

STAR TREK
“Necessary Evil”
by
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This is the second printing of the rough draft, so take note of grammatical errors. Any comments for story refinement are appreciated. This is the fourth book in a series. Editing versions of book one: “A Touch of Greatness,” book two: “Another Piece of the Action,” and book three, “Both Hands Full,” may be attained by contacting the author.

An additional short story, “Re-establishing the Neutral Zone” follows the conclusion of this book.

My sincere appreciate goes out to everyone who have sent their regards, pointed out errors, whether grammatical or related to cannon, and those requesting the next book. The fifth is in progress, and I don't see it wrapping up anytime soon. Now, if only work and school would stop interrupting my day dreaming! ☺ Enjoy.

PROLOGUE

Lt. Commander Zara Undine fired up the thrusters and pivoted the attitude of the shuttle for a steeper departure vector. The angle plus the bank gave Captain Tammias Parkin Arblaster-Garcia an excellent view of the mob gathered at the fence in protest of all things Fleet. The protest signs had been hurriedly assembled, evidenced by the fact that most were in English, bad English with letters reversed or poorly drawn, though some were in Klingon with letters that were even more deformed. The signs were mostly derogatory statements describing biological forms of waste and places where Star Fleet could put it. One of the protesters pitched a small bottle and managed to score a direct hit to the forward window. It caused no damage to the shuttle, but when the bottle broke a green liquid spread itself over the window. Undine blinked and hastened their exit.

Captain Garcia had already been in a particularly foul mood before the fiasco, but now his mood hadn't seen a rival. The Away Team was abnormally quiet, as if they were expecting him to throw a tantrum. Unfortunately for them, he wasn't ready to preach from his soap box yet or his anger might have been dissipated more quickly. Instead, he put a foot up on the console and a fist to his chin and sulked.

"I think your concert went off fairly well," Lt. Commander Tatiana Kletsova said. Her metallic, silver uniform, with red highlights marking her as security, momentarily caught and reflected the sunlight as the light slipped across the inner space of the cabin as the shuttle continued its climb. The sun's intensity polarized the forward window.

Lt. Undine glanced back at Kletsova, glanced to the Captain, and then put her attention back to her piloting. Undine was not human, she was Zaldan. The only evidenced of this were her webbed fingers and toes, and a very straight forward manner that was often mistaken for antagonism. Consequently, she didn't feel the need to try to soften the Captain's mood or in any other way ease the tension that filled shuttlecraft 'Mississippi Moon.' As a Zaldan, she not only saw courtesy and compliments as a form of dishonesty, she believed it was a waste of time. She was aware that Garcia knew his performance was flawless. Saying so could only be construed as social manipulation, an attempt to distract him from his present anger. An anger she believed he was entitled to.

As it was, Garcia ignored the compliment. He didn't even look back at Tatiana, a friend since enrolling in Star Fleet Academy. Instead, he tried to distract himself by the fragment of a song in his head, "Mississippi Moon want you keep on shining on me..." Normally he would be working hard on forgetting the song that was stuck in his head, a manifestation of OCD, but his anger was stronger than his obsession with the lyrics or the tune in the background of his mind. All the shuttles were named after songs, either direct titles or words found from random lyrics, and this was no doubt the immediate trigger of Garcia's current musical tangent, a necessary distraction that was aiding him from verbally chastising his crew in an unproductive manner.

Lt. Commander Tuer, the security officer for the New Constitution, was unable to tolerate the continuing silence and scowled as only a Klingon could. "I don't see why you're angry at me," Tuer said. His uniform was similar to Tatiana's in that it was silver with red highlights, minus the skirt, of course, but it also had Klingon style armor. Polished and cleaned armor, something Garcia had insisted on for his Klingon crew. He wanted his warriors to appear as if they didn't lack for state of the art materials, whether it was weaponry or defensive tools. "It's not like I started the fight."

Captain Garcia closed his eyes, biting down on his first response. “In all of my studies and research of Star Fleet history and protocols, I have never once heard of such a stupendous blunder as the one you pulled, Lt.”

“It was a misunderstanding,” Tuer protested.

“No,” Garcia corrected. “It was a hand-wash sink!”

“It looked like a urinal,” Tuer went on.

Kletsova laughed out loud. Garcia shot a ‘cross’ look at her.

“Shuttlecraft Mississippi Moon to New Constitution,” Undine said. “We’re on final approach. Open hangar bay doors.”

Lt. Commander, and First Officer of the New Constitution, Kitara responded: “Opening hangar bay doors. Is everything alright? You’re returning ahead of schedule.”

Undine looked to the Captain.

“We’re fine,” Captain Garcia said. His tone suggested otherwise.

“We haven’t received the supplies. Are you carrying them?” Kitara asked.

“No,” Garcia said.

“Captain?” Kitara asked.

“Tuer will file the report as soon as we’re on board,” Garcia said, reaching over to close the channel.

Captain Garcia was the first one off the shuttle after it landed and he went straight way to the Bridge. Kitara stood as the deck watch announced his arrival: “Captain on the Bridge.” She saluted, right fist closed over her heart, and became instantly aware that he was sporting a cut and a black eye. She knew first hand what a skilled fighter he was so she suspected his apparent bad mood was due to the fact that someone had achieved a lucky hit, or two, on him. Of course, it was also possible, she concluded, that he had had taken on injuries in order to avoid causing another person injuries, which was one of Garcia’s weaknesses, from her point of view. The quickest way to end a fight was to put the enemy down.

“Captain?!” Kitara asked.

“Get me Star Fleet Command,” Garcia said without stopping to chat. “I’ll take it in my Ready Room.”

“Captain?” Second Lt. Indira Sookanan’s voice was soft, almost pleading, as if she had information to convey but would rather not interact with the Captain in his present mood. Like all people of Trinidadian descent, she had her legal name, the one on her birth certificate, and she had her street name, the one everyone called her. She answered to, and preferred, Trini.

Garcia stopped. “What, Trini? Can you patch me through to Star Fleet or is there some kind of spatial anomaly or misaligned zodiac signs causing interference?”

“No interference, Sir,” Trini said, remaining business like even in the face of heavy sarcasm. “Star Fleet Command called us a few minutes ago and they want to speak to you. I put them on hold, pending your arrival.”

Garcia turned without further ado to go take the call. As soon as the doors to his Ready Room closed, he remote activated one of the wall monitors with his neural implant and waited for Star Fleet Command to come on and berate him. To his surprise, and dismay, it was retired Admiral Leonard H McCoy that had been assigned the task of scolding him. Genetically speaking, McCoy was his biological father, and though their

relationship was hardly father and son, Garcia was expecting McCoy's chastisement to take the form of parental discipline.

"What in Heaven's name is going on over there?!" McCoy demanded.

Garcia frowned, thinking so much for the paternal approach. "It was just a small misunderstanding, Admiral."

"A small misunderstanding?!" McCoy asked. "You were supposed to give a concert in exchange for some supplies and instead you start a riot?"

"The people here have a very elaborate hand washing ritual, rooted in an archaic religious belief system," Garcia began.

"Oh, dear God," McCoy said. "Don't tell me you disparaged their beliefs and offered meds to treat them for obsessive compulsive disorders."

"No, Admiral, I didn't disparage them," Garcia said.

McCoy waited for an explanation. After a reasonable moment passed, McCoy said, "Well?" It came across as a bark.

Garcia frowned. "One of my Officer's mistook a hand-wash sink for a urinal."

Someone on McCoy's side laughed and McCoy's eyes shifted from his monitor to the man laughing. The look McCoy gave the man resembled the very look Garcia had shot at Tatiana some thirty minutes ago. It was a very effective look; the laughter stopped.

"They couldn't find the humor in the mistake," Garcia went on. "There was a small altercation, which blossomed into a full out battle for our lives as we made a mad dash for the shuttlecraft."

"In all my days of Star Fleet," McCoy said, trying hard to maintain his patience. "I have never heard of such a blatant, stupendous error in judgment."

"Nor I," Garcia said.

"You're a Star Fleet Captain, Tammis," McCoy said, pointing out the obvious. "You are ultimately responsible for the behavior of your crew, regardless if they are Klingon or Star Fleet. I expect you to better prep your Away Teams."

"Yes, Sir," Garcia said.

McCoy softened, not to the point of laughing, but enough to put Garcia at ease. "I managed to speak to the Ambassador while I waited for you to arrive. He has agreed to handover the supplies as previously arranged, the caveat being you must make a public apology to appease the masses."

"Of course," Garcia said. He frowned.

"Was there anything else?" McCoy asked.

"Off the record?" Garcia asked.

"Sure," McCoy said.

"I was just wondering if Kirk ever had anything comparable that may not have been in a report," Garcia asked.

"You're not Kirk," McCoy said. "Stop comparing yourself to him."

"Aye," Garcia said.

"Everything else going alright?" McCoy asked. "Your Klingon crew playing nice with the Star Fleet crew?"

"Everything is going just about normal, for me," Garcia said. "Don't be surprised to find that you have a lot of grand kids on the way."

"Rivan is having twins?" McCoy asked.

“Twins wouldn’t be a lot,” Garcia said. “I got to go. The Ambassador is on the other line, no doubt looking for that public apology. I suppose if that doesn’t quell the riot, I can always use the ships phasers and stun a whole city block.”

“Don’t even joke about such a thing,” McCoy said.

“Captain Kirk did it,” Garcia said. “On Iotia, if I’m not mistaken.”

“You’re not Captain Kirk,” McCoy repeated.

“I will get back to you soon,” Garcia said.

“You always say that and then I don’t hear from you until you need me to bail you out of trouble,” McCoy said.

“Really, I’ll call on you soon,” Garcia said. “Garcia out.”

Garcia looked at the blank screen as he took a moment to compose his apology and then he answered the Ambassador’s call.

CHAPTER ONE

“Captain’s Log, Star date 45352.4,” Tammias Parkin Garcia began his third official entry as Captain of the USS New Constitution. “Having completed my social damage control, the USS NC has finally collected the supplies from Starbase 42 and is en route to the Kartala Nebula, where we will rendezvous with USS Hakudo Maru to deliver said supplies. In addition to these supplies, my orders are to entertain the troops in the field, so to speak, and so I’ve recruited from my crew those with the minimum talents necessary to put a small musical ensemble together. The Klingons took a liking to the Mikado, for some unfathomable reason, but it may just work. Some of it does translate into Klingonese well enough, so it’s going to be quite an interesting adaptation of this comic operetta as we have an eclectic mix of English, Japanese, and Klingonese. The fact that we’re to rendezvous with a Starship with a primarily Japanese crew hasn’t been lost on me. Synchronicity is an interesting phenomenon.”

Garcia closed out the New Constitution’s Captain’s log and opened up his personal logs all the while trying to suppress one of the Mikado’s songs from occupying his brain. “Let the punishment fit the crime,” had gotten itself stuck in his head. He paused as he considered how to start his private entry, sipping a cup of hot, tomato soup, fresh from the replicator. He had to resist the urge to call another grilled cheese from the replicator, since he had already eaten two for the day and two sandwiches were more than sufficient. His dietary beliefs held that if you couldn’t pick it, or hunt it down and kill it, then it shouldn’t be eaten. That meant since sandwiches didn’t grow on trees, he shouldn’t be eating them, but he had wanted the comfort of a grilled cheese before his concert. True enough, the replicator made it more nutritious, so it wasn’t like it was an egregious break with his dietary needs to eat another sandwich, but the other concern he was factoring in was the fact that he hadn’t been as active today as he would have liked, except the short run for his life. In short, he could do with less calories. He had had sufficient comfort food the last few days that he should be feeling better already. It was time to start feeling better, he told himself. “*Punishment fit the crime!*” flared in his mind.

“Personal log,” Garcia said, holding the bowl with both hands, absorbing the warmth radiating out from his soup. “The Einstein’s crew reassigned to the NC have blended in well with the mix of the Path Finder’s crew, which is comprised mostly of Klingons. I would be happier if all the Einstein’s crew were privy to the information about my dark secret, the afore mentioned Path Finder and her mission: to find and expose enemies of the Federation and Klingon Empire and eliminate any Borg using the modified Genesis device, called the Starburst. But, on counsel of the Path Finder’s Senior Officers, I am keeping up the appearances that the NC is my only ship and only mission. So far, only three of the most senior Einstein Officers assigned to me have been recruited into my little circle. The others are on review and will be notified on a need to know basis. All of those in the ‘know’ refer to me as Captain, keeping up the charade, even though everyone in on my secret refer to me as Admiral, in charge of a small, growing fleet of ships on special assignments; the ‘Silent Running’ and ‘Cloak and Dagger’ type assignments. I would prefer to keep the title Captain, but my posse prefers otherwise. I have Gowr to thank for that.”

A light on his desk had started blinking halfway through his personal log entry. Ignoring it failed to make it stop. He knew it was an incoming message for him, live, no

text options, otherwise he would have rerouted it to his implant. Intuition told him it was Simone and he needed to take the call, but he was determined to resist.

Garcia sighed and took in some more soup. “The Path Finder’s mission is still a go, though it no doubt irks those who set it in motion to no longer have complete control over it and the crew. The parable of two masters keeps coming to mind. I have to answer to Star Fleet, as the Captain of the NC, that’s one, and I have to answer to Admiral Pressman for secret ops which is technically Star Fleet but more unofficial, that’s two, and I have to answer to Admiral Sheaar, Klingon Empire’s special ops, for the same reasons as I must tend to Pressman, and that’s three. Fortunately, the NC’s mission is primarily ‘band’ duty, pomp and circumstance, ferrying supplies, personnel, or dignitaries, so there should be no arduous assignments that might interfere with the secret agenda of the PF. In fact, it may help facilitate that mission, by giving me an alibi.”

Garcia hit the pause switch on his log entry and accepted the call, wondering why Trini had put her on hold, as opposed to just taking a message. Simone appeared on the view screen in front of him. She did not look pleased. Agitated actually seemed to describe her appearance.

“Why are you stalling?” Simone demanded.

“Can you be more specific?” Garcia asked, putting his soup down.

“Don’t you feel it? How can you resist?” Simone asked. He had never seen her so emotional.

“Are you telling me you’re deliberately doing this?” Garcia demanded, growing suddenly, equally impatient.

“Deliberately? You think I like being unstable? You’ve put off coming to Vulcan long enough. Now, I demand that you turn your ship around at once, while we still have time,” Simone ordered.

“I don’t have time for these rituals, Simone. You’re just going to have to make do,” Garcia said.

“We’ll die,” Simone said, her voice full of pleading.

“Nonsense,” Garcia said. “It just feels that way.”

“Tammias, please,” Simone said, her tone and mood changing so fast that he thought it was a tactic, as opposed to sincere negotiating. “I will die and you will follow. Remember your reaction when Sarek died? Magnify that times a hundred. My twenty first birth day is in two weeks. If you do not turn around, you will arrive too late.”

Garcia rubbed his forehead. As if he didn’t have enough on his plate. He did want to be with her. He had noticed the frequency of which he was thinking of her had increased, which was annoying, as he needed to stay focused. He had passed it off to an OCD reflex coupled by the fact that he had not seen her since the graduation ceremony on Earth, where Picard had given the commencement speech and Garcia had conducted the final choral orchestra ensemble. It had been a bitter sweet ceremony, since Joshua Alberts had been killed in an accident. His mind began to recall details of Joshua.

“Tam,” Simone cried. “I want you. And though my ability to reason may be clouded with passion and emotions, and my judgment is growing thinner with each passing moment, I am still capable of thinking through this logically and I can find no reason for you to delay in our union.”

“I can think of a half dozen,” Garcia said.

“Fine! Then come here and reject me and our business will be concluded,” Simone snapped, full of rage. She tossed the contents of her desk to the floor. “Either way, you must be here.”

“Fine,” Garcia said. “I’ll be there in three days.”

“Three days? It will take you at least eight from your current position traveling at a rate of warp nine,” Simone said.

“Three days,” Garcia said. “Don’t ask how. But I will be there. You just have this ceremony thing ready to go.”

“Three days,” Simone said. She frowned and put her hand to the screen and then burst into tears. “Do not be angry at me, or this biological compulsion we share. It is what it is. I will be waiting for you.”

“Try to meditate, will you,” Garcia said. “It’ll help take the edge off both of us.”

“I will try. It is difficult. I...” Simone failed to find the words, which caused her some anger. She never had a lack for words. She wiped her eyes, stood up straight, trying to remain stoic and logical. She swallowed air.

“I understand. I’ll see you soon,” Garcia said. He cut the transmission and leaned into his desk, closing his eyes. He took a moment to force himself to think of something else, and then he continued his report from where he had left off.

“Add another boss to my growing list of people making demands on me,” Garcia said, frowning. He hated himself for giving into her, but mostly he hated himself for his own wanting. He was a bottomless pit for wanting. He could find dozens of ways to rationalize himself into a relationship with Simone, but less ways of denying the same, and so the fact that they were going to be compelled due to Pon Farr issues just seemed too convenient, which, interestingly enough, was increasing his desire to resist. His natural tendency to resist any and all kinds of authority seemed to have little sway over his biological compulsion to mate, though. So much for his practicing self denial and delayed gratification, he thought. Three days. He sighed. Surely I can go three days, he mused aloud.

“Delete that last sentence. The Path Finder’s Senior Officers act as a committee to deliberate over which situation warrants our immediate attention, with me making the final decision. It seemed like the only equitable thing to do, to spread the wealth, since my bosses are rather demanding. Lord help us if the Federation and the Klingon Empire ever go to war against each other again, for that will no doubt divide the loyalties of the crew that are already questionable. It is no secret that many of the Path Finder’s crew had been given secret orders to eliminate the others and take control of the ship. Even I was given orders to kill the Klingons and take the ship using my Kelvan technology. For now, though, the Path Finder crew is abiding by the truce and there is a reasonable balance of power,” Garcia pressed on. Three days seemed too far away.

Garcia closed out his personal logs and proceeded to open up the Path Finder’s log. “The Path Finder is currently silent running, monitoring Cardassian troop movement. I am able to get updates by using the interstellar portals provided by the Preservers that connect NC and the PF via a permanent, stable wormhole. The Gateways are primitive versions of the Iconanian Gateway dimensional transport system, created over 200,000 years ago. The Gray Queen informs me that the Iconians stole the technology from the Preservers and there are Gateways hidden all across the Universe. My gates lack the sophistication to send me anywhere in the galaxy. They only work in

tandem with other gateways, attuned to my network of gates, but the Gray Queen believes it might be possible to upgrade them once her colony is better established.

“Either way, I don’t know how people ever got around without Gates before. I prefer Gates to Transporters, that’s for sure. Sorry, tangent. The PF’s assignment to Cardassian space seemed to fit both the Federation’s and the Klingon Empire’s immediate needs for more intelligence. I would rather be scouting the neutral zone studying Romulan ship movement, but, hey, I’m just a lowly Captain. What would I know about intelligence? I am going to have to interrupt the Path Finder’s current intel gathering in order to conclude my business with Simone in a timely manner. I’m still not sure how I am going to explain that trip to the crew.”

Garcia paused, hoping his thoughts of Simone would fade. When that didn’t work, he realized he was probably going to have to seek some sort of physical distraction. Exercise or an adventure on the holodeck without the safety protocols. Perhaps he could just spar with his Klingon First Officer and have her beat him to a pulp.

“Meanwhile,” Garcia said, moving on, “I have the IKV Tempest, formerly the IKV SaLing, which I commandeered during a war game with Klingon Admiral Sheaar, headed towards an out of the way star system where we have been led to believe we will find an abandoned Preserver technology cache. We’re ‘borrowing’ technology from the preservers to aid in the establishment of the Gray colony, a colony I am providing sanctuary to, paybacks for saving Admiral McCoy’s life. Further, I have hired the Pa Nun to take care of a private mission for me, as I simply can’t be in all the places I need to be at once. I’ve been told that the Preservers made a clone of me; it would sure be nice if I had him now. Ha. Two of me. There will be enough of me soon enough. Sorry, tangent. If you’re not use to my logs, you will have to forgive the occasional bunny. It doesn’t help that I’m distracted by my thoughts of Simone. I don’t have time for this!”

Tired of chasing rabbits, Garcia picked up his soup again, found it sufficiently cold that he could now drink it without fear of burning his mouth. He switched back to personal logs. “I’m fortunate to have so many I can rely on, for keeping Admiral Pressman’s ‘Starburst’ project, and the Path Finder itself, a secret is a challenge I doubt I could do alone. I owe a great debt to Captain Picard, of the USS Enterprise, who not only helped me return to duty as a member in good standing with Star Fleet, but he is one of the few that openly sanctioned my attack against the Borg at TelKiar, demonstrating the effectiveness of the Starburst weapon. (Openly behind closed doors, that is. His efforts in this area got me out of a court marshal and got me an automatic pass at the Academy, so I’m through with school, and don’t have to go through the pomp and circumstance ceremony to be called graduated. (Ironically, I just have to provide the song and dance for everyone else, being in charge of the band and all.)) All the data I collected at TelKiar before wiping out the entire star system with the Starburst weapon suggests that had we not stopped the Borg there, we would not be stopping them at all. Admiral McCoy, my father, is not please with the level of destruction and hopes that that single demonstration will be sufficient to deter any further Borg incursions. I personally think it will only make the Borg more determined. Time will tell. There is no word yet what the Romulans think about the TelKiar situation.

“And finally, after an intercession with my Senior Officers, I have agreed to limit my access to the Kelvan computer on the Path Finder, due to the lack of self discipline and lack of good judgment that occurs when I am plugged into the device. Again, I am

fortunate to be surrounded by such good people, otherwise, there would no doubt be criminal charges levied against me for the liberties I took while under the influence of Kelvan technology. Though Doctors McCoy, Crusher, and Jurak, all assure me that the lack of inhibition while under the influence of Kelvan-tech is similar to being inebriated, I can not forgive my trespass. Not this time. Legal sanctions or not, my abuse of the technology weighs heavily on me, and it will probably not be any easier as time goes by, for I will pay for the mistakes, soon enough.”

Garcia closed out his logs, musing over his ramblings, and became annoyed that his thoughts again turned to Simone. He used his implant to delete the file he had just dictated to the computer. A prompt asked him if he was sure and he said yes. Almost immediately after saying ‘yes’ he had a change of heart. He had the computer reassemble the files before they became permanently irretrievable. He pushed up out of his chair and headed for the Bridge. Unlike the Ready Room on the Path Finder, the New Constitution didn’t have a fireman’s pole to make his entry more fun and dramatic. He really did miss being on the Path Finder. He missed Losira, the artificial intelligence that was the result of all the Path Finder’s computer systems being in gestalt with an alien computer system, created by an extinct race known as the Kalandans.

“Captain on the Bridge,” Undine said.

“At ease,” Garcia said. The crew was much more formal when it came to military courtesies and discipline than any ship he was familiar with. That was no doubt the Klingon influence. There seemed to be a competition between the Klingons and Fleet to see who could extend the most courtesy and discipline. “I’ll be on holodeck three, going through the rituals. Your ship.”

“Aye,” Undine said.

“Rituals” was Garcia’s tradition for his crew. Prior to the start of each shift, that shift would assemble on the hangar deck to participate in a modified Tai Chi slash Line Dancing routine. Rivan was there for the start of each ritual, for she enjoyed it thoroughly, probably more than anyone on the crew. She had proven so apt that she was giving lessons for those who proved less apt at learning the sequences to be performed. Garcia often thought it humorous that people who were extremely tech smart tended to have so little kinesthetic smarts, making dance difficult for them to master. Repetition was slowly bringing everyone up to speed, however. To his surprise, the Klingons also seemed to enjoy the daily rituals, for they liked routines that kept them in sync with their fellow warriors. In addition to the discipline of daily rituals, they also seemed to like the “country” song selections, comparing them to an outdated form of Klingon Opera. Garcia was just happy to go through the motions of the ritual and not think about his responsibility for a time. And, he had to admit, it was a real “hoot” seeing Klingon, Andorian, Nausicaan, an Orion Slave Girl, and Ferengi, all in step with humans of every race. The ship wasn’t a true melting pot, but rather, more analogous to a salad, well tossed. Everyone came together for rituals and it was evolving into something bigger than even he had expected, which was nice since it had initially started as a bet between him and Admiral Pressman to see if he could get his Klingons to comply.

After the exercise, Rivan greeted Garcia with a hug. She practically glowed. Though she had never tried to hide the fact that she was pregnant, there would be no hiding it now. It wouldn’t be long before the first of the many mistakes arrived.

“How are you feeling?” Rivan asked.

“Okay,” Garcia said. He noticed Rivan’s eyes as they glanced at his hands. He forced himself to let go of his left wrist, where the Kelvan bracelet had been before it had been confiscated by his First Officer. And now that he was consciously missing it again, he wanted it badly. Perhaps Simone could help him with this, adjusting his mental obsession with a mind meld.

“Give it some time,” Rivan said, taking Garcia by the arm, and resting her head against him. “There is no shame, Tam. Your actions saved the crew. You saved the crews of several ships, including the Enterprise. And a whole world full of life. You have a lot to be happy for.”

Kitara, First Officer of the New Constitution and Path Finder approached and saluted. She was a formidable, female Klingon Warrior, with enough Spirit and Fight that she should have been a Captain in the Empire’s fleet many times over, but due to old traditions dying hard she was stuck with Garcia as her Captain. She was wearing the silver with gold highlights, minus the full armor upgrade considered by most Klingon warriors to be the bare essentials. She was wearing the armor ‘lite’ option instead of the full gear, which Garcia encouraged, but didn’t insist upon. If it made his “warriors” happy to wear their full armor for the full extent of their shift, he was happy to oblige them. Kitara was probably only wearing the dressed down version of the armor to be an example to the other Klingons.

“May I have a moment of your time, Captain?” Kitara asked, keeping eye contact with him, ignoring Rivan. “Alone.”

“Joy and love, Kitara,” Rivan said, and excused herself, kissing the Captain before departing.

Kitara frowned, but nodded to Rivan out of respect to the Captain. The Klingons didn’t like her, and not just because she wasn’t a warrior but because she would try to tame them. Rivan would have them all hugging and cooing, and the Klingons just weren’t going to comply. “We’re Klingons! Not Tribbles,” Kitara had snapped once. The fact that Rivan seemed unfazed or even scared by Kitara’s gruffness was either a sign of Rivan’s fearlessness, stupidity, or ignorance. Either way, Rivan was obviously the Captain’s girl, so she was safe as long as the Captain was strong. One of his many girls, Kitara thought, suppressing a growl.

“Would you accompany me to Sickbay, please,” Kitara asked.

“Yes,” Garcia said, almost resigned.

They walked quietly to the lift, only pausing so that Kitara could yell at one of the Klingon crew members. “That’s not where that goes, Lt.,” and felt satisfied that he hurried his business along, closing the panel that hid the GNDN conduits. The doors closed on the lift and she ordered the floor. Without turning to face the Captain, she said: “It’s official. I’m pregnant.”

“But you were on the planet,” Garcia said. “I thought only the females that I transported with the Kelvan transporter before I went off on my suicide mission with the activated Genesis weapon to destroy the Borg were impregnated.” He needed to take a breath of air to recover from the long, impromptu sentence. He also needed to force himself to breathe just to force himself to breathe. His ability to resist his urge to be with Simone increased ten fold due to his self hatred and anger. Relax, he told himself. What was this, now? Twenty two mistakes? If only Guinan were here to force peace on him by just being present.

Kitara looked at him. “Perhaps you have forgotten that we shared time, prior to that event. You got me the old fashioned way,” Kitara said.

Garcia rubbed his forehead. He hadn’t forgotten that he had ‘shared time’ with her, violating all sorts of protocols and regulations. “Maybe you should let me access the Kelvan computer once more and let me correct all of this,” Garcia said.

“Computer, hold lift,” Kitara said. She faced him, not bothering to hide her anger. “What are you saying? You want to just abort all the problems? That’s what it would be, right? You just transport them out of our wombs? Make your life all nice and neat again?”

“It is an option,” Garcia said.

“It is not an option!” Kitara shouted. “And I would just assume throw every female that took that option out the closest airlock.”

“I can’t force people to participate in unwanted pregnancies,” Garcia said. “What I did was tantamount to rape.”

“Right, and to correct that, you want me to sanction you using the same Kelvan technology that created the problem to commit murder. That reveals just how much negative influence that technology has over you and if it wasn’t integrated so thoroughly into the Path Finder’s systems, I would have it discarded already,” Kitara said. “Kelvan technology has no honor, and whether it was by Kelvan designed that you are so negatively influenced, or simply a lack of self control and discipline when in control of that much power, the end results are the same; you become a menace and a threat to the personal liberties of the crew. We will not go lightly into that jeopardy again, if ever again, not just for the crew, but for your own sake. It changes you. It warps you. Mentally and physically it takes its toll on you and we want you healthy. For your crew’s sake, for the sake of your mission, for the sake of all the children you have coming, you will remain in good health, even if I have to lock you in the Brig to guarantee that outcome. There will be no more debates on this issue. There’s a reason humans aren’t immortal with Q powers, so get use to your human boundaries. Computer, resume.”

The lift started up again and didn’t go far before it hit the floor they wanted. Garcia walked with Kitara, side by side and entered Sickbay with her. Doctor Jurak was busy working on something Garcia was not immediately familiar with. Doctor Misan came right to Garcia and started to complain. The moment he started complaining, Doctor Jurak came over to join, pushing Misan out of the way to occupy the Captain’s center of attention. Misan pushed back, but Jurak grasped his wrist and twisted at a pressure point, taking Misan to his knees as if he were a child, easily manipulated.

“Enough of that!” Kitara snapped, slapping Doctor Jurak. “You will both behave like professionals or I’ll see you both in chains!”

Jurak let go and Misan stood, massaging his wrist, but judging by his face, his pride was hurt much more than his wrist. His antennae lay flat against his head, like an angry cat’s ears, and he seemed a little bluer than his Andorian pigment normally allotted for.

“Doctor Misan, continue,” Garcia said, satisfied that his First Officer had handled the infraction.

“Doctor Jurak is setting up a bank of artificial wombs to offer those who would want an abortion an alternative,” Misan said. “This goes against the principal of your

directive that he will provide anyone that wants an abortion under these circumstances to have one.”

“I do not believe that Star Fleet Officers, who’s standard mission is to seek out new life, would be so ready to avail themselves of abortions when there is a viable alternative to carrying an unwanted child,” Jurak said. “I’m at least providing them an option.”

“Captain,” Misan interrupted. “Has it occurred to you that it might be possible that the Kelvan are using you once again? When they were programming your great brain and physical nature, perhaps they hardwired into you the need to procreate frequently in order to ensure that the Kelvan mindset would not go extinct. It would explain your virility, even while under the influence of male birth control, and the fact that several of the people you impregnated are not known for their compatibility with the human genome only seems to validate this possibility. Karsat, for example, should not have been able to procreate with you.”

“My offspring may inherit good genes, but they will not be Kelvan,” Garcia assured Misan. “Not without the Kelvan neural imprinting procedures, which must be started prenatal.”

“But if the Kelvan were to get a hold of any of these offspring, they could breed them to restart the experiment. Since the Kelvan know that they were successful in creating you, Human/Vulcan Kelvan hybrid, then it seems likely that they would want to ensure the continued success of their work by giving you an elevated libido and the fertility of a Tribble,” Misan said. “In addition to that, all species have an innate desire to procreate, to preserve their genes, and the Kelvan technology not only enhanced your ability to disseminate those genes, but it chose from each of the females’ available eggs the best possible combination of genes to better ensure the survival of your offspring.”

“Are you suggesting that faced with the possibility of immanent death at the confrontation with the Borg, my Kelvan programming sought out to ensure the survival of those genes, and so the Kelvan technology sought out the perfect egg and sperm combos to produce children that would be capable of using Kelvan technology, imprinting or no?” Garcia asked.

“That’s exactly what I am saying,” Misan said. “And quite frankly, one of you is enough. I recommend all the fetuses be destroyed because you don’t know what evil you are bringing upon us.”

“And you call yourself a Doctor!” Jurak growled.

“Please, it’s not like you don’t kill stuff just to dissect it,” Misan said.

“I don’t butcher children!” Jurak growled.

“They’re not children at this stage,” Misan pointed out. “If we stop them now.”

“Whether it be one cell, or a fully developed fetus, it is still a life!” Jurak argued.

“It’s a life, but it’s not a child,” Misan said. “And if you can’t make the distinction between a few cells and a complete, self sustaining organism than you’re a fool or a hypocrite. Human cells die and sloth off every day, and I don’t see you going around catching them and nursing them back to health! We could sustain every human cell if we wanted, even turn them all into clones and make them self sufficient, but we don’t do that.”

“You’re being ridiculous and you know it,” Jurak said.

“The Kelvan have a great propensity for evil,” Misan said. “You know this more than any one, Captain.”

“It’s not evil, per say, it’s just poor social etiquette based on the fallacy that they are superior life forms,” Garcia said. He heard the voice of his dead sister, Jovet, saying “you’re a monster.” He heard Simone saying she wanted him. He swallowed and continued. “With proper raising and the instilling of human morals and values, they should prove not to be monsters.”

“You mean, like the human values and morals that you were instilled with?” Misan asked. “I don’t see how that stopped you from using the Kelvan transporter to artificially inseminate all the females on Path Finder and SaLing. And you may not have known this, but Lt. Kelly was one month pregnant. Your human morals didn’t prevent you, while under the Kelvan influence, of aborting her and her husband’s child and replacing it with one of your own.”

Garcia paled. “Why wasn’t I told of this?” Garcia asked.

“I just ran the checkup on her today,” Misan said, handing Garcia a PADD. “You can see for yourself the genetic profile of this new fetus is of you and Kelly.”

“What happened to the other child?” Garcia asked.

“Who knows? Maybe you beamed it out into space, or maybe you converted it to energy and absorbed it directly into your veins,” Misan said. “What do Kelvan do with the unwanted babies? Are you like lions, killing off all the cubs once you’ve conquered the pack?”

“That will be quite enough, Doctor,” Garcia said. He read over the genetic profile of Kelly’s lost child and he knew if he had been connected to the Kelvan computer, he could run a simulation on the genetics to see what the child would have looked like had it not been aborted in favor of his own genes. He had no recollection of having done any of this, but there was no doubt that this was his doing. “There will be no more debate on this. Doctor Jurak, I can not, and will not, force any of these people to carry through with the pregnancies.”

“Yes, you can,” Jurak said. “You are the father and you have equal say in whether these lives are terminated or allowed to continue.”

“These pregnancies were not mutually agreed upon, therefore I have no rights,” Garcia said. “Anyone who comes to you for a procedure to terminate the pregnancy will be treated with respect, regardless of what you think of their decision. Is that understood?”

“Clearly,” Jurak said, a bit of a growl leaking through his lips.

Misan looked vindicated, but he would have clearly preferred all the pregnancies be terminated. Garcia handed the PADD back to him in such a manner that the Doctor flinched.

“However, I see no harm in offering the alternative to abortion, Doctor Misan,” Garcia said. “If an artificial womb is acceptable over an abortion, I will take full legal responsibility for raising any offspring, releasing anyone from further responsibility in this matter. I have already drafted several legal documents for those who want to keep their offspring, whether that entails joint custody or full custody. I will pretty much agree to whatever terms the mother wants.”

“Captain, you can’t offer this option,” Misan protested. “You’re in a position of authority and offering artificial wombs as a viable alternative to abortion could be

construed as you trying to force compliance with your agenda. As a Doctor, I have to be an advocate for their rights and you are using your power as Captain to unduly influence them.”

“And who’s the advocate for the unborn?” Jurak asked. “Captain, you could delay this matter and wait for a ruling from a higher authority, perhaps the nearest Starbase has a judge advocate...”

“You just want to delay to allow the fetuses to develop past the legal abortion threshold,” Misan asked.

“Doctor Jurak, I’m not pursuing legal options. What part of there will be no more debates over this matter do you two not understand? This matter will be resolved here, with us. We’re all adults and we will figure this out. Doctor Misan, I support the patients’ right to choose,” Garcia said, a calm falling over him that suggested he might lose control and break someone’s neck. “And a patient can not make choices unless they are informed of all of their options, is that clear? Everyone knows that I prefer life, however, I will allow people to choose in this matter, and no one will suffer any ill consequences for choosing something that might otherwise oppose my preference. There will be heavy sanctions against any member of my crew that acts negatively against any person choosing to abort. Further, if any patient comes to you and feels they can no longer function as a member of this crew because of their choices, I will sign their transfer. Are we on the same page now?”

“Aye,” Misan said.

“Is this all?” Garcia asked the three of his officers. He was gripping his left arm fiercely enough to leave marks.

“Would you like another treatment?” Jurak asked.

Garcia let go of his arm. “No,” he snapped. “I’ll be in my quarters if anyone needs me. And no more fighting. This is Sickbay, after all.”

Garcia departed. He felt sick at his stomach knowing he had murdered Kelly’s child. The rogue Deanna Troi program that had been installed in his head by a Kelvan computer appeared before him, as if transporting in. She was in every way exactly like the real Deanna Troi, for the Kelvan who had abducted the real Troi had made a mirror image of her to make the template for the program that they had stuck directly into Garcia brain to influence him towards their agenda. It didn’t help matters that Garcia was linked to the real Deanna Troi by means of a psychic bond, which he was quite certain the Troi program accessed to update her own personality quirks.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Troi asked.

“No,” Garcia said, and started walking.

Troi followed. “It’s not your fault,” Troi said.

“Really?” Garcia asked, amazed that she could even say such a thing. “And how did you come up with that brilliant conclusion?”

“You were under the influence of alien technology,” Troi said. “You would not hold anyone responsible for their actions if they were drugged or otherwise ill so much so that their judgment was impaired, so, I think you should lighten up on yourself. You don’t hold Picard responsible for all the people he killed when he became Locutus of Borg. It’s the same thing.”

Garcia turned to face her, not caring if anyone else in the corridor was witness to him speaking to himself, for that’s what it appeared to be since no one else saw his

mental companions. “And I think you’ve lost your mind. Did you hear what Misan said in there? I killed a child!” Garcia snapped. His inner voice rang with the mantra, ‘I am the Destroyer of Worlds.’ He killed a lot of children when he blew the planet up at TelKiar to destroy the Borg infested planet. His resistance to his compulsion to be with Simone increased again as his self hatred increased. Simone was pure and good and he was this out of control, maniac killer. “Bloody hell, Deanna. Don’t you get it? I can’t lighten up. This message needs to be driven in me deep and hard so that their will never be a repeat performance. Whether it be drug induced or technology induced, I had choices, and I made poor choices. There is no excuse for what I did! Now, I’d like to be left alone so I can torture myself in private.”

Garcia stormed away, but on a ship, there were very few places he could escape to be alone, and he could never be alone from the people sharing his brain. Deanna was still there with him, even if she was out of sight. As if karma was out to prove the point, he was intercepted by Karsat, the ship’s cook, before he had even made it to the turbolift. He was so caught up in his own thoughts he hadn’t seen her until she touched his shoulder.

Garcia had hired Karsat partly to protect her and her offspring from the Gorn, partly because he was the father of her children, but also because he needed a cook, after having killed the Path Finder’s original cook in a ritualistic Klingon challenge. One of the reasons he needed a cook was due to the fact that the Klingons have an aversion to replicated foods, even though if he put a plate of real food and replicated food side by side, they couldn’t tell him which was which in a blind folded study. Bottom line, the Klingons required fresh food which meant most of the time they wanted to kill it themselves, making Karsat indispensable, since after the hunters killed it, the meat was traditionally turned over to a woman to prepare. Killing to eat was basic nature, he reminded himself, trying to lessen his personal disgust. Nature was not always nice and neat. All animals had to eat, whether it was killing a plant or another animal. Some animals would even engage in infanticide if it improved the odds of their own genetics winning out. So much for being more evolved, Garcia chastised himself.

“Captain, will you be dining alone again tonight?” Karsat asked.

“I’m through eating for the day,” Garcia said, trying not to let his anger at himself be misplaced towards her, which was his inclination especially after she had just startled him. He closed his eyes. Five kids with Karsat, and a child with Persis, nearly twelve years ago, who he would never be able to see... And how many more on the way? Twenty two? Twenty three? That wasn’t even counting the potential for twins. Garcia had often been compared to Captain Kirk when it came to his affinity for alien females, and yet, he knew of no stories of Kirk and hundreds of children produced from his numerous alien encounters. If Kirk had chosen dalliances with aliens in order to avoid having children, then emulating Kirk was no longer an option because this strategy obviously wasn’t working for him. Why was he obsessed with aliens? He wondered. Maybe he needed a new role model. Who did he know that had lots of children?

“Captain,” Karsat interrupted his musing. “As far as I’m aware, you haven’t eaten since breakfast and I have had a number of requests from people wanting to dine with you at the Captain’s table. Tatiana, Trini, Rivan, for starters. Sendak. Rivan calls it the Commune, but there are others on board who would like your company. It is also my duty to make sure you eat well. Doctor’s orders.”

“Fine,” Garcia said. “I’ll dine at 1900, set the table for six. First come first serve.”

“Anything special?” Karsat asked.

He nearly said peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. “Surprise me,” Garcia said, and took the turbolift up to deck three and his quarters.

CHAPTER TWO

The New Constitution didn't have a Ten Forward, such as the Enterprise D, but it had an elegant table setting for the Captain and any potential guest that he might entertain, and a room offering a forward view by four, large, oval windows. The Captain's table could easily sit twelve people if the mood struck. When not used for dining, the Captain's mess doubled for a conference room. A hidden stair went down a deck to the kitchen and the crew galley, which had had to be upgraded to make it fully functional, since it had previously been the main replicator for crew to meet outside their quarters for meals. A dumb waiter brought everything up to the Captain's dining level, where Karsat would then proceed to distribute the food, having already had the table set. She was sucking on a cigarette as the Captain entered.

"You're early," Karsat stated, she seemed flustered at having got caught with her vice. She used a mini air-vac, attached to the end of her cigarette, to try and contain most of the smoke, but there was no way to capture a hundred percent of her exhale. The air-vac functioned on both sides, catching smoke and ashes from the cigarette itself, and most of the smoke as Karsat held it close to her mouth and exhaled. She blew a deliberate stream of smoke across the top of it, which caught the smoke in a static electric field and closing, luminescent force fields designed to look like a mini black hole. She then touched the air-vac and caused it to extinguish the cigarette. She could always finish it later.

"I figured I should be present to meet with people as they arrive," Garcia said.

"I'm sorry," Karsat said. "I shouldn't smoke here, but, I needed a fix."

"Are you okay?" Garcia asked.

"The little ones are driving me crazy," Karsat said. "They're climbing the walls and ceilings."

"Is that a euphemism describing their boredom?" Garcia asked.

"No, I'm saying they're literally climbing the walls and ceilings," Karsat said, touching Garcia's hand to remind him of the slight suction ability in her finger tips, a characteristic of her species.

"How can I help?" Garcia asked. He hadn't forgotten about her gripping abilities. A shiver ran down his spine. Simone crossed his mind.

"I don't know if you can. I just got to make sure there are no sharp corners or places to crawl into, and make sure if they fall they don't hit anything sharp or hard," Karsat said. "In the wild, they would just run free and be one with nature, but here, the rules are different. They are resistant to early socialization. Their brains simply aren't developed sufficiently to understand anything but the present. I tell them no, or down, and they will comply because I'm the alpha female, but ten minutes later, they're back to pushing that boundary again."

Garcia nodded. "We could simulate their natural environment on one of the holodecks, if you think that would benefit them," Garcia offered.

"They would no doubt like romping through high grass and climbing trees and swimming," Karsat said. "It might tire them out."

"I will see to it, then," Garcia said.

"Something to drink while you wait for your guest?" Karsat asked.

"Yes, please," Garcia said. "A mimosa."

Karsat looked at him flirtatiously. "A real mimosa?"

“Yes, why not,” Garcia said. Perhaps a little alcohol would take the edge off, he thought, giving up on one of his hardened rules of not drinking. After all, McCoy condoned the medicinal value of an occasional drink, even an illegal one at that.

“Freshly squeezed orange juice and a bottle of chilled champagne coming up,” Karsat said, happy to provide for her Captain, employer, and the father of her children. She didn’t hide the fact that she held love for him, as most people did. She brought him the drink as he stared out the closer of the four windows. “Here you go.”

He accepted the drink. “Thank you,” he said, and tasted it. He nodded, pleased. He would have preferred a little more pulp from the orange, but he kept that to himself as the first of his guests arrived.

Rivan entered, with Garcia’s “Orion Slave Girl,” Ori. Rivan was wearing the standard ship’s uniform, white highlights and no rank, but instead wore a badge that gave her the honorary title of Ambassador. Ori was dressed simply; a kaki skort, a loose fitting, cotton shirt, a gold arm bracelet, but nothing on her feet. She refused to wear shoes. The moment Ori saw Garcia, her eyes brightened and her face became more animated. She practically flew to him, as light on her feet as if she were a ballerina. She hugged and kissed at him and he nearly spilled his drink. Karsat took the drink from him, laughing.

“You sure are popular, Captain,” Karsat slipped in, playfully.

“Aye,” Garcia agreed, leading Ori to the table.

Ori made her sign for food.

“Yes, we’re going to eat together,” Garcia said, using sign language as well as words. “Please, sit.”

“Ori learned some new signs today,” Rivan said.

“Really?” Garcia said. He asked Ori, “What’s new?”

Ori made a sign for cat poop. It was a sign made with arms crossed, one hand acted as the animal head barking, with fingers arranged in ears and mouth position, and the other hand making an expelling motion.

Garcia looked to Rivan, wondering where she learned that sign from. Rivan signed to Ori to tell the full truth.

Ori signed the phrase: ‘don’t play with cat poop.’

“Yes,” Garcia signed, shaking his head. Why Ori was fascinated by the automatic litter-box cleaner mechanism was beyond him.

Tatiana Kletsova, Indira “Trini” Sookanan, Sendak, and T’Shanik entered. Garcia went to meet with them, as did Rivan, who greeted each with a hug. She did so as eloquently as if she were the actual hostess, or the Captain’s wife, taking each first by the hand with both of her hands, and then hugging them, sustaining the contact and inhaling, and then kissing them lightly. Rivan’s warmth was always sincere; regardless of stranger, family, friend, or lover; they were all given love equally and unconditionally.

“The Garcia commune, together again,” Rivan cooed.

“Speaking of communes, I heard from Sandra,” Trini said.

“Sandra?” Kletsova asked.

“Sandra Rhodes,” Trini said. “You know, the brunette from warp physics class. The one that was always hitting on Garcia.”

“I don’t remember Rhodes ever hitting on me,” Garcia said.

“You never remember them hitting on you,” Kletsova said.

“What about her?” Kletsova asked.

“She was assigned to the Enterprise, 2nd Lt, security,” Trini said.

“I don’t remember her hitting on me,” Garcia continued to protest.

First Officer Kitara entered. “May I join in on short notice?” Kitara asked.

“Please,” Garcia said, gladly willing to change the subject and get the meal going. “Please, everyone, be seated.”

Karsat had only prepared for six guests, but it was just as well, since Kitara would most likely not eat what she had prepared for the humans and Vulcans. She paged down to the kitchen to have one of her staff rush something special up for Kitara. Meanwhile, Ori kept trying to share the food off her plate with Garcia, a plate that was specifically created for her nutritional needs, to maximize neural development.

“No, thank you,” Garcia said, putting utensils down to sign. “Yours. Eat.”

“Have you’ve been ignoring your little flower?” Kletsova asked.

“Obviously,” Garcia said, shooting her a look.

“You’re going to have to do better,” Kletsova said. “We’re going to have to turn all of deck four into a nursery soon enough.”

“Yes, and we’re going to have to hire some more staff, that’s for sure,” Trini said.

“I’ll volunteer,” Rivan chimed in.

“You can’t do it all,” Kletsova said.

“Some of the children are no doubt going to have special needs,” T’Shanik said. “Some will be telepaths.”

“Kors has notified me that she will be staying on with us,” Garcia said. Kors was an Aenar, a variation of the Andorian species, the characteristic of being all white instead of the typical Andorian blue, and highly telepathic. She was also the first female Garcia had ever kissed. The first real female, he corrected, since he didn’t include his holographic encounters. He closed his eyes to push the thoughts of kissing Simone out of his head.

“Is she...?” Kletsova asked.

“Yes,” Garcia answered, almost too quickly, not allowing Tatiana to ask the full question of “Is she pregnant.” He sounded angry.

“But she wasn’t on the ship,” Kletsova pointed out.

“It occurred when I transported her away from Bliss and to safety,” Garcia said.

“What about Dryac?” Trini asked.

Garcia only nodded, sipping his mimosa. He was going to need a lot more alcohol, he decided.

“I didn’t think Humans and Medusan’s were capable of genetic exchange,” Sendak said.

“We’re not,” Garcia said. “But the Kelvan technology found a way to produce a viable offspring. Consequently, there are no specialist available to help us on that one, so we’ll be forging new ground. It’s going to be the most difficult challenge, since we’ll more than likely all have to have visors to even be around that child. I don’t have a clue how that’s going to come out.”

“Fascinating,” T’Shanik said.

“A child so ugly, only its mother can look at it. Good times,” Kletsova said, toasting with her drink. She was one of the few of the Path Finder’s crew not impregnated, as she was on the planet’s surface trying to apprehend the Orion Slave

Trader, Bliss, in order to recover the stolen Starburst weapon. In fact, she was the only female at the table not impregnated with a Garcia child. "I guess you'll have to resign yourself to playing Mat Helm on the holodeck to get your fix of fast women."

Garcia only frowned, not wanting to argue with her.

"Who's Mat Helm?" Rivan and Trini both asked.

"Think Go-go girls, bad acting, bad dancing, cliché lines, umm, pretty much a typical day in the life of Garcia," Kletsova said.

Garcia finished one item on his plate and went to the next one, having started with the least favorite item, leaving his most favorite item for last. Any other time he would have just mixed it all together, but he was trying to remain in a pleasant mood, despite Tatiana's jabs and sarcasm. Perhaps after dinner he could be Mat Helm, just for a little while.

"Tam, are you ever going to smile again?" Rivan asked.

"Is that appropriate table discussion?" Kitara asked.

"No," Kletsova answered.

"All subjects are open at the Captain's table," Garcia said. "What's said at the Captain's table, stays at the Captain's table."

"Good," Rivan said. "Cause I have something to say."

"Not a surprise there," Kletsova said.

"Tanya," Garcia corrected, using the English form of Tatiana. "I gave you a pass on the ugly baby comment because your opinion is welcome here. Just allow others theirs."

"Aye," Kletsova said.

"Proceed, Rivan," Garcia said.

"As you know," Rivan said. "On my planet when someone breaks the law and is caught in the act, they are executed on the spot. There are times when people have broken the law and have not been caught by officials, and yet, they act as if they had been caught. They simply give up the will to live, become lethargic, and some even go as far as to seek out a place where law officials are monitoring to commit a second crime in order to receive the punishment they felt they deserved from the previous crime, even though they were free and clear of all demands by society at large."

"What are you saying?" Kitara asked. "You want Garcia to commit suicide?"

"No!" Rivan said, shocked. "I guess I can see how you might think that was coming but, no! No! How can you even think that?"

"Get to the point," Kletsova said. Garcia shot her another look, but she didn't back down.

"The point I am trying to make, Captain," Rivan pressed on. "And perhaps I am not doing it well, but truth be said, you violated social rules of conduct. More specifically, you violated the rules that you hold most precious, the spatial boundaries and liberties of personhood. This violation has had, and will continue to have, serious consequences. However since no one is seeking equity through the law, you are free of everyone's obligation except those which you apply to yourself. None of us can tell you how to think or how to feel, so if you want truth, then you're going to have to find a way to forgive yourself and deal with the realities at hand. If not for your sake, then for ours and for the children that are on their way. The children, I dare say, are the only innocent ones in this situation, the only ones without any choice, and they deserve the right to

know you. The real you. The you that I met and fell in love with. The one that everyone here loves and would gladly sacrifice their life for. It is times to move on, because if you don't, well, then you're just the walking dead, and subconsciously, that will become the resolution that your mind will seek. Selfish or not, I want you alive, healthy, and happy. That's all I got to say on the matter."

Garcia set his fork down on the table, well aware that he had everyone's attention. Even Ori was still and attentive to what he may do, but then, she was peculiarly sensitive to high emotions. Garcia placed his hands in lap, his right hand falling naturally over his left wrist, which irked him and he shifted his hands to the table face down, as if he needed to get a grip on reality. He closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and reached out for Rivan's hand on his left, and Ori's hand on his right.

"Truth be known," Garcia said, tears in his eyes. He couldn't stop the stream. In truth, he didn't understand where all of his emotions were coming from. He felt out of control and he hated it. Was this his body moving him closer to Pon Farr? Or was this just the accumulation of stress from all the drama surrounding him lately? "You're absolutely right."

Kitara grunted. And then started to laugh. Everyone turned to her for an explanation. "And I was afraid I was going to have to kick his ass to make things right again."

Every one but the two Vulcans began to laugh. Ori's laugh wasn't an oral thing, and she was probably laughing because everyone else was, but her joy was very visible on her face. She touched Garcia's face, affectionately, wiping his tears.

"I don't see how violence would have changed his mental state," Sendak said. "Indeed, I can only see how that might fuel his current bent for self persecution."

"The goal would have been to fight him to the brink of death in order to trigger his fight or flight response and remind him that he wants to live," Kitara said.

"And if his biological propensity for survival didn't kick in?" Sendak asked.

"Then he would be no better off than he has been for the last several days, moping about," Kitara said.

"I've not been moping," Garcia snapped. He shook his head, and said, much softer, "I am just a little moody. Personal reasons." He said this last while looking directly at Sendak, as if giving him a hint. "Everything will work out, one way or the other. And I'll change my name to Jacob."

Trini burst out into laughter, spraying food. Kletsova rolled her eyes.

"I don't get it," Rivan said.

"It's a Biblical reference," Kletsova said. "It wasn't funny."

"I know this reference," Kitara said. "Isn't this the man who sacrifices a son for God?"

"The son gets a stay of execution at the last moment," Trini said.

"What kind of god would ask that of a man? And what sort of man would comply with such a request?" Rivan asked, appalled.

"A man wanting to prove his faith," Kletsova said.

"I find it an inspiring story," Kitara said.

"Well, I would have liked a little more consistency, if you ask me," Kletsova said.

"How so?" Trini asked.

“Well, if God could stop Jacob at the last moment from killing his son and free will was maintained, so that he still knew that Jacob was faithful even though he didn’t complete the task assigned him, then surely god could have also stayed Cain’s hand right before he killed Able and punished Cain for murder without Able having to die.”

“Free will would have been violated,” Kitara said.

“Free will was violated with Jacob, what’s the difference? Better yet, he could have stopped Adam and Eve from both eating of the forbidden fruit and maintained free will, because god would have known they couldn’t be faithful the same way that he knew Jacob was faithful even though there was no follow through. Maybe the world would have been a better place had Able lived, or if Adam and Eve never sinned, because god could have contained the issues with them,” Kletsova argued. “After all, God was supposedly more pleased with Able than Cain. Where was He when Able needed him?”

“Spoken like a true atheist,” Trini said.

“You are missing the point of the story,” Kitara said, chiming in.

“And this, Rivan, is why people avoid discussing politics and religion in general,” Garcia said. “Especially when they have to work together.”

“I find it very interesting,” Rivan said. “Much of your justice system is built on Judeo-Christian values, which, if I understand my sources correctly, are influenced by Greek and Roman philosophy.”

“Will anyone be wanting dessert?” Karsat inquired.

At the word dessert, Ori grabbed Garcia’s arm and signed to him.

“I guess that would be a yes,” Garcia said, actually smiling. “Hot chocolate cake topped with vanilla ice cream, melted chocolate, streaks of caramel, oh! and some peanut butter on the side.”

“Ahh!” Kletsova shouted. “What is it with you and peanut butter?”

Ori signed frantically, her hands describing rain.

“And lots of those little, eatable sparkly things,” Garcia added.

Ori hugged and kissed Garcia.

After dessert, Kitara asked for some time with Garcia alone. The others excused themselves. Karsat brought them Klingon coffee, lowered the dumb waiter, and departed down the stairs. She closed a door, sealing off the stairwell from the dining room, securing the Captain’s and First Officer’s privacy.

“You have good friends, Captain,” Kitara said. “Most of them speak truth to you, and most of the time at that. Respect without inducing fear. That is most honorable.”

Garcia nodded.

“Captain Glor reported in,” Kitara said. “They have arrived at New Fabrín and have secretly started construction on a Gateway inside the Yonada spaceship. I don’t see the point, however.”

“The point is, we need a place to fall back to. A secret base of operation that only we know about,” Garcia said. “The Yonada spaceship is the perfect hideout. No one would suspect it. It’s just a floating monument, a testament to the Fabrín people. Once the gate is functional, I intend to send a Losira agent there to install a Losira computer system and tie it in tandem to the Yonada computer system, well, what’s left of it after it was stripped, and then have her download a copy of herself into that system. Once that is complete, we can make that station operational and begin upgrades so it will be ready to receive us.” Garcia knew that once the Losira computer system was operational there,

she could make as many Losira agents as she needed to do the work. No one on the planet looking up at their small, artificial moon would suspect a thing. It was a place Garcia had dreamed about visiting ever since he was a child, watching it travel across the sky. At the time he had considered turning it into a secret hideout to hide from the Kelvan who had wanted to kill him, but getting there had always proven problematic.

“The Yonada ship isn’t capable of warp drive,” Kitara said. “But I suppose, as a base of operation, it is far enough outside normal traffic lanes to not be considered a likely host for a secret base. The ship is big enough to conduct business without anyone noticing, especially if we only use the Gateway to access it.”

“That, or cloaked ships,” Garcia said.

“The Queen wants her gray back,” Kitara said.

“He can return to the Queens service once the Yonada Gateway is functioning,” Garcia said. “I’m going to want another Gateway, though.”

“How many gates do you need?” Kitara asked

“I don’t know, yet,” Garcia said. “One for every ship in my growing Armada, that’s for sure. We can add another to the list, by the way.”

Kitara raised an eyebrow.

“The T’Pau, a D’Kyr class starship, has been put at my disposal,” Garcia said. “Vulcan is going to send it to planet Bliss with a science team, to meet with the Queen and study any of the artifacts retrieved from the Preserver base we intend to raid. McCoy had a secret meeting with T’Pau and she is hand picking the crew. They should be ready to go in three or four days.”

“D’Kyr class. They still make those?” Kitara asked, not hiding her disgust at the D’Kyr class.

“I kind of like the annular warp coil, which rotates into position, but tucks away nicely when not in use,” Garcia said. “Kind of like the slide outs on the cone section of the Path Finder, which provides us more working space when not at warp.”

“I don’t like slide outs or moving warp coils,” Kitara said. “The more mechanical items you have, the more likely you have to repair things. I especially don’t like the rotating sensor drum on the Path Finder. Sweet and simple is more practical.”

“Indeed,” Garcia said. “Send Glor my compliments and have him warp over to Iotia as soon as he finishes at New Fabrin. Once there, have him contact planet Bliss to borrow a couple of the grays to establish the next planet side Gateway. I have an offshore site I’ll want to set up for my next base.”

“Another secret base?” Kitara asked. “Don’t you think you’re expanding further than our resources allow?”

“Possibly,” Garcia said. “But, this one is more of a personal thing for me. I suspect I am going to have children there, given what I now know to be true, and I intend to take care of my obligations. That world is still operating under an open economic exchange theory, with paper money as currency. Further, I have a few warrior friends that might be useful to have at our sides, if we ever need some extra hands. You’ll like the Iotians. They fight like Klingons. They don’t give up.”

“I have never heard of Iotians,” Kitara admitted.

“Not surprising,” Garcia said. “Their system is on the far side of Earth in relationship to Kronos, and, they’re not warp capable. That will be their down fall if I recruit any of them for missions. They’re not tech oriented for the most part. Smart,

adaptable, and will fight to the death, but it will be necessary to train them in basic Fleet tech. On the positive side; they're dying to get a piece of the action, so they will come eager to learn."

"I'll pass the word to Glor," Kitara said.

Garcia was quiet for a moment. "I'm going to have to go to Vulcan in a couple of days. I intend to take the Path Finder. You'll have to cover for me. Standard ruse, I'm engaged in war game simulation on the holodeck," Garcia said. "I'll be gone two, maybe three days at the most."

"Why are you going?" Kitara asked.

"I have some personal business I must tend to," Garcia said. "Let's just leave it at that, please. Anything else left on the table for us to discuss?"

"Yes," Kitara said. "We need to discuss how and where we will raise our child. And the other children. I am happy enough for ours to be raised on a Starship, but most importantly, I am adamant it be raised versed in Klingon culture."

"I agree," Garcia said. "It should be versed in both our cultures."

"No," Kitara said. "Only Klingon culture, at least, for the primary years. It needs a good foundation to ground it."

Garcia nodded. "I understand the point of view, however, our ship is not completely Klingon, so there will be a meshing of cultures, unless you intend to take the child to Kronos," Garcia said.

"I want you involved," Kitara said. "This is going to be difficult."

"We'll face the challenge together, Kitara," Garcia said. "I will defer to your desire that Klingon culture be our son's primary foundation. However, you should be aware that the other children, from the other species, will have their needs, too, and I will not play favorites."

"I would not like it if you did," Kitara said.

"Well, don't you see how rivalries could be established if I treat ours roughly, Klingon style, while I treat the Vulcan with tempered logic?" Garcia asked.

"No two children are alike. Even if they were all from the same mother, they would each have their own special needs, their own temperaments, and so you can't expect to raise the first one as you would the last one," Kitara said. "You give each according to its nature and needs and the rest will work itself out. When they're older and wiser, they will understand that life is not always fair, because we will have taught them well."

Garcia's badge rang and he answered it. "Garcia here."

"Captain," Undine answered. "You have an emergency call."

"Priority one?" Garcia asked.

"Negative. It's a general public line, emergency, immediate attention requested," Undine said. "From planet Delta. Real time."

"I'll take it in my Ready Room. I'll be there in a moment," Garcia said.

"Aye," Undine said, closing out the communication.

"Excuse me," Garcia said, and departed quickly. There could only be one person calling him from Delta and that would be Persis. They had exchanged mail and videos, but there had not been a live, real time, dialogue between them since... God, he hated complications, he thought. He loved her fiercely, perhaps even more so because they could never be together again, due to a peculiar allergic reaction he had had to her. They

had been kids, messing around on his birthday, and he and she had bonded telepathically which caused him to have seizures. The episode had nearly killed them both, and would have had Doctor Selar not intervened and saved their lives. The end results were that they could never be together again, physically, in the same room, or he would die. They had limited contact, perhaps to allow each other the chance to move on with their lives, and so Garcia had never known he and Persis had produced a child on their one time encounter, until a news reporter unwittingly revealed it to him. McCoy had later confirmed it and had taken responsibility for keeping Garcia in the dark. At the time, he had told McCoy he would never keep a secret like that, and now, here he was, keeping lots of secrets.

Garcia's mind returned to worrying about what sort of emergency might have prompted a call. Was Persis okay? Was she ill? Was her husband treating her well? He barely heard the call to attention as he stepped out onto the Bridge and went straight way to the Ready Room. The door whispered shut behind him and he activated the screen and was relieved to see Persis in person, standing there, breathing, and apparently in good health physically. And then he took in the signs of distress on her face and the obvious signs of having recently cried.

"What's wrong?" Garcia asked her. There was no hello, or need for it, as if there had been no years of separation. He felt a terrible yearning in his heart and throat. He wanted to reach out to her and embrace her and comfort her and it was gut-wrenching to know that it would never be.

"It's our daughter," Persis said. "She's missing."

"I need you to be more specific. Clarify missing," Garcia said.

"It appears that she ran away," Persis said. "There's a note saying that she is going to see you, but I don't buy it. She knows that would kill you."

"I'll be right there," Garcia said.

Persis blinked, confused. "You mean, you will come here?" Persis asked.

"Absolutely," Garcia said.

"But it will take you a month at best warp," Persis said.

"I will be there in an hour," Garcia said. "What are the authorities doing about this?"

"They're not doing anything. She has to be missing for another twenty four hours before they will look into it, and if they assume she's just a runaway, at thirteen they won't pursue the matter intently," Persis said. "She's close enough to adult status here, they will just think she's moved on. And Tam, she has a locator tag imbedded subcutaneously. I would know if she were on this planet. Alive or dead."

"I'm on my way," Garcia said.

"I hear you say that, but that doesn't make any sense," Persis said. "I just wanted you to pull some strings with Star Fleet and see if they would begin a search at your request. There's Starfleet ship here in orbit. The Patton, I think."

"Persis, I will be there in an hour. Don't ask how and don't tell anyone I'm coming," Garcia said. "Just believe me. I'll talk to you soon. Garcia out."

Garcia stepped out onto the Bridge. Undine stood and was about to announce him.

"Undine, listen to me," Garcia said, interrupting her. "I want Alpha Team to report to holodeck one for war game exercises. You are in command of the New

Constitution for the duration of this exercise. We are not to be interrupted for anything.
Is that understood?"

"Aye, Captain," Undine said.

"Your ship," Garcia said, and left the Bridge.

CHAPTER THREE

Garcia stepped into his quarters only to find it occupied. Rivan was propped up on his bed, reading. Ori was curled up with a pillow clutched to her stomach, sound asleep. Rivan watched as Garcia walked over to the two Preserver Orbs he had been given, which were the equivalent of Remotely Operated vehicles, tied in tandem to him telepathically to his mind in such a way that the extra personalities residing in his mind could manifest themselves into real life. The Orbs created real matter, as opposed to holographic matter which was unstable at best and only within an Omicron field.

“What’s up?” Rivan asked.

“I thought you and Ori were going to start sleeping in your own quarters,” Garcia commented.

“She likes your bed,” Rivan said. “It smells like you.”

“Yeah, well, we need to train her to sleep in her own bed,” Garcia said.

“Okay,” Rivan said. “Are you going on an Away Mission?”

“Yes. I’m going to the Path Finder. Sorry I can’t stay and talk,” Garcia said, activating the orbs by sending them mental energy. “Duana, Ilona, you’re with me.”

The orb illuminated and floated up from his hands. Duana and Ilona materialized, the Orbs disappearing into their bodies as if they had been chakras. They each took a deep breath, orientated, and had to run to catch up with Garcia who was already on his way out of the room. Duana waved at Rivan.

“Joy and love,” Rivan called after them.

Ori looked up, blinked, and then went back to sleep, hugging Garcia’s favorite pillow to her face.

Alpha team consisted of Doctor Misan, Kitara, Kletsova, Trini, Sendak, and six Klingon warriors. There were other teams, each designated with a specific grouping of talents in expectations of future needs, but Alpha team was generic enough to cover a host of potential issues.

“What’s the deal?” Kitara asked.

“My oldest daughter is missing, possibly a runaway, and we’re going after her,” Garcia said. “Anyone have a problem with that, say so now.”

No one said anything. “Very well,” Garcia said. “Computer, recognize Captain Garcia, authorization, primary colors are bent.”

“Captain Garcia, command access available,” the computer responded.

“Open the secret compartment and power up the Gateway, Path Finder coordinates,” Garcia said.

The back wall slid open to reveal an empty space to the uninitiated. Those wearing rings given them by the Preserver Queen, formerly known as the Princess, saw the large, circular Gateway. The Gate’s iris spun open to reveal a pooling of lights, twirling like a cyclone that indicated an active wormhole. The energy of the spinning vortex decreased until it was gone and the gate looked like nothing more than a gentle pool of water, standing vertical. The other side of the wormhole was barely visible, like looking through a clouded lens, or a glass of murky water, but the other side could be seen. The flutter of lights and the absence of darkness on the other side was the first confirmation that the opposing iris was now open, followed by a series of lights as the computers on either side linked together. Losira, the Path Finder’s artificial Intelligence

manifested itself on the other side, awaiting the arrival of the guest to be. At a signal from Garcia, the Alpha team started through the portal.

“Computer, secure door to holodeck one, and run Garcia war game exercise, variation alpha one,” Garcia said.

A holographic simulation began to play, with holographic versions of the Alpha team members. There was a shadow in the holographic projection the size of the hidden compartment where the portal rested. Garcia stepped up to the Gateway, hit a button on the inner wall of the compartment, which caused the ‘hidden’ compartment to return to the concealed mode, while at the same time stepping closer to the wormhole. He stepped into the wormhole just as the wall came to a full close against his back...

And came out the other side, on board the Path Finder. Losira was there to greet him.

“Garcia, the sky is up,” Garcia said.

“Voice recognition accepted,” Losira said, stepping up to take Garcia’s hand, pulling him closer to inspect his eyes. By taking his hand she could determine his finger prints where ever his fingers lighted against her skin, as well as accurately measure the size of his hand and the length of his fingers; a complete biometric profile was compared to the previous identification process, noting it to be with in the accepted parameters. Finger and hand size had some variability depending on season, temperature, and health conditions. Her pupils dilated as she scrutinized his retinas; retina prints were as unique as finger prints. “Biometric, finger prints, and retina scans, complete.”

Losira kissed Garcia hard on the mouth, her eyes closing as she sighed and moaned with delight, drawing in his air, saturated with his molecules. “DNA scan, complete. Welcome back, Captain. I’m so happy to see you.”

“Are we through with security check?” Kletsova asked.

“Ah, sure, you all pass,” Losira said, waving them off with a flick of a hand while hanging onto the Captain with the other.

“Prep the transwarp drive, Losira,” Garcia said, ignoring Kletsova’s look of disgust. The Transwarp Drive tended to make every one on board “sea sick,” for a lack of a better term. “Notify Dryac we’re going to make a jump. Any one who wants a Dramamine can pop one now. Who’s at the helm?”

“McKnight,” Losira said. She seemed genuinely concerned. In truth, she liked predictability and routine; not knowing things bothered her. “Is there a problem?”

“Don’t know yet,” Garcia said. “Kitara, I want a team ready to beam down to investigate Persis’ home, look for clues to where my daughter may have gone. Doctor Misan, go to sickbay and I’ll join you there directly.” Garcia hit his comm. badge. “Captain to McKnight.”

“Um, McKnight here,” she answered. “Everything okay?”

“Put in the coordinates for a transwarp jump to the Delta home world,” Garcia said, attempting to leave the Shuttle Bay, but finding it difficult to pass through the door with Losira hanging on him. Most of the alpha team had already departed. “I’m on my way to the Bridge. Losira, can you give me some space.”

“But I’ve missed you,” Losira said.

“Walk beside me,” Garcia said.

Garcia wasn’t ten paces down the corridor when Mr. Smith, Dryac’s personal attendant, intercepted him. “Is this necessary? You know transwarp makes Dryac sick.”

“It makes everyone sick,” Garcia pointed out.

“None as much as her,” Mr. Smith said.

“That’s why I gave her a heads up,” Garcia said. “She’ll have to cope, just like the rest of the crew. And you’re in my way.”

One of the Klingon pulled Mr. Smith aside and Garcia continued to the lift, with Trini right behind him. Trini seemed like she wanted to say something, but she kept quiet. Garcia said “Bridge,” and the lift began to move. Garcia turned to say something to Trini, only he found one of his mental companions suddenly between the two of them. The rogue counselor Troi program had manifested herself right between him and Trini, utilizing the holographic capabilities that the Path Finder had to offer. The Path Finder was basically a giant holographic emitter, which comprised both Fleet emitters and Kolandan emitters, the same kind that made it possible for Losira to manifest herself, and with Garcia practically one with the ship, all his mental companions could move about the ship just as easy as they could maneuver around the hidden recesses of his mind. He preferred them on the ship, out in the open, than in his mind, but he was a bit angry that his Troi had popped in so unexpectedly.

“How many times do I have to tell you, don’t do that?!” Garcia snapped, startled by her sudden appearance and proximity.

“Do you realize you’re always a bit harsh to Mr. Smith?” Troi asked.

“Are you my conscience?” Garcia asked her.

“Perhaps I should be,” Troi said.

“I’m in the midst of a crisis,” Garcia said. “I don’t have time for niceties.”

“Have you noticed that every time you’re on the Path Finder, you’re in the midst of a crisis?” Counselor Troi asked.

“Your point?” Garcia asked.

He was saved from having to listen to her as Tuer met Garcia as they arrived at the Bridge. Trini worked her way around Garcia, Tuer, and Troi and went to her station, relieving the Klingon that had been monitoring signals and data flows between Cardassian ships in the sector.

“You realize jumping out of this system will alert the Cardassians that someone had been monitoring their maneuvers?” Tuer said.

“I do,” Garcia said. “We’re still cloaked, right?”

“Aye,” Tuer said.

“Good, then what they don’t know, will just make them be more hesitant about instigating a fight,” Garcia said.

“Engine room to Bridge, we’re ready for a transwarp jump,” Gomez said.

“McKnight, take us there in three,” Garcia said. “All hands, prepare for jump.”

McKnight counted down and pushed the button. The stars spun around a central point on the view screen, star points becoming lines, circles and then flooding the whole screen with white, before spiraling back to circles in the opposite direction, then lines, then star points once more. Several of the Klingon on the Bridge became ill and had to leave their post to keep from being sick all over their terminals. Garcia displayed no concerns for their well being, partly because this was pretty much routine every time they activated the transwarp drive, and partly because the Klingons preferred to handle their illness without a lot of attention placed on it. He went over to Trini’s station and punched in Persis’ home number while she was being sick into an air sickness bag. He patted her

gently on the back. She paused for a moment in her being sick, decided she had a hold of herself, and then put the call through for Garcia. She turned to be sick again just as Persis appeared on the screen.

“Give me the transporter coordinates to your home,” Garcia said. “I’m sending a team down.”

Persis nodded, pushing a button on her terminal. It was obvious that she had been crying, but now she was openly crying again. “Thank you, Tam.”

Persis closed out the screen on her end, not wanting to maintain eye contact, literally not wanting Garcia to see her in her present state.

“I’ll be in Sickbay,” Garcia said. “Tuer, your ship.”



Garcia entered Sickbay, activated a screen, and started filing through the medical files as if he were rummaging through a medicine cabinet. Doctor Misan came up behind him, watched for a moment, and then finally inquired.

“Can I help you find something specific?” Doctor Misan asked.

“I need some sort of immunosuppressant that will prevent me from having an allergic reaction to Persis when I beam down,” Garcia said.

“You’re joking, right?” Doctor Misan asked.

“Do I look like I’m joking?” Garcia asked. “Her DNA is on file, you’ll find it attached to my medical records, due to the severity of the reaction.”

“I’ve seen it and what you’re asking for is too dangerous. It’s more than just an allergic reaction, you know,” Misan said. “There’s some telepathy issues involved here. You bonded with her.”

“That was a long time ago. Surely there’s something available to counter this by now,” Garcia said.

“You can’t change basic chemistry, Captain,” Doctor Misan said. “If your body reacts negatively to a chemical, then it reacts negatively to a chemical. Snake venom is just a protein, after all, so, if the proteins that comprise Persis’ body are not compatible with your human chemistry, it is what it is.”

“Nice snake analogy,” Garcia said. “Now, give me the snake venom antidote.”

“I can give you an immunosuppressant, a toxin that will make you sick at your stomach, and kill all of your current t-cells, which will reduce the like likelihood of you having an episode. That’s the easy part. The hard part is keeping you from having a seizure. I guess I could give you a psychotropic drug to reduce the likelihood of you having an epileptic seizure, but it’s no guarantee. Not to mention the fact that these two drugs are incompatible. The first one is going to leave you open to potential infections and the second one is going to decrease your mental acuity.”

“Drug me,” Garcia said.

“With Jurak still on the New Constitution, I’m acting Chief Doctor and I don’t think it’s worth the risk,” Doctor Misan said. “It could kill you.”

“Just think of it as a late term abortion,” Garcia said. “And if you’re successful in killing me, Admiral Pressman will no doubt put you in command. It is, after all, why he originally recruited you, right?”

Doctor Misan turned a darker shade of blue, ordered up some chemicals from the replicator, filled a hypodermic with the cocktail, and shot it into Garcia’s arm not caring if he

caused any pain. In truth, he didn't want Garcia to die, but only because if he killed Garcia, then his life was surely forfeit. Kitara would probably kill him soon after.

Garcia smiled pleasantly, thinking, that wasn't so bad, and then he turned towards the closest receptacle and hurred. After a couple minutes, he got himself under control, forced himself to breathe deep, and then went to the nearest lavatory to clean. He returned and Doctor Misan ran a check.

"I'd rather not give you anything for the nausea," Misan said. "You're probably going to feel strange, and may have a headache later, but you'll live, for now."

"I do feel strange, like I'm underwater," Garcia said.

"That's one of the side effects of the anti epileptic meds," Misan said. "I would also prefer you not leave the ship in this condition."

"Your preference is noted. Now, let's go," Garcia said, hitting his comm. badge. "Duana and Ilona, prepare for a site to site. Tatiana, lock onto me, Misan, Duana and Ilona, and beam us down to the coordinates Persis gave you."

"You're going down?" Kletsova asked, concerned.

"I am, now energize," Garcia said.

A transporter wave caught him and Misan, and a moment later, he, Misan, and two of his mental companions were on the surface, in the middle of a living room. Someone dropped a glass of water. Garcia orientated himself to the sound. Persis was mouthing the words 'no,' and backing up. He went to her and embraced her.

"It's okay, shhh, it's okay, I'm here," Garcia said.

"How is this possible?" Persis asked.

"The miracles of modern medicines," Garcia said. And then he pushed her away to rush to the sink where he made it just in time to be sick. He ran the water, cleaning the sink and then his face. Duana handed him a towel.

"Thank you," Garcia said. He turned around to see Kitara.

"Have you lost your ever loving mind?" Kitara snapped.

"I had to come," Garcia said. "I had to try."

"No you didn't," Kitara said.

"Tam?" Persis asked.

"I took some drugs so we could meet, so you don't have to worry about killing me," Garcia said.

"No, she just has to worry that the drugs will kill you," Kitara said. "It's not like she doesn't already have enough on her plate."

"Tam, I am glad to see you, to touch you, after all these years," Persis said, hesitant, but allowing herself to be pulled towards him. She sobbed on his shoulder.

"I can handle this investigation, you know," Kitara said.

"Have you found anything?" Garcia asked.

"No immediate evidence of foul play," Kitara said.

"Captain," Sendak said, coming into the room. "I would like to get access to her computer records, check out her emails and stuff, but there's a block on it."

"Persis?" Garcia asked.

"Information is stored at a remote location, and it will take an act of congress to get into it," Persis said. "Our society respects privacy, even of minors, and unless she is declared legally dead, or a criminal suspect for murder, there's no real way to get in there."

“Sendak?” Garcia asked.

“I can do an illegal tap using the Path Finder’s computers,” Sendak said.

“Do it,” Garcia said.

“You’re taking a big chance authorizing that,” Kitara said. “If we get caught...”

“Do I look like I care?” Garcia said.

“You look like you’re sick,” Kitara said. “I want you to go back to the ship and let me handle this.”

“And I will,” Garcia said. “After I inspect Tama Orleans’ room.”

“You’re sweating,” Persis said. “Do you want me to lower the temp?”

Garcia swallowed. “I’ll be okay,” he said. “Show me her room.”

Persis led Garcia to his daughter’s room. The smell of Persis was almost unbearable, and if it weren’t for his constant distraction at possibly being sick, he probably would have tried to kiss her, even with an audience. He sat down on Tama Orleans’ bed, holding a hand to his mouth. Duana brought him a bucket, his daughter’s trash receptacle, to be sick in just in case he needed it. He nodded, setting it beside him, trying to take in his daughter’s room. It seemed like a normal teenager’s room. There were photos of friends tacked to the wall. There was a small vanity table, a desk, a pile of clothes on the floor. Garcia noted Ilona examining items on the vanity. She picked up a portable media player, which offered audio and video options.

“If I were running away, I wouldn’t have left this,” Ilona said.

Garcia nodded, motioned for Ilona to bring it to him. He resisted the urge to be sick.

“Tam, I really think you should get back to the ship,” Kitara said.

“I’m okay,” Garcia said. He turned on the media player. One of his songs cued up with the start up page, requesting a pass code.

“That sounds familiar,” Duana said, referencing the start up melody.

“Do you know the pass code?” Garcia asked Persis.

Persis shook her head.

“How long has your husband been beating you?” Duana asked.

“Duana!” Garcia snapped.

“What? You don’t see it or are you just going to ignore the signs?” Duana asked.

“It’s none of his business,” Ilona said. “She made her bed, she can sleep in it.”

“Ilona, shut it,” Garcia ordered. “Persis, are you being treated well?”

Persis looked down, hesitant to answer.

“And you wonder why she ran away,” Ilona said.

Garcia quieted Ilona with a look.

“Anything you can add to complete the picture here will only help us find your daughter sooner,” Kitara said, surprisingly compassionate for a Klingon.

“What’s going on here?” a man entered. “Who are these people in my house?”

“Captain Garcia, my husband, Mio Halington,” Persis said.

Garcia stood, not bothering to shake hands. It took all his strength not to immediately rush the guy and pound him, but he held his prejudice in check and used all his senses to get a good feel of the man standing before him. He wondered if his hatred for the man came from his love for Persis, or because he just didn’t like him.

“Ah, so your true love has finally come back into your life,” Mio said. “I suppose it was only a matter of time.”

“It’s not like that,” Persis said.

“I told you I would find Tama. What, you didn’t believe me?” Mio asked.

“I just have this feeling,” Persis tried.

“Feelings?! Like, you can trust your feelings,” Mio said.

“Do you know where Tama Orleans is?” Garcia asked him.

“Oh, don’t even go there with me,” Mio said. “After all these years you finally show up and want to play Dad? I’m the one who puts food on her plate.”

“I’ll buy her a replicator and save you any more trouble,” Garcia said. “Now, do you care to answer my question?”

“If I knew where she was, I would have already dragged her ass home,” Mio said.

Garcia stepped closer to Mio. “If I ever get wind that you have hit or inappropriately touched Tama or Persis, you and I are going to have issues.”

“How dare you come into my house and threaten me,” Mio said. “Do it again and I’ll kill you.”

Garcia stepped even closer. “Bring it,” Garcia said.

Kitara had already anticipated the fight as Garcia was stepping up but she wasn’t there in time to prevent Mio from punching Garcia in the gut. Duana pulled Persis back, while Kitara put Mio in a joint lock, and Garcia went to the ground to be sick. Ilona handed him the bucket and towel.

“You’re even weaker than I imagined,” Mio said, resisting the pain as Kitara manipulated his arm. “What, you have all your women fight for you?”

“You need to be quiet, now,” Kitara warned him, pinning him against the wall.

“Is this the big man you’re always dreaming about?” Mio asked Persis. Kitara twisted his arm a little more. “Break my arm, bitch, and I’ll kill you.”

Kitara used Mio’s resistance against him. As she pushed him to the wall, he was trying to push away, so she increased her push towards the wall so that he would increase his resistance, and then suddenly she jerked Mio away from the wall to give her space and momentum. He tried to counter his fall back, and just then she pushed him into the wall head first, knocking him out cold and dropping him to the floor. It all went much quicker because of her anticipation of his reactions. She called Doctor Misan and two of her men to take Mio to the other room. “Keep him sedated, but treat his wound,” Kitara said.

“I want a back ground check on him,” Garcia said. “And check the computer on his vehicle. I want to know everywhere he’s been in the last two weeks. Check his credit account to see where he’s spent money.”

“You don’t think he has anything to do with Tama’s disappearance, do you?” Persis asked.

“The step father, or second husband, is eighty five percent more likely to rape and or murder a rival offspring than any other agent,” Ilona said.

Persis leaned back against the wall and slid to the floor, sobbing. Garcia looked at Ilona, but he was uncertain if he was angry at her for stating a known fact, or because he was actually an example of that statistic, having recently killed Kelley’s offspring in favor of his own.

“What?” Ilona asked. “That is the correct statistic.”

“Not on this planet,” Garcia said.

“I’m sure it’s close enough,” Ilona sulked.

“Why did you stay with him?” Garcia asked, simultaneously with Duana and Ilona. Their voices blended like musicians singing.

“It was nice in the beginning. It grew worse with time, his jealousy changed him,” Persis whispered. “And the longer I stayed, the harder it was to leave. It’s all my fault...”

“That’s enough of that,” Garcia snapped.

“It is partly her fault,” Ilona said.

“Ilona!” Garcia snapped.

“If she doesn’t take responsibility for her part in this, she is doomed to repeat the patterns that brought her here,” Ilona said.

“If I want psychological advice, I will ask Counselor Troi,” Garcia said. “Persis, I want you to pack your bags. You’re leaving with us.”

“I have nothing to pack,” Persis said. “I have nothing. All I want is my daughter back.”

Garcia moved over next to Persis and held her to him. “I know,” Garcia said. “We’ll find her. Meanwhile, why don’t you get some things. You mentioned in a letter once to me that you still had the star shells I gave you.”

“Mio destroyed that,” Persis said.

“Come, let’s go back to the ship together,” Garcia said.

“I can’t go with you,” Persis said. “My life is here. And, I can’t risk making you sick. Look at you, you’re barely able to keep from puking.”

“There is another option,” Garcia said. “This is temporary.”

Garcia’s comm. badge rang and he answered it. “Sendak, here, Captain. You’re going to want to come up and look at this.”

“I’ll be right there,” Garcia said. He nodded to Duana and she helped Persis to her feet. Kitara gave Garcia a hand up.

“I’d like to stay a bit longer, search around the house, and talk to the neighbors, see if anyone saw anything,” Kitara said.

Garcia nodded. “Path Finder, four to beam up,” Garcia said.

Duana, Ilona, Persis, and Garcia arrived on the Path Finder. Garcia turned and offered Persis his hand as he stepped down off the transporter. “Persis, I want you to go with Duana. She’ll show you to guest quarters and will make you comfortable. I promise to inform you of the first piece of information I find, okay? If you need anything, you can ask the ship, or correspond with me direct.”

Persis nodded, but before leaving with Duana, she risked kissing Garcia on the cheek. “Thank you.”

Garcia held firm as Persis was led away. The doors closed and before Kletsova could get her sarcastic remark in, he rushed over to the wall, pushed in on a hidden recess, revealing a waste chute, and again was sick. While Garcia was indisposed, Kletsova replicated a towel and a glass of water, using the site to site replicator system, and brought the items to him. She rubbed his back as he continued to be sick.



Garcia arrived on the Bridge, feeling a bit under the weather, but hiding it fairly well. He made for the Science Station where Sendak was ready to give a report, but Trini interrupted him.

“Captain,” Trini said. “The Tempest is reporting in. They require your immediate presence.”

“They’ll have to wait,” Garcia said.

“They say it’s urgent,” Trini said.

“Tell them to wait,” Garcia snapped, and approached Sendak. “What do you have?”

“I have downloaded Tama Orleans emails,” Sendak said. “Her last email was from someone by the name of Niki Carter, inviting her up to visit her on a starship.”

“Excuse me?” Garcia asked.

Trini came over to Sendak’s station. “Nikita and Tama know each other?” Trini asked.

“As far as I’m able to determine,” Sendak said. “Their correspondence started shortly after you returned to Earth from Iotia. Based on the first email from Nikita, I surmise that Tama Orleans initiated the contact after reading a news article about her time with you on Iotia.”

“Get me Niki on the viewer,” Garcia said.

“It’s at least a four hour delay from here to Earth,” Trini said. “I can’t get you a live feed.”

“Open the Gate and patch it through the New Constitution, but get me Niki and Nancy on the line, now,” Garcia said,

“Aye,” Trini said.

Garcia turned back to Sendak, wondering why it seemed everyone was having trouble following his orders. He tried to calm himself down, noticed he was squeezing his left wrist, and decided to try a stick of gum. “Can you tell me which Starship that last message supposedly came from?”

“The transmission markers suggest that it was the USS Enterprise, however, I suspect it to be a forgery seeing how the Enterprise was not in this region of space at the time the message was said to have been sent,” Sendak said. “The time stamp corresponds with Tama Orleans disappearance.”

“I have Lt. Nancy Carter, Jupiter Station, online,” Trini announced.

“On screen,” Garcia said.

“Tam?” Nancy asked.

“Hello, Nancy. Did I wake you?” Garcia asked.

“It’s okay,” Nancy said, wiping her eyes. “Your message said urgent. What’s going on?”

“I need to speak with Niki,” Garcia said.

“She’s visiting her Dad on Earth,” Nancy said.

“Can you call them and conference this call?” Garcia asked. “I really need to speak with her.”

“Hang on,” Nancy said. After a moment of Nancy pushing buttons, a male voice answered Nancy’s hail. “Sorry to bother you, Boris, but I need to speak with Niki.”

“So, why are you calling here? You canceled on me,” Boris said.

“She’s not with you?” Nancy demanded.

“No, she’s supposed to be with you!” Boris argued.

Garcia interrupted what was obviously about to become a fight. “Nancy, listen to me. I believe Niki has been kidnapped. Contact Starfleet Security, start tracing her steps. I’ll contact you soon.”

“Alright,” Nancy said. “Carter out.”

“Trini, get our Away team up, we’re going to Earth, ASAP,” Garcia said.

“Calling them,” Trini said.

“Engineering, prepare to make a transwarp jump as soon as the Away Team is on board,” Garcia said. “Losira, alert Dryac we’re about to jump again. McKnight, set coordinates for Vulcan.”

McKnight pivoted her chair about to look at the Captain. “Did you say Vulcan, sir?” she asked.

“No,” Garcia said. “Why would I say Vulcan?”

“You did say Vulcan,” Sendak said.

“Alright, fine, I meant set the coordinates for Earth,” Garcia said, rubbing his forehead.

“Captain,” Trini said. “The tempest is on hold. They say they need to speak to you, urgently.”

Garcia sighed. “Put them on,” Garcia said.

Captain Gowr, of the IKV Tempest appeared on the screen. The name Garcia had intended for the Tempest was “Wolverine” but it didn’t stick. Gowr had chosen the Tempest and it was voted in. Everyone’s Shakespeare fan, Garcia had bemoaned.

“Admiral Garcia,” Gowr said, saluting.

Kitara arrived on the Bridge, utilizing a site to site transport. Garcia held a finger up to Gowr, asking for one moment, and nodded to his First Officer. “Have Trini catch you up to speed,” Garcia told her before giving his full attention back to Gowr. “Captain Gowr. What’s the problem? Have you arrived at Pollux Five? Have you found the Preserver cache?”

“We have arrived and we’re being held hostage. At the risk of sounding crazy, a giant hand has grasped our ship and is threatening to crush us,” Gowr said.

“Apollo!” Garcia said, frowning.

“No, Sir,” Gowr said. “Someone named Athena. She wishes to speak to you and refuses to let us go until that happens.”

“Damn it, I’m busy,” Garcia snapped.

“Captain,” Kitara said.

“What?” Garcia said, turning to her.

“Why don’t you attend to that and allow me to pursue this new lead,” Kitara said.

“Because my daughter appears to have been kidnapped and it’s my job to find her,” Garcia said.

“Captain, we should speak in private,” Kitara said.

“You’re not going to persuade me to relinquish my duties in this matter,” Garcia said.

“I am not asking you to relinquish your duties in this matter,” Kitara growled.

“I’m asking you to let us do our jobs. You can not do everything. Now, this pseudo god apparently wants to speak at you and you can do that, but there is nothing more you can do at this moment to help Tama Orleans, otherwise you would already be doing that.

Now, go to the Tempest, see what you can do about that situation, and I will contact you as soon as we have any new information about your daughter's disappearance."

Garcia pointed at her, ready to present an argument, but he couldn't find anything to counter what she was saying.

"Notify me the moment you find out anything," Garcia said. "Lieutenants Tuer and Kletsova, Duana and Ilona, and Doctor Misan, report to the Gate. Number One, your ship."

Garcia stepped into the turbo lift with some deliberation and was whisked away. As soon as the doors closed, the rogue program of Counselor Troi took that moment to beam into the lift so she could have a private counsel with Garcia. The one good thing about Counselor Troi being in front of him via the Path Finder's holographic emitters was that she was not in his head. Technically, she was still in his head, it just felt as if she wasn't. And, the transporter lights that she imitated was a nice compromise to just appearing in front of him, startling him again.

"Captain," Troi said. "You're being unreasonably harsh on everyone. They know their jobs. You don't have to shout or raise your voice."

"Like McCoy never snapped or raised his voice," Garcia said, directing the turbolift to proceed via his implant.

"First, you're not McCoy," Troi said. "Second, McCoy was never a starship Captain. As a starship Captain you have an obligation to present yourself in a certain kind of light. A light you're failing to achieve. Snapping at your officers is unreasonable, and snapping at your friends is intolerable. I know you have been under a lot of stress, but you're going to have to lighten up."

"How dare you," Garcia began, stepping closer to her. He was nearly distracted by the warmth radiating from her, the smell of her filling his senses.

"It's my job," Troi said.

"Your job is just to stay out of my head," Garcia began.

The lift doors opened on the intended floor. On exiting the lift, he was confronted by a large, Royal Bengal tiger. Only, he didn't see a tiger, he just knew everyone else saw her as a tiger. What he saw was an attractive female, of apparent Egyptian descent, dressed in all the accouterments of an era long since past. Gold armbands pressed into her tanned flesh. A gold headband helped to define her dark hair, which fell just above her shoulder and was cut at severe angles. A gold necklace with a large, amber jewel fell just above her bosom, a bosom apparently held firm by a push up bra. A gold belt hugged her hips, accentuating her hourglass figure and pulling tight her white dress which tapered and flared out over her thighs. Her sandals were gold in tint with straps that wound to her knees. All in all, she reminded him of the holodeck version of Isis he had created to fulfill a particular fantasy, which made her appearance to him a little distracting and unnerving at the same time. Her name was Aahla and she was a temporal agent in the same manner that Gary Seven and his cat Isis were temporal agents.

"I would like to go with you, Tammas," Aahla said.

"I don't really have time for you," Garcia said, walking. Even his mental companions didn't see Aahla as a human, but Troi knew enough not to question the fact that he was talking to a large cat. Everyone on board knew that the cat had free run of the ship and was obviously the Captain's pet. Garcia wondered if the crew doubted his

sanity at this point. Only the Klingons didn't seem to care, for they seemed to appreciate that the smartest, bravest warriors all had their eccentricities.

"If you're going up against the gods, my presence could bring balance," Aahla said.

"I still don't know what your agenda is, Aahla," Garcia said.

"You don't need to know everything, Tammias," Aahla said. "And much of it you would dismiss or ignore because of your scientific paradigm. There is a war coming. A war of good versus evil, light against dark. The best outcome arrives by maintaining a particular continuity in this time line."

"Please," Garcia said, only slowing his pace a little. "There is no evidence of evil in nature. If a tornado wipes out a trailer park or a volcano takes out a village, it's not because the gods are angry, but because you should build trailers stronger, and not build villages next to a volcano. If you build your house near a volcano or on a beach, you shouldn't be surprised if a wave or a lava flow rolls through your living room. The only evil in the universe is derived through the choices of men, who are either bio-chemically unstable, or just badly educated."

"That is one perspective," Aahla said. "There are also forces manipulating people to behave in certain ways."

"The devil made me do it didn't work in the dark ages, it isn't flying in the 24th century, either," Garcia said.

"Good point, Tam," Troi said. "Perhaps you can bear all of this in mind when you're interacting with the crew."

"Are you through lecturing me?" Garcia asked Troi.

"Either way," Aahla said, ignoring Garcia's and Troi's conversation. "You have to admit you're going up against a potential rival that outclasses you in technology, intellect, and strength. You're going up against my own kind."

"Technology, perhaps, but intellect?" Garcia asked. "If Kirk can outsmart Apollo, I imagine I can handle Athena."

"Your pride may be your downfall," Aahla said. "It would not hurt you to cultivate good friends and trust in their abilities."

"I'm not so prideful that I won't accept help," Garcia said. "You may come."

"Thank you," Aahla said. "Oh, and by the way, you should know. I'm pregnant."

Garcia screamed, gritted his teeth, and waved his hands in frustration as he sought words to express his feelings. Troi touched his arm, wanting to help him process all the conflicting emotions running through his head. "How is that even possible? What are you? You're not human, you're not tiger. What are you? And aren't you like a million years old?"

"Calm yourself," Aahla snapped, the way a grandmother might to silence a grandchild. "And I'm not that old. Maybe several thousands, but not millions. Be nice. Besides, I'm not displeased by the turn of events. I am surprised, partly because I, too, didn't think it was possible, but mostly because I didn't see this turn of events. I suspect the Counsel who sent me to watch over you knew."

"I thought you knew everything," Garcia complained.

"Contrary to popular belief, I do not know all things about all space and time. I know some things, and some particulars, and I'm quite versed in 23rd century history, and

not just the histories written by various species which can be bias towards a particular perspective,” Aahla said. “As it turns out, this was meant to be.”

“What do you mean by that?” Garcia said.

“Our child will play a pivotal role in ending the Kzinti Human war,” Aahla said.

“That war has been over for a hundred years now,” Garcia said.

“Predestination paradox,” Aahla said. “You and I will not raise him. He will be raised on Kzinti by Kzinti.”

“Why? What happens to us?” Garcia asked.

“I don’t know,” Aahla said. “We’re in flux, but the reading I did on the child was very clear. It is what it is. It has already happened. That’s why I can see it so clearly now.”

Garcia resumed walking and instead of grabbing his wrist he took hold of Troi’s hand. They arrived at the hangar deck where the Away Team waited to pass through the Gate to the Tempest.

“What took you so long?” Lt. Kletsova asked.

“Are you still sick?” Duana asked.

“I feel like crap,” Garcia admitted.

“I tried to warn you,” Doctor Misan said.

Garcia ignored him. He forced himself to breathe and turned to Troi. “You have valid points, as always. I will consider your advice and work at being more calm.”

“Oh, and he’s bringing Kitty,” Ilona said.

“Watch who you’re calling Kitty,” Aahla said, but all everyone heard was a growl, accompanied by a show of teeth.

“Let’s move out,” Garcia said. “We’re burning daylight.”

Garcia was the last to go through the gate, pausing only long enough to hug Troi. “Thank you,” he said, whispering it in her ear.

CHAPTER FOUR

After Tammas Parkin Arblaster Garcia, the clone, had pitched the rock at the Gorn, striking it square between the eyes, he had come to a remarkable conclusion. His first thought wasn't, "you just made him angry, run for your life," but rather, "Oh, that's interesting." Given the arc the rock had taken, and factors including aim, weight of the rock, and amount of force applied to tossing said rock, the math suggested to him that whatever planet this was, it had gravity so close to Earth normal Gs that he couldn't tell the difference. Had the gravity been more or less than Earth normal, the stone's flight path might have been greater or lesser, causing him to miss the target on the first throw, because his brain and muscle memory only knew how to throw in Earth gravity. His awareness stepped up a notch as the 'fight or flight' response took over his nervous system, making the world seem as if it were moving in slow motion.

The Gorn hit by the rock cried out, alerting its fellow hunters that there was new prey in the area. One of the Gorn responded by throwing a spear. Garcia caught it, turned it about, and spun to add momentum to the spear before returning it to the Gorn. Like the rock, it flew perfect and hit the target exactly as anticipated. The new cry was a war cry, mixed with the spits and hisses that would be associated with pain from an injury. Garcia had their attention and decided it was time to run. Another Gorn hurled a spear at him. He caught it and turned to flee. He had to force himself to moderate his departure to entice the Gorn to continue their pursuit with the hope of actually capturing him. This would allow the Seven of Nine clone time to rescue his friend Afuhaamango, and company, who had been captured by the Gorn in question.

Instead of following the meandering stream, Garcia chose to climb the hill side. This kept him in line of sight of the hunters. It almost seemed that the higher he climbed the more intent they were in catching him. He came to the realization as to why that was when he topped the hill and viewed down into the valley below. There was a Gorn village, with Gorn women and children, hunters, and aged, perhaps ten thousand strong. Most of the buildings were of huts, built of bamboo and other woods, with leaves and straw comprising the walls and roofs, a number of communal fires were also scattered about, but the most interesting sight, almost dead center of the village, was a monolithic structure of a grandiose design beyond the apparent technological means of the Gorn. Garcia recognized it almost immediately. It was of the same design of a building Kirk had discovered on Miramee's planet, believed to be an artifact built by the Preservers. It was technology that offered protection to the Native American tribes that had been relocated from Earth. This could only mean one thing. This was a Gorn colony under the protection of the Preservers, who Garcia now knew to be alien invaders from outside the Universe, posing as gods as they conduct their experiments on the unsuspecting populations.

The sight of the monument occupied Garcia's attention too long. He escaped back the direction he had come, passing to the right of the closest approaching Gorn. They continued to pursue him. They came slowly, methodically, spreading out in hunting fashion, working in cooperation. In truth, hunting wasn't their specialty. They were ambush predators by nature, and so, Garcia had to wonder if perhaps they weren't leading him into a trap. Then again, though they weren't great hunters, they were very adept at cooperative hunting, more so than humans, and again, it was out of biological necessity. Anything that slow would have to be smarter than its prey if it was going to

continue eating. The only advantage Garcia had over them was his speed, which he used to stay just far enough ahead of them to keep them in sight. He paused under an occasional tree or cluster of trees to enjoy brief moments in the shade, acting as if he were more winded than he was. If he weren't in a run for his life, he would have enjoyed the hike and the scenery. Within a half hour of their continued pursuit, Garcia's suspicions came to fruition. They had indeed been herding him towards a trap; a cliff. Garcia stared over the cliff and frowned at the amount of animal bones at the base. They had been herding the dinosaurs to the very fate that he now found himself facing. The sound of the stream flowing over the cliff was the only peaceful sound in earshot.

Garcia turned back to face the Gorn, planting the spear he had caught, leaning into it as if he needed its support. He decided this is where he would have to make his last stand, giving his friends more time to escape. The Gorn created a semi circle, fourteen strong blocking all egress except towards the cliff.

"So, is this going to be a fair fight?" Garcia asked.

One of the Gorn stepped forwards, spear ready to jab.

"You know, we could find a way to coexist in peace," Garcia offered, wondering if his Universal translator was functioning. Gorn was one of the few languages that he did not know and mostly that was because it was almost impossible for the human physiology to reproduce the sounds and so, why waste the time and energy when technology was sufficient to overcome the obstacle.

The lead Gorn stabbed at him. Garcia moved out of the way, going around his own spear, using it for leverage to support himself in a double foot kick. He planted his feet squarely into the Gorn's ribs, catching him off guard. The Gorn fell back on his ass, winded. This established one thing in Garcia's mind: these Gorn knew nothing about modern warfare. Garcia's odds of survival had just increased slightly.

The other Gorn laughed or boomed, it was hard to tell with all the hissing, but a second Gorn joined in the fray with the first. They both circled, holding their spears at ready, looking for an opportunity to strike. The first uttered a guttural command and a moment later they both made a stab at the prey. Garcia grabbed the closest spear, pulling it down to block the second spear, trapping them both against the spear he had planted in the ground. He then kicked the closest Gorn in the knee, already bent during its lunge. This move would have broken a human's leg, but merely caused the Gorn to fall back, favoring its injury. As it fell back, it relinquished its firm hold on its spear and Garcia pulled it to block the second blow from the other Gorn. This blow glanced off and Garcia twirled his new spear like a staff and hit the Gorn on the back as it went by. He drew a nice line with the edge of the stone blade from shoulder to mid back. The wound immediately began to drip blood. The Gorn cried out in pain, arching its back, but it was not mortally wounded.

"Now, guys, look, someone is going to get seriously hurt if you keep this up," Garcia said. Using his knee, he broke the spear in half.

The first Gorn to attack made a grunt and another Gorn entered the conflict. Three Gorn now circled, a little weary but still exuding enough confidence that they would have Garcia skewered before the end of this. Garcia held the two ends of the broken spear in each hand, taking the stance of a Pilipino stick fighter. After the three lunged simultaneously, and lost, they could barely understand how Garcia had bested

them. All three ended up cut and one had ended up unconscious due to a blow against the base of the skull. The remaining Gorn were now enraged.

“I don’t think he’s dead,” Garcia said. “But we should really end this now.”

Garcia considered his options as the remaining Gorn closed the circle. The only way he was going to get out of this was to badly wound and or kill them, neither of which he wanted to do. The other thing was that there was no way he was going to avoid getting hurt, for it would only take one of them grabbing his arm or leg and it would be all over for him. Garcia backed closer to the edge of the cliff.

“This really sucks, you know,” Garcia said. They didn’t seem to care.

Without further ado, he made his decision. He tossed the two ends of the spear hitting the two closest Gorn in the head. He then grabbed the spear he had stuck in the ground, batted a Gorn over the head, hitting another in the leg, and managed to maneuver beyond their line. He ran towards the stream and leaped off the side of the cliff, using his spear to pole vault to get some distance. The Gorn made it to the edge just in time to see Garcia hit the water below, just beyond the water fall. When they did not see him emerge, they figure that was that, but they all agreed that because they needed proof of the day’s events, they needed to go collect the body. It would take them three hours to get down to the base of the waterfall, taking the route they took to go and collect the prey they would normally drive off the cliff, but the thought of the prize was worth the walk. Hopefully it would compensate them for the herd they had given up on.



By the time the Garcia clone had worked his way back to the portal drop off site, his clothes were dry and the sun had set. He had tried tracking his friends, but apparently Seven and or Afu had wisely concealed their escape in an effort to avoid the Gorn following them. When his communicator failed to produce a response, he considered calling out to them. It was probably safe calling out, but he held his silence because there were Gorn still on the prowl. He had managed to evade several teams patrolling the immediate area, looking for signs of him and his friends. There was also meat eating dinosaurs that would just love to snack on a soft human being; quiet just made good sense. He had just barely escaped a T-Rex earlier and only out of sheer luck at that.

The stars provided ample light to navigate by. The view was amazing and he was almost certain the glow of stars was the Milky Way. He could only imagine where in the Milky Way he was. In addition to the star light were billions of lightening bugs, a cloud of bugs for every bush and tree. The air was thick with flying insects, but fortunately the mosquitoes seemed uninterested in him. The sounds of crickets, cicadas, and other insects were overwhelming, and with the lack of artificial light, it made the reality of it all unsettling. This was more than likely going to be his home for the rest of his life, so he might as well memorize the sounds, and get use to them. He passed through a cluster of trees looking for evidence of his friends having been there. He was in the thick of the shadows and about to depart when he was ambushed from behind. Whoever had attacked him was a superior fighter to him and he quickly went to the ground. He was effectively pinned and could just barely see the fist coming down to pound him in the head. It stopped before hitting him.

“Garcia?” she asked.

“Seven?” Garcia asked.

Seven got off him and aided him to his feet. "I'm sorry," Seven said. "The way you were sneaking around, I took you for a Gorn."

"I was sneaking around because I wanted to avoid the Gorn," Garcia said.

"Did I hurt you?" Seven said.

"No," Garcia said, but his voice carried a 'wounded' quality, perhaps because of the question. "Were you successful?"

"Yes," Seven said. "Come with me."

Garcia accompanied her towards the silhouette of a mesa that reminded him of a place in Texas he had seen photos of: Enchanted Rock. The closer they got to it he could hear the moaning sounds the rock made as it gave off the heat that it had collected during the day. It was an eerie sound which he had only read about but it now made sense why the Native Americans would have considered Enchanted Rock haunted.

"Why aren't our communicators working?" Garcia asked her.

"I suspect the Preservers deactivated them when they originally abducted us and brought us into their base," Seven said. "Afu is using the tricorder to try and reinitialize them."

Seven led him to the base of the mesa where they climbed to an opening. Once in the cave she led Garcia by hand through the dark until they came around several bends and into the light of a camp fire. There was a hole in the ceiling that looked straight up, towards the night sky and the stars.

Afu rushed to Garcia and hugged the air out of him. "My god, I am so happy to see you alive. I thought for sure you died when the ship blew up!"

"Garcia made it out," Garcia said. "You realize I am a clone, created by a Preserver transporter."

"Seven did try to explain it to me, but you know, I don't care," Afu said. "I am still happy to see you."

"You sure did find a nice little cave to hide in," Garcia said.

"We lucked out," Afu agreed. "It's a very defensible place, something we're going to need if we're to stay here any length of time. Between the Gorn and the dinosaurs, we're a bit out classed and out numbered. Any idea what planet this is?"

"I am not familiar with the arrangement of stars," Seven said. "However, I am confident that we are still in the Milky Way galaxy. This planet may be the site of an ongoing Preserver experiment."

"I concur," Garcia said. "And, I discovered a Preserver artifact. If this isn't an experiment, then it's a sanctuary for extinct Earth animals."

"Do you think this artifact has another Iconian Gateway we can use to get somewhere other than here?" Afu asked. He hit another mosquito that had lighted on his neck.

"I doubt it," Garcia said. "It looks more like the artifact Kirk found on Miramee's planet. It's probably an asteroid deflector."

"You should take me there in the morning to let me see it," Seven said. "Perhaps I can find away to access it. At the least, it may have subspace communication capabilities."

"Getting to it may present a problem," Garcia said. "It's smack in the center of Gorn central."

“Wonderful,” Afu said. “I don’t suppose the Gorn are going to be reasonable or hospitable to guests.”

“Not likely,” Seven said. “We’re dealing with a primitive culture here. These are not Gorn of the 24th century.”

“How can you be sure?” Afu asked.

“I know,” Seven said.

“But how?” Afu asked. He killed another mosquito and cursed.

“My first assessment was that I intuitively would not attempt to assimilate them,” Seven admitted.

“Whoa,” Afu said.

“She’s no longer Borg, Afu,” Garcia said. “But, I suspect some habits and thought patterns die hard. It’s a fair way to evaluate a species’ value, I suppose.”

Seven looked away not pleased that Garcia seemed to know her so well. Garcia’s attention fell on the sleeping woman near the fire and the conversation switched to the girl.

“Her name is Elika,” Afu said. “From what I gather she was thrown into a volcano by the people of her village. When I found her, she was frozen in some form of suspended animation. She has no memories of how she came to be in that state. The last thing she remembered was falling and then the next thing she knew was that I was touching her.”

They continued to talk for another hour, until Elika finally arose. She moved closer to Afu and leaned against him, hugging him for comfort as she stared at the new stranger. Garcia needed to stretch and as he stood, he looked up and saw the moon framed in the space over head.

“Oh my god,” Garcia said.

Afu looked up. “That can’t be,” Afu said.

“It’s okay,” Elika assured them. “It’s just the full moon.”

“It’s the Earth’s moon,” Seven said.

Garcia scrambled for the tricorder and rushed back to the mouth of the cave. Seven, Afu, and Elika followed, slowing to make their way through the dark passage which obscured their camp from outside eyes. At the mouth of the cave, they could see down over the land, the hill country that was beginning to look more and more like the Hill Country of Texas. The moon lit up the landscape, revealing dinosaurs moving across the land in the cool of night. But Garcia saw none of the creatures. His eyes were only for the stars.

“There,” Seven said, pointing. “That is probably a planet.”

“Jupiter,” Garcia said. “And that’s Mars. We’re definitely on Earth.”

“This can’t be,” Afu mumbled.

“If that star is what I think it is,” Garcia mumbled, shifting through the star charts in the tricorder. “Then, based on my calculations, we were transported several million years into the past.”

Garcia turned to the voices of Duana and Ilona, who were now singing, “When the moon is in the seventh house. And Jupiter aligns with Mars. Then peace will guide the planets. And love will steer the stars.”

“Oh, don’t start that,” Garcia snapped at them, trying to suppress the song “Aquarius” by the old rock group the Fifth Dimension before it became repetitious in his head.

Seven looked at Garcia suspiciously. “Are you having stress induced hallucinations?” she asked.

“Oh, he has them all the time,” Afu tried to reassure her. “Some kind of mind meld accident which created extra personalities that took up residents in his head.”

“He is a Shaman,” Elika stated, as if she recognized Garcia’s power now.

“Tell them how long we have,” Ilona said.

Garcia frowned. “Further, if my calculations are right, we have at the most, six months before the cataclysm that annihilates the dinosaurs.”

“Not good,” Duana said.

“Then I guess it’s a good thing the Preservers left an asteroid deflector with the Gorn,” Afu said.

Garcia turned suddenly to his friend. “Oh my god,” Garcia said. “We’ve got to destroy that monolith.”

“Are you crazy?” Duana asked.

“If we don’t, we, hell, for that matter the whole human race, will never have existed,” Garcia said.

“Oh, good times,” Afu said.

CHAPTER FIVE

Garcia stepped through the portal and was greeted affectionately, Klingon style, by Lt. N'elent. She had made a claim on Garcia some time ago and it was no secret the two of them had been intimate. At the time, she had been unknowingly infected with a parasite that had prevented her from getting pregnant, or she would have been closer to term. As it was, it was because of his encounter with N'elent, that the same parasite had infected Garcia. Unfortunately for Garcia, being infected was a terminal condition if the parasite wasn't removed, which prompted an emergency medical procedure to save his life. Since there was only two ways of getting this parasite, eating the raw heart of an infected Targ, or having sexual relations with someone who was infected, the parasitical infection had been traced back to her so that she could be cured. Consequently, that meant it was possible for her to conceive and it had happened one of two ways: either when Garcia and she had been intimate a second time, or when he had transported her off the SaLing with the Kelvan transporter. It didn't matter which method; it was definitely his baby. Her current enthusiasm at her condition showed in the exuberant manner in which she met Garcia.

N'elent pulled back just enough to see his eyes. "Where is my warrior tiger?" she asked. She ignored Ilona who was pointing at Aahla. "You are being too timid."

"I'm under the weather," Garcia said, excusing himself.

N'elent turned to Doctor Misan, punching him in the shoulder. "Why aren't you doing your job? Make him better."

"N'elent, I'll be fine. We'll talk later, but for now, I'm due on the Bridge," Garcia said. "Oh, and prep a shuttle for going planet side."

"Aye," N'elent said, angry that it was all business, and not bothering to hide it.

Garcia headed for the Bridge, followed by Tuer, Duana and Ilona. He should have been considering ship business, but he was wondering how he was going to cope with a lot of angry, pregnant Klingon women, mixed with all the other women, and all of them vying for his attention at the same time. Not to mention they would all probably come to term about the same time; he shuddered at the thought. A number of the female "Klingon" officers stared Garcia down as they passed. And rightly so: he had done this to them against their will. Tuer commented on their staring, but Garcia told him to ignore it. They had a right to look at them the way they were doing and he was going to tolerate it. They all took this right to life business serious, and more than that, some very old, almost instinctual rules had taken over making them see Garcia as a powerful clan leader who had simply claimed them for his own. It probably wasn't so, but that was how they were acting.

"They did ask for battle trophies," Duana tried reassuring Garcia with humor, trying to be funny. "What a better way to commemorate?!"

Garcia fumed, but held back his response. He squeezed his left wrist.

It didn't take long to get to the Bridge and when Garcia was announced, everyone stood. Gowr greeted him with a salute, closed fist to the heart, hitting his chest twice. The officers on the bridge, of which only two were male, echoed the salute, minus the chest pounding, which was reserved for earned friendship. The tempest crew had more female Officers than any Klingon ship due to the fact Kitara had recruited friends that had been overlooked for promotions in the Klingon fleet. Garcia could almost feel the stares as if they were shooting daggers at him.

Garcia emulated the salute. "Status report," Garcia said.

"We're still unable to break free of the hand," Gowr said. "However, we have determined that the hand is comprised of force fields and holographic matter. It's not an actual hand."

"Have you been able to detect an omicron field?" Garcia asked. "Or a power source on the planet?"

Before Gowr could answer, the main viewer came to life with the image of a woman. The perspective showed the full woman, dressed in a toga and other Greek accouterments, such as sandals with straps winding to her knees, and thin gold bracelets on her left wrist. She also wore a hunter's bow and a quiver of arrows, as well as a sword. She walked forward so that only her upper torso and head was framed in the viewer, but it was clear she had her arms on her hips, akimbo style like an angry mother.

"I'm not accustomed to having to wait for a mortal to answer my call, Tammas Parkin Arblaster-Garcia," she said.

"That's Captain Tammas Parkin Arblaster-Garcia to you," Garcia said, and was actually amused by seeing the anger on the god's face. "Athena, I presume. I'm sorry for the delay, but I'm not accustomed to jumping just because someone claiming to be a god says jump."

"You will beam down and speak with me in person," Athena ordered.

"You will release my ship and I will consider it," Garcia said.

"I will release your ship after you have beamed down," Athena said.

"Well, I'm afraid you're just going to have to wait, as I prefer not to transport," Garcia said. "I'll be down in about forty five minutes. Viewer off."

"You want me to carpet bomb her location?" Gowr asked.

"No, but keep scanning for a power source," Garcia said. "We may have to take that out with a surgical phaser strike."

"Permission to go to the planet with you?" Gowr asked.

"Why not," Garcia said.

"Kurak, your ship," Gowr said.

"Aye," Kurak said, saluting before she took the command seat. Her eyes never left Garcia.

Once the lift doors closed and they were on the way down, Garcia asked Gowr: "Did the Gray Queen provide you with any Kaluza-Klein particle lasers?"

"She was able to provide us with the basic principles, but claimed to lack the resources for building an actual working model," Gowr said. "Gates are easy, she said. Weapons are difficult. I have a weapon's master working on the construction of a prototype as we speak."

Garcia nodded. The lift opened and they were met by Officers armed to the teeth, carrying extra weapons and armor so as to prep the Away team as they continued towards the shuttle bay. Garcia accepted the sword and sheath with a strap that went over his shoulder, putting the sword against his back, and a gun belt that carried the Gorn miniature rail gun he had appropriated from an earlier run-in with the Gorn. The weapon was illegal according to the Star Fleet charter, but if it gave him an edge against a god, he intended to carry it. Duana and Ilona strapped the same on, so they resembled him, only cuter. Garcia had intended to stand on the shuttle ride down, but the officers insisted he be seated, which meant he had to remove the sword.

“So, is this your ship’s mascot?” Gowr asked, referring to the tiger. “I thought you rescued a targ for that duty.”

All the Klingons laughed, a couple of them braving to slap the Admiral on the arms.

“The tiger’s name is Aahla,” Garcia said. “And she has a taste for Klingon blood.”

The laughter stopped.

Garcia smiled up at Gowr, who exploded suddenly into laughter, hitting Garcia. Everyone joined in. And then someone started to sing a war song, appropriate for their descent into potential battle. Garcia added counter point, using a classic Klingon form of the cannon that doubled as chorus and background melody. Only Gowr was not surprised. The newly recruited warriors stood a little taller, out of respect to Garcia, realizing the rumors they had heard about him were no doubt true. Garcia sat down and slept the rest of the descent, which only further raised his esteem in the Klingon’s eyes. A human who could relax well enough to sleep before a potential battle was a rare man. And the human who trusted his life to his fellow Klingon warriors enough to sleep near them, was even rarer. It was the most complementary thing Garcia could have done, short of dying at their side.

The shuttle landed and Gowr took charge of the exit, the Away team falling out in a prearranged order. Garcia woke on his own as the shuttle powered down. He stepped off the shuttle and advanced, flanked by warriors, and followed by Duana and Ilona behind him and to the right and left. He was wide awake, for he always transitioned from sleep to full wake instantly, but he did have drool on his chin, which he wiped away on his sleeve. Duana always seemed to be on his left side, he realized as he noted the positions of his mental companions. He approached a classical Greek temple, iconic pillars supporting a flat, marble roof. Athena sat in a large marble chair, her bow and sword set aside. To her right was a member from a species Garcia had thought extinct: a female Cheronian, instantly recognizable due to the remarkable feature that half her skin was black and the other half white, as if someone had drawn a line right down the center of her. Garcia knew that the race had driven itself into extinction during a civil war, but that did not mean that the Preservers hadn’t managed to ‘save’ a number of specimens. Could the Preservers themselves have been responsible for starting the civil war? Garcia wanted to believe that, as opposed to believing that racism could be so prevalent that a species would fight to the point of extinction or participate in genocide. The other female was Minaran, a species Garcia recognized only because he had mind melded with McCoy. The fact that she was extremely empathic made it possible for him to confirm his suspicion, but she remained neutral in her response, neither smiling nor frowning at his attempt to communicate with her telepathically.

Athena uncrossed her legs, stood, and slowly descended down the marble steps, lifting her hand as if she expected Garcia to take it and kiss her knuckles. Instead, she paused as she caught sight of the tiger and pointed at it.

“You were not invited,” Athena addressed the tiger.

“None the less, I am here,” Aahla said.

“Garcia, are you aware of what sort of company you keep?” Athena asked.

“I choose my company,” Garcia said, as if that was all that needed to be said.

“Unlike you, I don’t have to create a race of slaves or buy my friends.”

“If you are referring to my companions, they are not slaves,” Athena said. “They choose to be with me.”

“Right,” Garcia said. “I’m not here to argue with you, but I am here. Now let my ship go.”

“Your ship is free,” Athena said, nodding.

Garcia looked to Gowr, who placed a call to the ship to confirm the situation. Garcia heard the response but waited until Gowr nodded in satisfaction.

Athena and Garcia stepped closer together simultaneously. “What is it you want, Athena?” Garcia asked.

“You are in possession of Preserver technology and are harboring a Gray renegade,” Athena said.

“Wouldn’t that be a rene-Gray?” Duana asked in jest.

Athena and Garcia gave a sour look to Duana and then ignored her. “I thought it was funny,” Duana mumbled to Ilona.

“If you’re referring to the orbs manifesting my back up singers, I’m afraid I can’t give them up,” Garcia said. “I’m rather attached to them. Telepathically speaking, of course. As for the Gray, I offered her and any of her kind that chooses freedom, sanctuary.”

“There is no sanctuary,” Athena said. “They have made a commitment to us and they will follow through on that obligation or suffer the consequences.”

“I will not condone or participate in the slavery of any species,” Garcia said. “To you or anyone.”

“You say this out of ignorance,” Athena said. “They are no more slave to us than a Trill host is to the symbiont. Their function is to serve us. That is the way of it.”

“The difference with the Trill, and the way I see you, is that the Trill host has a choice,” Garcia said.

“Do you really think that no host was ever taken against their will?” Athena said.

“This is not open to discussion,” Garcia said. “I will not turn her, or any in her colony, over to you.”

“I am prepared to offer you a truce,” Athena said.

“A truce would suggest that we’re at war,” Garcia said. “And I don’t recall any open declarations made to that effect.”

“You really don’t want a war with us,” Athena said. “I’m sure your bitch cat whore will tell you that much. Give me what I want and I will guarantee your Gray colony’s safety and you may keep your Preserver technology, on the condition that you refrain from making any more Gates, and do not attempt to duplicate the Orbs.”

“I don’t see any reason why I should listen any further to you,” Garcia said.

Athena stepped closer to him, touched his collar. “If you think the Kelvan and the Borg were the worse threat your species ever faced then you need to think again. There is a temporal war coming, has come, will come, is currently raging. Your species could be eliminated before it has even become a species.”

Aahla stepped forward. “Are you threatening to break the temporal truce?”

“Be silent,” Athena snapped at her, pointing. “You already know what’s coming and you could no more prevent it than I could.”

“If neither of you can prevent it, then tell me again why I should listen to you?” Garcia said.

“Like her kind, you have endeared yourself to us as a species,” Athena said. “If you were to create an alliance with me, it would strengthen the bond we share, which has the potential of improving the outcome for all of us.”

“You see, I don’t like these sorts of conversations,” Garcia said. “It’s all cryptic and stupid and I don’t feel you’re really bargaining with me as much as toying with me.”

“Afu is alive,” Athena said. “I will see to it that he is returned to you, unharmed.”

“You’re holding him prisoner?!” Garcia asked.

“No,” Athena said. “I just know where he is and can facilitate his return.”

“Tam, she’s playing you,” Duana said.

Garcia turned to her. “No, you’re kidding?” he said, flippantly.

“Don’t take that tone with me,” Duana said. “I’m just trying to help.”

“I say we kill her and get this war started,” Ilona said.

“Oh, god, why are you two in my head again?” Garcia demanded.

“I could exercise them,” Athena said.

“You’re not messing with my head,” Garcia told Athena point blank. “There has been enough of that already. Alright, fine, what is it you want from me exactly?”

“I want you to father a child with me,” Athena said.

“Oh, everywhere we bloody go,” Kletsova said.

Garcia laughed. “That’s all?” Garcia asked.

“You gave her one!” Athena said, pointing to the cat. “She knows that it changes the balance. I will have one as well.”

“The cat’s pregnant?” Gowr asked Kletsova.

Kletsova shrugged. It was the first she had heard of it. Duana and Ilona looked at each other and said, “Kittens?”

Garcia took Athena by the wrist, pulling her right into him. She locked her hand onto his wrist.

“Deal,” Garcia said. “If that’s all it takes to get some peace and quiet, an end to a war, and my friend Afu back, you can have one.”

Thunder rolled across the sky and lightening struck the temple. Apollo appeared, lurking in the clouds larger than life, spying down on them, hands out stretched.

“Betrayer!” he yelled. “You will die, bitch. All of you will die!”

Lightening ripped from Apollo’s hand. One of the warrior’s fell, layers of muscles and his skeleton visible as the lightening coursed over and through his body.

“Take cover!” Garcia ordered, drawing his miniature rail gun. He tried to pull Athena towards the cover of a marble slab, but she held her ground, raising her hand to fire lightening back. In the process he took an indirect hit with lightening. Athena’s companion, the Cheronian, pulled Garcia out of the fire fight, and the Minaran healed Garcia, taking his wounds upon herself, and then becoming unconscious as her body tried to heal herself.

Gowr was suddenly by Garcia’s side. “Are you alright? Is she alright?”

Garcia felt her pulse. “She will be,” he said, standing up. He motioned for Gowr and the Cheronian woman to stay and stepped back out into the open.

Apollo was much closer now and no longer appeared to be part man and part cloud, but was just a giant of a man stepping down from the temple as if it had been nothing more than a foot rest. He continued to shrink in size as he approached as if the angles of perspective were reversed and he was really falling away instead of coming

closer. Garcia fired at Apollo, which caused injuries and blood to fly from a torso so perfect that it seemed as if Michelangelo had carved it out of marble.

Apollo seemed shocked by the injuries and paused in his progress. With karate style push of his hands, he sent Garcia flying back as if hurled by a wind. Garcia hit a pillar and slid to the ground, but managed to scramble right back to his feet. Apollo was angered by the fact that Garcia didn't even appear hurt and was about to redouble his efforts to strike him with lightning, but he was hit square in the chest by lightning hurled at him by Athena. Apollo blocked, sending the energy off in random directions and clapped his hands in a call for help. A hole was torn in the day sky, which was technically an open portal framed between two pillars. It might have appeared more ominous to primitive cultures, but everyone present recognized it for what it was. On the other side of the portal, numerous heads turned, eyes glowing. A stream of 'uglies' started pouring through the gate, obscuring the hellish background. 'Uglies' was the only word Garcia could think of to describe the flow of demons launching themselves through the portal as vigorously as tigers jumping through a burning hoop to please a circus trainer bearing a whip. Suddenly there was a seemingly endless horde of demons about to struggle with, the mass of creatures pouring through the gate so thick they could hardly tell where one started and one stopped, a sight that almost stilled Garcia with horror. It was definitely distracting him from his original goal of shooting at Apollo. Apollo gave Athena his full attention.

"Hiv Suv!" Garcia yelled, which was "Attack Fight" in Klingon, a redundant string that was an easy enough mistake for anyone not versed in Klingon, or overwhelmed by an approaching army of darkness. Garcia fired his M-rail gun into the cloud of demons, perhaps dropping a dozen of them with his weapon before it was out of ammo. He drew his sword and went full at it. He was about to be overwhelmed by ten demons at once, but Duana and Ilona took them out with their own miniature rail guns, firing the rest into the horde that continued to pour through a Gate like water from a broken dam. By this time, all the Klingons were actively engaged in battle against the demons, bat'leths moving in fluid motions, sparking against the noon day sun. It became evident in battle that it was necessary to work back to back, because it only took one of those things latching on to ones back to pretty much end the fight. Kletsova, unable to match the strength of Klingon with sword or knife, fell back and opened up on the creatures with a phaser. She hit three consecutive creatures with short bursts of her phaser set to kill. Each creature doubled in size and ferociousness, forcing her to discard the phaser as a useful weapon.

The Cheronian touched her bracelet and became invisible. A moment later, the Minaran disappeared in a similar manner, as if the Cheronian was picking her up and holding her close to her.

Duana struck a killing blow to one of the monsters with her sword, kicked up her miniature rail gun she had discarded after it was empty and tossed it to Kletsova. Duana dispatched two more demons before retrieving an ammo cartridge from her belt, tossing that to her as well. "Use that!" Duana yelled.

One of the demons had managed to sneak up on Kletsova's position, climbing over the shuttle, expecting to leap down on her unawares. It would have taken her out, too, except Tuer hit it with a throwing knife, right between its eyes, dropping it at her feet. It startled her so, that she shot it with the Gorn weapon anyway. She made a

decision to watch for attacks coming from the top of the shuttle as she fired into the horde.

“More ammo!” Kletsova yelled.

Garcia, Duana, and Ilona managed to simultaneously throw ammo cartridges towards her without breaking stride in their attacks. Ilona’s cartridge hit Kletsova in the forehead, nearly knocking her out.

“Sorry,” Ilona yelled.

Kletsova staggered in pain, stunned, but finally managed to reload her weapon. She did it just in time to drop one of the creatures as she fell back to a sitting position against the shuttle, holding her forehead with one hand and firing away with the other. From here out, her aim was a bit off, but she kept in the game.

Apollo and Athena were engaged in hand to hand battle, their equal powers having been canceled out. Consequently, they were forced to rely on their individual strengths of character, mind, and body. Apollo expected to win over Athena, driving her to the ground with brute force, and perhaps would have, had he not been attacked from behind by a Royal Bengal tiger. Apollo cried out in pain and the Gateway unleashing the horde of demons closed. The demons were not great fighters. Their strength lied in their numbers, their ravenous hunger for all things flesh, and their level of scariness. Once the gate closed the horde was quickly eliminated, leaving an incredible pile of carnage. Bodies and parts littered the ground hardly leaving a bare spot to see earth or grass, a stream of blood flowing towards the shuttle, and a stench that would take months to get out of their clothes, if they didn’t decide to burn them first, was upon them.

Athena seemed winded, but otherwise fine. No open wounds, unlike Apollo who looked like anyone might who had just been bitten on the back of the neck by a tiger. Aahla brushed up against Athena. The fact that Athena tolerated Aahla’s attention was a testament to just how badly she must have been hurting. All of Garcia’s personnel still standing seemed a bit winded. At least four were dead and two lay wounded on the ground. He hit his comm. badge. “Tempest, get a medical team down here immediately.”

Garcia went to Apollo and pressed the tip of his sword to Apollo’s chest.

“This was unnecessary,” Garcia told him.

“You can’t kill me, mortal,” Apollo said. “I will have my vengeance against you.”

“What is your problem with me?” Garcia asked.

“I curse you,” Apollo said. “You will live to watch most your children die. You will have to decide who will live and who will die. And you will be forced to kill one of your own or allow it to bring such evil upon your kind that you will think you spawned Lucifer himself. The war is on between us, Garcia. Prepare to suffer like no man has ever suffered before.”

“Oh, how cliché is that?” Garcia whined, and then shoved his sword through Apollo’s heart. Apollo cried out in surprise and pain, then surprisingly laughed as his eyes locked one final time on Garcia, his hand reaching up to smear blood on Garcia’s face, and then he fainted dead away. His body evaporated away into a mist, revealing an Orb which fell to the ground. The Orb was already illuminated, but it began to grow in brilliance and began emitting an ominous sound.

Athena rushed over to the Orb and threw it towards the temple. “Take cover,” Athena yelled.

One of the warriors standing near Garcia anticipated what was about to come. She grabbed Garcia by the arm, swept his feet, and took him to the ground, putting her body on top of his as a shield.

No sooner than Athena had finished saying the words ‘take cover’ there came a tremendous explosion that sent pillars crashing. The flash of light whited out the sky and sent a rush of heated air outwards. A miniature mushroom cloud blossomed. The sound continued ringing in their ears even thirty minutes after the burst. Few of them had had time to find sufficient cover. The warrior on top of Garcia was as good as dead, lying limp on top of him, a sizeable chunk of marble imbedded in her armor and obviously penetrating her back. Ahla rolled the dead weight off of Garcia and rolled him over, checking his vitals. He brushed her off, and tried to get up, hating the fact he was literally laying in a flow of blood, but he was still too disoriented to even sit up, his vision blurry. He could see Gowr standing over him, talking, but couldn’t hear. Then Doctor Misan was kneeling beside him, pumping his arm full of something. Garcia closed his eyes and went to sleep.

CHAPTER SIX

Blue skies capped the hole over the cave fortress that Afu had found. They had continued to discuss their plight while morning turned into day, and though the air was fresh and sunlight pleasant, it didn't remove the weight of what they were deliberating over. In addition to that, they were all hungry, thirsty, and little rested having nothing but hard rock for cushions. Only Garcia seemed unmolested by the numerous biting insects that had pestered the group.

"So what is this, a predestination paradox?" Afu asked, scratching the back of his neck.

"Yes," Seven said. "We are obviously here to prevent the Gorn from colonizing Earth."

"Well, obviously we're successful, whatever we decide to do," Afu said.

"Don't think like that," Garcia said. "We could still easily get ourselves killed and then everything else we know just goes away."

"Not necessarily," Afu said. "We could do nothing and the whole thing still be okay because we couldn't be here now if our past wasn't our future. Did I say that right?"

"That's why they call it a paradox, Afu," Garcia said.

"Garcia is right. We must destroy the monolith, even if it results in our own destruction," Seven said.

"Wait a minute," Afu said. "I remember reading a book once where time travelers went into the past as tourists and one of the tourists went off the official path, accidentally stepped on a butterfly and completely destroyed the time line. Could that happen?"

"If we're successful, 97 percent of all life on earth will become extinct," Seven said. "I doubt any one butterfly that we kill will make a difference at this juncture."

"Unless that butterfly is the one whose descendants repopulate the earth and evolve into people," Afu said, killing another mosquito and suddenly regretting it.

"It wouldn't be a butterfly, but a rodent. So don't kill rodents. Either way, we can't obsess over those details," Garcia said. "Or we won't be able to function. Let's focus on eliminating the monolith."

"What about finding a way off the planet?" Afu asked.

"Right. We'll cut some trees down and build a spaceship," Garcia said, being a smart ass. "Look, I don't have an answer Afu. This may be the final game for us. If it is, we know our mission and we know that the end results justify the means. We're already dead, we just have to win the game."

"Screw that," Afu said. "I was thinking of changing my name to Adam and starting the human race."

"Funny," Garcia said. "We're still twenty million years too soon for that."

"Very well. I suppose if you want to march on the Gorn village, I could use the phaser to stun half of them if they charge us," Afu said.

"You could take out more than that if you shoot to kill, wide beam dispersal," Seven said.

"Here's the problem with that. We can't justify killing all the Gorn," Afu argued.

"What difference does it make if we shoot them or blow up the monolith and allow an asteroid to take them out?" Garcia asked.

“Not much, I guess, except knowing that I didn’t shoot them,” Afu said. “We need to come up with a plan for getting to the monolith with the least amount of issues. Killing one Gorn will only enrage the rest of them, and killing half of them will magnify the trouble even more. And I do not want to kill all the Gorn in an unfair fight.”

“I think one phaser against ten thousand, spear throwing Gorn is a fair fight,” Garcia said. “But I agree, the best idea is sneaking in during the night, perhaps under the cover of a thunder storm.”

“We’ll need a way to enter the monolith once we’re there,” Seven said.

“We need to eat,” Elika said, saying the only thing that made sense to her, since she was unable to follow the conversation at all. And the fact that she was starving motivated her to speak up.

“And water,” Seven agreed. “Elika is right. Our first order of business is survival so we can make further plans.”

“I guess I can go hunting,” Afu said. “Anyone up for dinosaur barbecue?”

“I’ll do the hunting,” Garcia said.

Afu looked at him. “Really?” he said, surprised.

“I’ve always said, I’m not going to eat any meats I didn’t kill,” Garcia said.

“And, I will need a source of fats and proteins in order to keep my strength. Dinosaurs are the easiest, cheapest source of food available, and it might be considered a mercy killing, considering their fate. The majority of the survivors are doomed to starve.”

Afu handed Garcia the phaser rifle.

“No,” Garcia said. “I’ll find another spear.”

“You’re joking, right?” Afu asked. “You’re going to go up against a dinosaur without a phaser?”

“We need to conserve the phaser’s battery for a potential show down with the Gorn,” Garcia said. “Plus, I’m not leaving the Garcia commune defenseless. I will choose prey of appropriate size and ease of catch. Preferably eggs. Or a Gorn supply stash.”

“I think you should avoid the Gorn,” Seven said.

“I’ll try,” Garcia said. “Afu, the stream is the closest source of water. See if you can’t find a way to bring some here. Seven, take the tricorder and skirt the Gorn village. We need to know exactly how many, their strengths and weaknesses, and whether or not it’s going to be feasible to sneak up on the artifact. Afu, if you can get our communicators working again, that would give us an advantage.”

“I’ll get on it as soon as Seven returns with the tricorder,” Afu said.

“What do you want me to do?” Elika asked, eager to be an active part of her new community.

“Stay with Afu,” Garcia said.



A bit of fortune had favored Garcia as he had been able to recover the spear he had chunked at the Gorn the previous day. The Gorn had most likely ripped it out of his arm and had thrown it down, the weapon no longer valuable due to some superstitious belief that if it had spilt Gorn blood, it was no longer a lucky spear. It was definitely lucky for Garcia, for it was going to make hunting and or fishing much easier. He also found a bit of rope where Afu and Elika had been tied to the tree. It wasn’t of great length, but he couldn’t see wasting it. He tied the strands together, wrapped it around his

waste, and tied it off. He then took a path up stream to get well out of the Gorn hunting grounds. After about an hour walk, he was starting to get a little disillusioned about how easy it was going to be to find food. The day before he had seen hundreds of dinosaurs ranging, but today he had barely even felt a tremor or heard a roar.

The Mesquite tree population became increasingly denser as he continued to follow the stream, making not quite a forest, but almost. He stopped to test some berries at a bush and decided they were eatable. After sampling a few, he looked for signs of any animals that might also have been sharing the berries with him, any thing easy to catch. He was kneeling down, examining tracks when he heard a scream. He got up and rushed towards the river.

What he saw amazed him. There was a camp site that could have passed for a modern day camp site, with a rubber life raft doubling for a bed, an actual sleeping bag, a small natural gas stove, and a coffee pot. The creature that had screamed was humanoid, bi-pedal, and reptilian, but nothing at all similar to a Gorn. She was backing away from a baby T-rex, holding something like a cam-corder in one hand and a Klingon pain stick in the other. The T-Rex came forwards and she touched the stick to it. There was large electric discharge and T-Rex reared back, but it was not dissuaded in the slightest. It swung its head at her and knocked her to the ground.

Garcia charged the T-Rex, screaming at the top of his lungs, "Get away from her!" The T-Rex tilted its head and then turned its body towards Garcia as he entered the alien's camp site. It actually took a step back, probably not certain what to make of Garcia's antics, for it had probably never been charged at before. Garcia poked at it with the spear, trying to drive it back. It brushed the spear off with no consequence and came forward, hitting Garcia with a direct head butt. Garcia flew back into a tree and slid to the ground, his left arm broken. The T-Rex roared, spit, and tilted its head to better perceive the morsel it was about to devour. Garcia forced himself to stand, his left arm hanging uselessly. The T-Rex charged and at the last second Garcia lifted the spear and braced it against the tree. The stone tip end of the spear went in the T-Rex's mouth and out the back of its neck. It reared back in wretched pain, staggered, tried to roar, tried to shake the spear out, began to choke on its own blood, and then fell on its side as it kicked, its front claw unable to reach the spear to pull it free.

Garcia leaned against the tree and slid to the ground again, raw emotions pouring out of him, not just because of his pain, but because of his overwhelming sense of empathy for the animal and how badly it was suffering. The distress the animal was in was reflected in its pathetic cries, its body convulsing. This hadn't been a hate killing, but a killing for mere survival, and it still saddened Garcia to no end that it was going to be a long, tortuous death. Had he the tools, he would sedate it, heal it, and send it on its way.

The non-Gorn reptilian approached the T-Rex, a new weapon in her hand. She fired it at the creature, sending several projectiles into its head. It went still. She turned to Garcia, both her camera and her weapon aimed at him.

"This is not the creature I've been tracking for several days now," she said out loud, for the benefit of the camera. "I've never seen anything like it. Notice its clothing. And you saw the way it rushed in to protect me. It has to be sentient."

She approached closer. "Shhh, easy now," she said. "I only want to help. I want to look at your arm. Do you understand?"

Garcia was struggling to stay conscious. "Help me."

"My god, it speaks common," she said. She pocketed her weapon and pulled out a radio, with a gold, flip top lid slash antennae. With a flip of her wrist, the antennae extended revealing the inner mechanisms and it made a chirp as it self activated. "Computer, activate transporter for an emergency beam out. Lock on to my GPS coordinates and beam two directly to my dad's laboratory. Energize."

A moment later she and Garcia were in a place more civilized, looking much like a modern day medical clinic. She started yelling for assistance.

"Father! Father, I need you, quick!" she yelled. She set down her camera, arranging it so it could continue filming, and tried to help Garcia up. "Father! Computer, find my dad and tell him there's an emergency in his lab."

The computer acknowledged her command as she lifted Garcia to a medical table. He was surprised at her strength. Another of her kind entered. Taller and older.

"What's all the ruckus, Ket?" the older, male reptilian asked. "Don't tell me you brought in another stray, wounded pup..."

"Dad, you got to help me. Its arm is broken," she said.

"What the devil is that?" he asked.

"I don't know, but it saved my life," she said.

"Saved your life?" he said.

"I was in the badlands, chasing a new species and was nearly eaten by a T-Rex," she said.

"I've told you to stay out of the badlands," he admonished her.

"Dad, help him!"

"The best thing we can do for it is put it down," he said.

"Dad! It's sentient," she protested.

"It appears to be a mammal," he argued. "Mammals are not sentient."

"Explain its clothing," she challenged.

"It's probably somebody's pet," he offered. "The Meel clan has been performing some interesting genetic experiments on rodents. This is probably the result."

"Please!" she continued to argue. "In all of Atlantis, have you ever heard or seen anything like it? I got video of it saving me!"

"Probably a trained reflex," he said, inspecting it a little closer. He poked it gingerly. "I think it's in shock. Not much muscle mass. You would think if anyone were going to genetically alter something like a rodent, they would give it some upper body strength so it can be used for general labor." He examined the arm. "Compound fracture," he said.

"You can fix that. You've fixed worse," she said.

"True," he agreed, musing. "I would be interested to see how the regenerator works on this type of tissue."

Garcia winced.

"Easy," the male reptilian said. "I'm going to try and help you."

"Who are you people?" Garcia asked.

"See, it speaks," she said.

"I heard," he said, flabbergasted. "It has learned to mimic forms of speech."

"Dad, it spoke our language!" she argued.

“No,” Garcia corrected. “I have technology that enables us to communicate. A universal translator. If you play back your recording, you would hear the difference.”

The male reptilian picked up a scanner and ran it over Garcia. “It’s speaking true,” he said. “There is technology imbedded in the clothing, in the medallion, and, oh my, there is technology inside your brain. How can this be? This is well beyond anything we have.”

“It’s an implant,” Garcia tried to explain. He could barely keep his eyes open.

“Dad, he’s an extraterrestrial,” Ket said.

“You’ve been watching too much fiction,” he said.

“What else can he be, Dad? He’s not Voth and you clearly see his technology is not Voth,” she said.

“We’re going to have to run more genetic scans for anything conclusive,” he said.

“Look, this genetic marker is Terran based genetics. He’s from here.”

“What about these markers?” she demanded.

“Bad reader message,” he offered.

“I am from several million years into your future, the descendant of the people that evolved on this planet, though I was not born on this planet,” Garcia said. “Please help me. I will try to explain.”

“Ah, wonderful. An alien and a time traveler. That pretty much completes both clichés, doesn’t it? What was that movie you were so fond of, Ket, where the astronaut thinks he’s going to another planet but lands on Terra some unspecified time in the future only to find it run by talking mammals? Classic,” he said. To Garcia he said: “Time travel is impossible. Science fiction. I can’t believe I’m even speaking at you.”

“Dad, who knows what will evolve in several million years,” Ket said. “Why have you come back in time? Was it because of the climate change? Global cooling is our fault, but we’re trying to bring it back into balance.”

“Global cooling?” Garcia asked. “Am I dreaming?”

“You dream? You have sleep cycles? Dad, we got to heal him. If we want the full story we have to repair him and ease his distress,” Ket said. “Surely you have enough scientific curiosity left that you are willing to at least listen to what he has to say?”

“Fine,” he said. “Prepare a sedative while I get my kit. But, I have bad feelings over all. Nothing good is going to come of this, mark my words.”

Ket returned with a hypospray that might have been at home during McCoy’s time. She put it against Garcia’s arm.

“Don’t worry,” Ket said. “This won’t hurt a bit.”

“Wait,” Garcia tried. “I need to stay conscious.”

But it was too late. He was gone.



When Garcia came to, he found himself lying on a table, covered with a single sheet. His clothes were gone and he seemed to be alone. He sat up, squinting, taking in the sights of the room. He heard gentle laughter in the background and when he focused he heard conversation. The voices sounded familiar. He looked around for his clothes, but saw none of his stuff. He eased out of bed, trying to be quiet.

“Dad, I’m telling you I saw another reptilian species in the badlands,” she said.

“Next thing you will be telling me is you have made cast of big feet,” the older one chuckled.

“Be serious,” Ket said. “I may have found the missing link.”

Garcia tried opening a cabinet and discovered it opened easy enough, but did so louder than he anticipated and the contents fell to the floor. The conversation upstairs went quiet.

“Is that you?” called the female voice belonging to Ket.

Garcia frowned, but didn’t speak.

“Please come up and join us. We have prepared food,” Ket called to him.

This was no doubt a test, perhaps to see if he was social and capable of rational choice. Garcia wrapped the sheet around himself like a toga and climbed the short flight of stairs. The two reptilian creatures were sitting in lounge chairs, made especially for their comfort, watching for him to make an appearance. The chairs they sat in, in fact all of the furniture, had a central focus, which was the fireplace, center of the room. Garcia found the coolness of the wooden floors against his bare feet pleasant. There was the hint of pine in the air. Garcia approached them cautiously and sat on the hearth, his back to the fire. A monitor on the far wall was playing video of Garcia’s brave rescue attempt.

“Are you cold or are you modest?” the male asked.

“A little of both,” Garcia admitted.

“But we’ve seen you naked,” Ket said.

“May I have my clothes back?” Garcia asked.

“In time,” the man said. “We’d like to talk to you. How’s your arm?”

“It’s good, thank you,” Garcia said, moving his arm through all points of articulation. “You did good work.”

“The tray of fruit there is for you,” Ket said. “We weren’t sure what you would eat, so we chose a variety. The diet of mammals varies from species to species, but we figure based on your teeth and digestive tract that you’re an omnivore.”

“Thank you,” Garcia said, picking a slice of fruit from the tray that he didn’t recognize. He wondered how many plant varieties of the fruit bearing kind would not make it to the twenty fourth century. “This is good.”

“Now, let’s start with where you’re from,” the male reptilian said.

“No,” Garcia said. “Let’s start with names. My name is Tammias Parkin Arblaster-Garcia. My friends call me Tam.”

The reptilian nodded. “Social etiquette. Nice. And I concur. It is much more civil to start with names. My name is Gilgamesh. And you’ve already met my grand daughter, Ketimer, or Ket.”

“Gilgamesh,” Garcia repeated, to make certain he heard what he thought he heard.

“Yes, or Gil if you prefer,” Gil said.

“And thank you for helping me,” Ket said. “Normally the beasts run off with a zap of electricity.”

“Had she listened to me, you would not have had to risk your life to save her,” Gil said.

“I was following signs of a sentient species,” Ket said. “I think they may be distantly related to us.”

“She likes to imagine things,” Gil said.

“I suspect you’re referring to the Gorn,” Garcia said. “They’re a reptilian species, not indigenous to this planet.”

“You’ve seen them!” Ket said, sitting forwards.

“They’re alien invaders?” Gil asked.

“They don’t belong here, that’s for sure,” Garcia said. “But neither do you.”

“What do you mean, neither do we?” Gil asked. “Terra is our home. We just spent the last two hundred years trying to save our planet and our people from extinction and you say we don’t belong here?”

“I meant no disrespect,” Garcia said. “I’m just admitting that I know nothing of your species.”

“All that work to save the planet and there isn’t one thing left of us in the future?” Ket asked.

“How do you mean saved the planet?” Garcia asked.

Gil sounded a bit upset, pursing his lips in dissatisfaction. Ket laughed. “You must excuse his feelings being hurt. He was certain that his reputation was sealed in the history books for all time,” Ket said.

“What did you do?” Garcia asked.

“You have the fortune of speaking to the great, great grand son of the most famous Voth in all the world,” Ket said.

Garcia looked to Gil.

“You really don’t know?” Gil asked.

“Please, tell me,” Garcia said.

“Two hundred years ago, our people realized our world was going to come to an end,” Gil said. “There was an insufficient supply of water to sustain all the living matter on this planet. The bio diversity was expected to significantly decrease, and with that diversity, we were expected to die off. So my great, great, great grandfather, Noah, devised a plan. He had watched the stars and planets, and realized that the fourth planet in our system had an abundant source of surface water. So he designed and built a fleet of space ships, ten of the biggest mechanisms Voth kind had ever created, and we flew them to the fourth planet, took all the water, and brought it back to Terra. It took all of that two hundred years to build the ships and move the water, but we did it, nearly drowned ourselves in the great flood that ensued, but by god, we saved our planet.”

Garcia was beside himself with disbelief, but he tried to hide it so as not to insult his host, the people who had healed him.

“Of course, no one counted on global cooling, and we’re predicting an ice age will probably eliminate most of the bio-diversity that survived the great flood, so we’ve moved most of our society towards the tropical zone, and we have been collecting specimens of every sample of life so that after the ice age, we can bring back most of the species that we predict to loose,” Ket said. “Gilgamesh is the chief scientist in charge of saving our planet from our own short sightedness.”

“How many Voth are there?” Garcia asked.

“Oh, there is probably six million here in Atlantis city,” Gil said. “Total world population is about twenty million. Most of our resources were put into the Noah project, so lots of people died, and then more died during the floods, and we were just starting to see population growth when we noticed the cooling trend. Our models say we probably

have a couple hundred years to prepare ourselves, but we don't like surprises and so we're preparing for the worst now."

"We lost too many people during the Noah project," Ket said. "Our goal as a society is not to let that happen again."

"Are you really from the future?" Gil asked again.

"I am," Garcia said.

"And you know nothing of this?" Gil asked.

"There are stories of a great flood, of a scientifically advanced city named Atlantis, even the names Noah and Gilgamesh are known to my people, but these are treated as no more than myths and legends, and the stories are peopled by homo-sapiens, the name given to my species," Garcia said. "No one has ever heard of a Voth."

"How could mammals take over the planet?" Gil asked. "That doesn't make sense. The land mammals are too small, frail, and weak to be considered anything other than a nuisance."

"If it wasn't for the mass extinction of the dinosaurs, we probably wouldn't have evolved to sentience," Garcia said.

"Mass extinction?" Gil asked. "From the ice age?"

"No," Garcia said. "An asteroid is due to strike the planet and it will destroy nearly all life on Earth, or Terra as you call it."

"An asteroid?" Gil asked. "This can't be. Do you understand just how massive an object would have to be to have such devastating effects and what the odds of such an object actually hitting the planet are?"

"I do," Garcia said. "And, for me, it isn't a matter of calculating the odds, but rather it's a matter of pinpointing the actual collision date. It's going to happen. From my perspective, it already has happened. The real question for me is whether or not we can save your people from going the way of the dinosaurs."

"Can you take us back to the future with your time machine?" Ket asked.

Garcia frowned. "I'm afraid it won't be that simple."

"If I learned anything from my great, great grandfather," Gil said with a sigh. "It never is."

CHAPTER SEVEN

“Lt. Undine,” Lt. Owens said, looking to the acting Captain from his station on the Bridge. “I have detected five starships on an intercept course, warp nine. They’re Klingon.”

“Five?” Lt Undine said.

Owens merely nodded. “And at warp nine...” he said, emphasizing urgency.

“Yellow alert,” Undine said. “Contact the lead ship.”

“Don’t you think we should notify the Captain?” Owens asked.

“The Captain gave us very explicit orders that he was not to be disturbed,” Undine said.

“But under the circumstances,” Owens began.

“He has faith in our abilities,” Undine said, remaining calm. “I think you should have equal faith. Now hail the lead ship.”

“Aye,” Owens said.

An angry looking Klingon appeared on the main monitor and tried to stare her down. It was no angrier than any other Klingon face Undine had ever seen, and since it was necessary to try and gauge the level of intended aggression by ascertaining how ferocious the Klingon was acting, she stared back. He seemed fairly serious to her, but she did not blink or in any other way show discomfort.

“You will heave to and prepare to be boarded,” the Klingon said.

“I am Lt. Commander Undine,” Undine said. “State the nature of your grievance.”

“I will speak only to Captain Garcia,” the Klingon said. “Now heave to, or face the consequences.”

“The Captain is currently indisposed; you can deal with me, or wait until he is free to speak to you,” Undine said.

“We will fire on you if you do not heave to,” the Klingon said.

“It will be an honor to meet you in battle,” Undine said.

“You’re bluffing,” the Klingon said. He didn’t feel the need to point out the fact that she was out numbered and out matched.

Undine displayed a hand, revealing her webbed fingers. The Klingon modified his tone and attitude when he realized Undine was a Zaldan, a species not known for bluffing. “I request to speak to Garcia.”

“As I said, the Captain is currently indisposed,” Undine said. “Of course, if you must fire on us and we’re destroyed, you will never know if the rumors of Garcia’s skill as a warrior are true. Should you fail to destroy us, you will have the reputation of being bested by a female. Which ever the outcome, I get my way in this.”

“I’ve been ordered to rendezvous with your ship and speak with Captain Garcia concerning matters of the state,” the Klingon said. “And I have been authorized to use all the force necessary to have this dialogue.”

“I will notify the Captain that you wish to speak with him,” Undine said. “Until the time he decides to respond, you are welcome to accompany us.”

“Do not try to escape,” the Klingon said. “I’ll give you one hour and then I will re-evaluate our situation to determine if you still want that battle.”

“One hour,” Undine said, giving Owens a nonverbal gesture to cut the transmission. She stood. “I’ll be in the Captain’s ready room if anyone needs me.”

Undine disappeared into the Ready Room and the Bridge staff quietly evaluated everyone else's discomfort with the situation that had developed. Once in the Ready Room, Lt. Undine accessed the computer using her security clearance and posted an urgent message, which would be routed through the Gateway directly to the Path Finder. Path Finder received the message and Trini responded with a brief message of her own: "Message received. Please stand by for instruction."

"Excuse me?" Undine asked.

The computer responded: "Please redefine question."



Garcia awoke to the gentle prodding of Doctor Misan. He sat up suddenly.

"Easy," Doctor Misan said. "You've been out for about two hours. How do you feel?"

"Like crap," Garcia said. He became aware that he was naked under his blanket. Kurak entered bringing him fresh clothes. "And I have that stupid fifth dimension song in my head." When he said 'stupid,' he wasn't commenting on the quality of the song, but rather his annoyance at how easily it had become stuck in his head. Without modesty, he got up and began to dress. He paused to smell his hand.

"The beasts," Gowr explained. "The Doctor says it will be a day or so before we're completely free of the smell."

"I'm working on a formula that should eliminate the aroma," Misan said.

"Have you tried tomato soup?" Garcia asked.

"No. Why?" Misan asked.

"It works on skunk spray," Garcia offered.

Doctor Misan didn't know how to respond to that, so he remained silent. He looked to Lt. Tuer and Captain Gowr. Tuer shrugged.

"What happened?" Garcia asked.

"The Apollo orb exploded," Doctor Misan said.

"And given the level of destruction, I think we should re-evaluate whether we allow you to keep your orbs on the ship," Tuer said.

"How many casualties?" Garcia asked.

"Six wounded. Three dead due to the conflict with the demons," Gowr reported. "Four dead from the explosion. One of them was Lt. Pensar, who gave her life to save yours."

"Who the hell told her to do that?" Garcia asked, his memory of the last moments before he had blacked out coming to him all in a rush.

"She was doing her job, Admiral," Doctor Misan said.

Garcia softened. "Was she given honors?" Garcia asked.

"Not yet. We must wait until her body dies. We're keeping it alive artificially for now," Gowr said.

"And why are we doing this?" Garcia asked.

"She has a living will," Doctor Misan said. "Her unborn child still lives and it will require us to sustain her body as long as there is any hope that the child will continue to develop and be born with reasonable health."

"Of course," Garcia said, agreeing with the sentiments of the will. They could transfer the fetus to one of the artificial wombs on the New Constitution, but the original

body was better if she could be sustained. “Does the will stipulate what is to become of the child and does the next of kin have any claims or require an obligation from me?”

“I’ll contact the family on your behalf,” Gowr said.

“Thank you, Gowr. Where’s Athena?” Garcia asked.

“Come with me,” Gowr said.

Garcia nodded for Tuer to accompany them and they proceeded to a room where they found Athena pacing. Her two companions came instantly to their feet, as if prepared to defend their ‘god.’ Aahla sat comfortably on the couch, grooming. She took up the whole couch.

“You’re alive,” Athena said, pleased, and obviously relieved.

“I am,” Garcia agreed. “Why did Apollo’s manifestation orb blow up after I killed him?”

“You can’t kill us,” Athena said.

“Um, well, apparently I can,” Garcia argued. “So, why did his manifestation orb blow up?”

“He’s a poor sport,” Athena said. Garcia prompted her to continue. “As I said, you can not kill us, but should you cause sufficient damage to his body, he takes a penalty and must leave the game for a certain time. In the time of his absence if another god chooses to take control of the manifestation orb, he loses access to it until they receive a penalty or they decide to give it up on their own. He has the option to destroy the vessel he is using to prevent occupation by another.”

“So, basically, I can kill you,” Garcia said.

“For lack of a better analogy, you can kill our bodies, if you’re extremely lucky, but we have hundreds of other bodies scattered throughout the Universe that we can go to. Apollo will keep coming back.”

“Good,” Garcia said. An old earth song, “To Your Scattered Bodies Go,” began to play in his head, with a whole new meaning, thanks to Apollo. “I look forward to killing him again. Pollux Five was supposed to be no longer occupied. What are you doing here?”

“I came here because of you,” Athena said. “I knew you would come searching for the technology left here.”

“Speaking of the Preserver technology cache hidden on this planet,” Garcia said. “Do you know where it is and can you get us access to it without further loss of life?”

“Robbing the cache was not part of our deal,” Athena said.

“I understand that,” Garcia said. “Now, will you answer the question?”

“I will open the cache for you,” Athena said.

“Thank you,” Garcia said. “Gowr is in charge of this operation. I expect you to cooperate with him. I have other important matters to attend to. I will return when I finish with my duties to conclude our affair. If you finish here first, you may join me on the Path Finder. Aahla, stay with Athena.”

“You will not see Afu until I am verifiably pregnant,” Athena said.

“Fine,” Garcia said. “We’ll discuss this later.”

Garcia turned and left, followed by Tuer and Gowr. As soon as the door closed Garcia began speaking, but he didn’t slow his pace. “Gowr, don’t trust her. Keep Aahla close to her, I think they cancel each others powers out. Not sure yet how that works, but I do believe Aahla is on my side. Get the stuff the Grays want and then get out of this

system. Contact me if you need anything. Tuer, inform Doctor Misan he can stay here to tend to the injured. I want the rest of my team to accompany me back to the Path Finder.”

Garcia then went to the Gateway where Tatiana met him, handing him the two orbs that had carried Duana and Ilona until he had passed out. When his brain shut down, so did the telepathic connection that sustained them, for they were as unconscious as he was. They re-manifested themselves as soon as he took the orbs from Tatiana.

Tatiana turned to dial the gate, but discover that the gate had already gone into a start up sequence, and began to operate on its own, accepting a wormhole from another gateway. Garcia watched the gate going through its operational process and wished it were a fully developed Iconian Gateway, with a programmable drop off point that didn't require a second gate. He wondered if he could open a Gateway next to a particular individual so he could go right to his daughter, or maybe open it up one any planet of his choosing regardless of distance. The Gateway came to life, the outer rim spinning like a combination lock until the locks engaged, and then the iris spun open. He could see the other side, like looking through a murky aquarium. He recognized Kitara on the other side stepping into the gate. Her appearance became a silhouette, and then she emerged from Garcia's side of the Gateway.

Kitara made an annoyed face. “What is that smell?”

“Battle glory,” Garcia said, not wanting to explain. “You found her?”

“No, but we have another situation you need to attend to,” Kitara said. “The USS New Constitution has been intercepted by five Klingon warships and they are threatening to destroy it if you do not respond to their query within the next fifty minutes.”

“Oh, bloody hell,” Garcia said. “Where's my clone when I need him?! Set the Gate for the New Constitution.”

Kitara adjusted the controls and waited for the Gate to reset itself for the New Constitution. Garcia, Kitara, Duana and Ilona walked through, not waiting for the others to arrive. They emerged on the holodeck, the war game still in progress.

“Computer, exit,” Garcia said. “Close door behind us and maintain high command security lock out on this holodeck.”

“Acknowledged,” the computer responded, with Losira's voice.

“What have you got on the kidnappings?” Garcia asked.

“We know that Nikita Carter was on the shuttle that departed Jupiter station bound for Earth,” Kitara said as they made their way towards the turbolift. “But she did not arrive on Earth. The message sent to her father saying she had decided not to go to Earth was sent from a terminal at Jupiter station. Security systems monitoring the terminal where the message was sent was temporarily disabled during that exchange. No leads there. Security systems on Earth show everyone disembarking the shuttle on arrival at Earth, but no Nikita Carter. There were no transporter logs or power surges detected during the shuttle's operation, according to the Star Fleet Security report we were able to access, so it is not likely she was beamed off during transit.”

“Ilona, Duana, that will be all. Go power down. Could she still be on the shuttle?” Garcia asked Kitara as the two of them stepped into the turbolift. He ignored the sulking his two mental companions were doing, going as far as to shut the door on them by pushing a button. He sympathized with their wanting freedom, and it was exhilarating being plugged into the devices telepathically, adding to his senses, but it also

decreased his mental acuity. That was something Doctor Crusher had discovered when he first used the devices on the Enterprise. "Bridge."

"The shuttle made three runs after the time of her disappearance. Star Fleet is still investigating and has blocked all access to the shuttle," Kitara said. "But I would say she is no longer on the shuttle, if she ever actually got on it."

"Wonderful," Garcia said. "I can't believe someone was able to tamper with those security cameras and alarms weren't triggered. It would almost have to be an inside job."

"I concur," Kitara said, and then put a finger on the door controls to keep it from opening. "Should I return to the Path Finder and transwarp jump to this location? If we're going to have a fight with Klingons, it would be nice to be evenly matched. This ship isn't battle ready. And even if it were, it would be no match for five Warships."

"Let's see what they want, first," Garcia said.

The turbolift opened and Garcia and Kitara stepped out onto the Bridge. Security on deck announced their arrival and did a double take, scrunching up his nose.

"At ease, everyone. And no comments on the smell. We're working on it," Garcia said, dismissing their honors and their faces of uncertainty with a wave. "Owens, hail the Klingons and let's get this over with. Thank you, Lt. Undine. Take over ops."

"Aye," Undine said, hustling to her next position.

"Captain," Kitara said, having assumed the tactical position. "These ships are loyal to Gowron."

"Wonderful. Am I on?" Garcia asked, looking to Owens for confirmation. Owens pointed at him. "Whoever the hell you guys are, you've interrupted my war game exercise, and I'm a little pissed off, so unless you want me to respond to your first message by destroying the lot of you, you best pick up now or be on your damn way."

A Klingon immediately appeared on the screen. "Brave words for a human," the Klingon snapped. "If I didn't have orders to bring you back to Kronos alive, and specifically not to fire the first shot, you would be dead already."

Garcia looked to Kitara.

"His name is Trolos, one of Gowrons favorite henchmen," Kitara said. "He has Royal Guard status, elite training."

"You will keep your bitch silent or I'll put her on a leash," Trolos said.

"Arm photon torpedoes," Garcia ordered.

"What are you doing?" Trolos demanded, sitting forward, and pointing to several of his men. Their shields started going up.

"You insult my First Officer and expect to live?" Garcia asked.

"You are no match for us!" Trolos said. "You will die."

"That's what the dozen Gorn ships that moved against me thought. That's what Admiral Shear thought when he engaged me in war game exercises. I assume you heard about those incidents, or you wouldn't be acting so cowardly by talking smack about me and my first officer from behind your shields," Garcia said. "Five ships indeed! Were you that scared of me you couldn't come alone?"

Trolos stood and pointed. "I will see you in chains!" Trolos shouted, pointing directly at him, his face contorting in anger.

"Until that time, you will treat me and my officers with the respect that we have earned, or I will know the reason why," Garcia said.

“You have not earned respect,” Trolos said, spitting. “You have stolen Klingon technology. You have brainwashed loyal Klingon warriors with promises you can’t keep. Do you really think just because you promoted that Targh waste to First Officer that she will get any kudos or promotions in the Klingon Fleet?”

“If the Klingon Fleet refuses to utilize the talent they have available to them, then, yes, I intend to give them what your outdated social paradigm can’t,” Garcia said. “Recognition, glory, and honor. And when I’m through with them, they’ll have their choices of any ship in any Fleet they wish to serve, and you’ll be begging me to do the same for you.”

Trolos roared. “You have been summoned to answer to the Counsel and Gowron. You are being challenged.”

“Really?” Garcia asked. “And who has issued this challenge?”

Trolos smiled. “You will have to come with us to Kronos to find out,” Trolos said. “You may have been given a pass by your precious Star Fleet Academy, but we Klingons don’t play that game. If you want to command Klingons, you must past the Klingon Academy’s challenge. You have been summoned to face the final three challenges and prove once and for all, publicly, that you deserve the respect you are claiming you deserve.”

“Viewer off,” Garcia said. He turned to Kitara. “I don’t have time for this crap.”

“If he carries an official challenge endorsed by Gowron, you must accept,” Kitara said. “If you do not, your Klingons will cease to follow you. We must agree, or accept immediate dishonor, and death without glory.”

“I am not a Klingon!” Garcia snapped.

Kitara came around the tactical station and took a pose directly in front of the Captain. One arm akimbo and the other hand putting a finger right in his face, she said: “You chose to play Klingon, you knew the dangers when you accepted your mission, and you will follow through with your commitment. I will not let you bring us all down in disgrace, ruin any further chance I have of a promotion to Captain, and bring dishonor on my family, my crew, on me, or our future child. You are going to Kronos, you will face the challenges that Gowron presents to you, and that is final.”

Garcia stepped in closer to Kitara, using his implant to inform the computer to temporarily shut down all universal translators in the sound of his voice, and then he spoke to her in Klingon: “If you ever tear into me like that again in front of the crew, I will gut you where you stand.”

Kitara pulled out her d’ktahg, reversed the handle and pushed it into Garcia’s gut, her hand holding the blade towards her belly. “Go ahead and kill me,” Kitara said, also speaking in Klingon. “I will not back down on this. You have an opportunity to make our mission public. No more sneaking around. You have the chance to win glory and honor beyond what any human ever dreamed of. It is my job as your First Officer, as your mate, and the mother of your future children to make sure you meet your full potential.”

Garcia took hold of the Klingon Knife. Kitara tightened her grip on it so that her hand started to bleed, her nostrils flaring, her eyes fierce and determined.

“Let go,” Garcia said.

“Decide,” Kitara said.

“I have,” Garcia said.

Kitara let go of her knife and Garcia secured it under his belt. Kitara could no longer resist her passion and put both hands to Garcia's face, pulled him towards her, and kissed him, biting his lower lip. She let him go and returned to her post. Garcia stood there for a moment, stunned, coming to little by little, taking in the silence, minus the computer noises, and then he became aware that his Officers were trying to remain occupied to avoid looking at him. He turned back to the viewer, motioning to Owens to reopen the signal. Garcia seemed unconcerned about the blood on both his and Kitara's face, and he didn't care what message the blood stained knife stuck under his belt sent, but Trolos saw the knife, the blood, and the resolution set on Garcia's face. A light of amusement or new understanding flashed in his eyes. Garcia's reputation appeared to be exactly what Trolos had heard.

"I accept the challenge," Garcia said. "The New Constitution will accompany you back to Kronos. Do not make any more demands on my time until we have arrived. I must prepare myself mentally and physically for what is to come."

"It will take us a little over a week to arrive at Kronos," Trolos said. "If your preparations allow, I would be honored to have you and your First Officer as guests at my table."

"It would be an honor to share company with you," Garcia said. "NC out. Lt. Undine, contact Star Fleet Command. Apprise them of our change in destination and the potential delay of about a month. I'll be in my Ready Room."

Garcia crossed over the threshold into his Ready Room while simultaneously using his implant to make a separate, direct call to Star Fleet, on a priority one channel. "Admiral Pressman, I need to speak with you," was his audible message and he sent it marked urgent.

As Garcia waited for the return call, Undine reported in that Star Fleet did not approve of the change in schedule and ordered him to continue towards his previous heading. Garcia told Undine that they will continue towards Kronos, regardless of what Star Fleet said, on his authority. A text message response from Admiral Pressman finally arrived, inviting Garcia to join him in his office, as well as a specific window for him to be there. It gave him eight minutes, which was almost exactly the minimum time he would need if he were to transwarp jump to Earth, obtain orbit, and beam down, plus or minus a few minutes depending on whatever excuse he needed to extricate himself from his New Constitution crew. What Eric Pressman didn't know was that the Path Finder was already in Earth's orbit, and it would take less than two minutes for him to step through the Gateway to the Path Finder and beam directly to his office.

Garcia stormed out of the Ready Room and headed for the turbolift. "Kitara, we need to finish our game. Lt. Undine, your ship. And I don't want to be disturbed again."

"Aye," Undine said.

Kitara followed, not saying anything. She was able to match the Captain's stride, easily enough, and soon they were back on the holodeck, and crossing through the Gateway back to the Path Finder. Losira met them, reaching out for Garcia.

"Not now," Garcia told her. "Are we in Earth's orbit still?"

"Affirmative," Losira said, touching him anyway. She ordered up a hot, moist towel using the site to site replicator system, and when the towel appeared in her hands, she began to clean the blood off his face.

“Thank you, but I can do it,” Garcia said, taking the towel away from her to clean his own face. He handed it back to her when he was finished. “Site to site transport, directly to Admiral Pressman’s office, now.”

“Both of you?” Losira asked. She handed a second towel to Kitara so that she could clean her own face.

“No,” Garcia said. And then he quickly changed his mind. “Yes, why not?”

In a flash of light, they were both suddenly standing before Admiral Pressman’s desk. He looked up at them both, noticed the elapse time on his computer, and smiled.

“Garcia, how are you doing?” Pressman asked, and then made a face. “What is that smell?”

“Success,” Garcia said.

“Well, I see you also brought your playmate,” Pressman added.

“Don’t give me that crap,” Garcia said. “What are you and Sheaar up to? Are you trying to get me killed?”

“Why, Admiral,” Pressman said, full of sarcasm. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I have been summoned to face the Klingon Academy’s challenge,” Garcia said, leaning on Pressman’s desk, turning his knuckles white. “Are you saying you don’t know anything about it?”

“You mean the fast track?” Pressman asked, putting his PADD down and picking up a worry stone. “You should be good at that.”

“You could get me out of it,” Garcia said, ignoring the look of discontent on Kitara’s face. She stayed silent and at parade rest, none the less.

“I’m sorry, I have no sway over Gowron or the Klingon Counsel,” Pressman said. Then he smiled. “But perhaps your friend Picard could help you with this matter. Or Worf? You and Worf are pretty tight, aren’t you?”

“Killing me will not protect your secret,” Garcia said.

“Don’t threaten me, Captain,” Pressman said, standing up. “Sheaar and I have taken steps to protect ourselves, so if you think exposing *your* secret will take me down, you’re sadly mistaken. I can’t take away the Captain’s rank I gave you, but you can forget this self promotion to Admiral and all your little friends can just go scurry back into the darkness from which you dragged them. I can’t even take away your honorary pass at Star Fleet Academy, but you will earn your rank and reputation with the Klingons or die trying. We’re tired of your arrogance and Sheaar is determined to tame you. As for me, I will have control over my project again, with or without your compliance.”

“If I’m not mistaken, you recruited me because you liked my arrogance,” Garcia said.

“I chose you because I knew you would get the job done,” Pressman said. “You did a great job on your first assignment. Not only did you eliminate a Borg threat, but you sent a powerful message to the Romulans to not screw around with us! And, speaking of missions, here’s your second.” Pressman slid the PADD on his desk over to Garcia. “Admiral Sheaar and I have determined that a particular Cardassian has become a threat to the security of Star Fleet and the Klingon Empire. He has been conducting illegal bio weapons research. We want you to get copies of his research material as evidence, destroy his lab, and kill him without casting suspicion on Fleet or the Klingon

Empire. The PADD has the complete dossier for you and Kitara's eyes only. Try not to blow up the whole planet, this time round."

"I think you've forgotten who's running this dog and pony show," Garcia said. "I'm not assassinating anyone."

"Oh, yes, you are," Pressman said.

"I will not be a part of this," Garcia said.

Admiral Pressman squeezed on his worry stone and Garcia went to his knees in pain. Kitara turned to go to his aid, but found herself suddenly frozen in place. She was cognizant of what was happening around her, but she couldn't move her body, not even her eyes. Pressman came around his desk and kicked Garcia in the chest, and then again in the head, and then picked him up by the scruff of the shirt and threw him onto the couch, where he lay in fetal position, unable to even gasp he was in so much pain. The door to the office opened and a female entered. She touched a button on her bracelet and Garcia's pain subsided enough that he was able to begin breathing again. It was Kelvan technology and the woman who had entered was full Kelvan, born Kelvan, currently residing in human form. She was, biologically speaking, his grandmother.

"You work for me," Pressman told Garcia.

"Grandmother?" Garcia asked, looking to the woman who had the appearance of a twenty eight year old, even though she was at least a hundred and forty. She didn't appear a day older than the day she first kissed Kirk. Variations in her appearance were capable through Kelvan technology, but she preferred her original, youthful, human body to everything else she had tried on for size.

"I prefer Kelinda," she said, her finger still on the button. Garcia wanted his own Kelvan bracelet badly and at the same time he wondered how it was that she was able to stay plugged into the computer interface, surrounded by all sorts of virtual options and yet not seem distracted from her focus on the present moment in time.

"Did you really think I wouldn't take precautions?" Pressman asked, tossing his stone up in the air and then catching it. "Are you that stupid? You probably think the Path Finder is the only one of its kind. I have people placed all over the game board and all I have to do is speak one word and you will be eliminated. But I don't want to do that. I like you. I recognize the inherent value of your service. I actually think you might be the last best hope for the Federation's future."

"That, and he and I have a deal. You can stop trying to send messages via your implant," Kelinda said. "I've blocked all communications with your ship."

"Why are you helping him?" Garcia asked, trying to sit up.

"He serves my purposes, for now," Kelinda said.

"You helped to open a wormhole from here to the Andromeda Galaxy and allowed Kelvan to escape. They will be back and with reinforcements," Pressman said. "She and I have an arrangement. I needed Kelvan technology for the Path Finder and she wanted to start a legacy. How's the family life?"

Garcia gritted his teeth. He now had confirmation about his elevated libido and his total lack of control over reproduction when utilizing Kelvan technology. "You don't really trust each other, do you?" Garcia said.

They both laughed. "Of course not," Pressman said. "I expect her to try and stab me in the back the same as you would if I gave you the opportunity. And I'm warning you, if you threaten me again, you will regret it."

“And what do you get out of this?” Garcia asked Kelinda.

“I get to watch you populate the galaxy with my grandchildren,” Kitara said. “You didn’t really think the project would end with you, now did you? You’ve all but guaranteed that my family line will still be here when the Kelvan occupy this Galaxy and I will be queen, to use the Earth colloquialism. It’s good to be queen.”

Losira transported in directly behind Kelinda. Reaching around her to grab her wrists, Losira separated Kelinda’s hands so she could no longer access the Kelvan technology and pinned her arms behind her back. At the same time, Garcia kicked Pressman in the gut and then leaped to his feet. He went right towards Kelinda, his right hand sliding down her left arm in search of the bracelet. He touched the button on her bracelet with intentions of using its power to help contain the situation and escape. Instead, he was suddenly incapacitated with pain. Again, he fell to his knees, dragging his hands down Kelinda as he tried to hold onto her for support. He barely managed to press the button on her bracelet before the pain drove him to let go.

Kitara was suddenly free. She instantly drew a weapon and put it to Pressman’s neck, grabbing him by the head and pulling him to her. She would have no problem cutting his head off if he so much as flinched.

“Release him,” Kitara ordered. “Or die.”

Pressman squeezed the stone in his hand and Garcia’s pain subsided. He gasped for air, leaning his head against Kelinda.

“Drop the stone,” Kitara said.

Garcia pushed himself to his feet, staggered, but held himself tall, still holding onto Kelinda for support. In his pain and weakness, he discovered an Oedipus impulse towards her, and a new wave of self revulsion brought vile to his taste buds. He closed his eyes, trying to force all the imagery and hate away, and found himself trying to explain the impulse through some sort of logic. Kelinda smiled at him as if she understood his torment and was even willing to entice him along that tangent. She winked and pursed her lips playfully. He pushed himself away from her, grabbing at his wrist. He wished he was with Simone.

“Are you okay?” Losira asked.

Garcia forced himself to breathe and nodded.

“How did you summon her?” Pressman began.

“I am going to kill you,” Garcia told him, as he struggled for breath, reaching for his own dagger.

“If either I or Admiral Sheaar end up dead or missing, your fault, someone else’s fault, my fault, no one’s fault, a number of my agents will act on preset orders, and people you know will begin to die of mysterious causes, unexplained accidents,” Admiral Pressman said. “I give you one week to complete your latest mission, or someone that I know you love will suffer the consequences. You and your crew better make a priority of seeing to my well being and happiness.”

“Tama Orleans?” Garcia said. “You got her!”

“I don’t know anything about that,” Admiral Pressman said.

Garcia didn’t know whether to believe him or not. Kitara pushed Pressman away from her, keeping her weapon pointed at him. She knelt down and retrieved the stone, careful not to squeeze it. She also recovered the PADD from the desk and then took Kelinda’s bracelet from her.

“Losira,” Garcia said. “Beam us up.”

“I’ll see you soon, son,” Kelinda said, and blew him a kiss.

No sooner than they were on the deck of the Path Finder, Kitara turned to him and Losira. Losira was supporting Garcia as if he were hurt. “How did Losira know that we needed help?”

“She and I have a telepathic bond,” Garcia said. “Now, if there is nothing else, I need to go rest for a few moments.”

“You need to report to sickbay,” Kitara said.

“No, I’m fine, really,” Garcia said.

“You came into contact with Kelvan technology again,” Kitara argued. “You need a treatment and we probably need to tell Star Fleet command to give every female in your sphere of influence the morning after pill.”

“I wasn’t connected to the Kelvan computer that long,” Garcia said, actually worrying that he could be wrong. What if his stray thoughts for Kelinda were resonant manifestations of thoughts he had been exploring in the Kelvan virtual reality before the pain from Pressman’s weapon drove him to let go. He had a flashback to Apollo’s curse, the part where he said he would have a child so evil it would be as if he had spawned Satan himself. Kelinda might be that vessel!

“What is this?” Kitara asked, holding up the stone, Pressman’s pain device.

“It is Kelvan technology, created to provide any non-Kelvan in positions of authority a measure of power over key slaves,” Garcia said, taking it from her. “Given the fact it had no apparent effect on you, I suspect Kelinda made it for Pressman as a defense against me.” He handed it to Losira. “Destroy this, recycle it, I don’t care. Just make it gone.”

Losira took the stone, holding it in the palm of her hand. The transporter took it away.

“Kitara, pass the dossier on the Cardassian to the senior officers. I want a conference in one hour. Also, while we’re still in Earth’s orbit, I want as much information on Admiral Pressman that we can steal from Star Fleet’s computers, short of beaming in and taking all the memory chips from his office. Also, have Trini contact Lt. Nancy Carter. I’m going to want to speak with her. Give me about a fifteen minute power nap. If you don’t hear from me in thirty, come wake me up. I’ll be in my quarters.”

“Aye,” Kitara said.

“Losira, I can walk on my own, thank you,” Garcia said, and headed towards his quarters.

On his way, Garcia heard singing in the galley. He went in to find a number of Klingons singing a victory song and knew that several of the officers there had been planet side with him on Pollux V. The singing slowly came to a halt as the Officers went to attention.

“I would hardly call us victorious,” Garcia said. “We lost eight people and that was just the first skirmish.”

Garcia turned to leave, paused, and then turned back to them. “Was it Patton or George C Scott that said battle glory is fleeting?” Garcia asked. He approached the closest Klingon Officer and took his drink. “To our fallen and our future battles,” Garcia said, raising the mug in toast. He took a big swig and handed the mug back to the Officer.

“Nice vintage,” he told the Klingon. “We need a little more tenor to balance out the base. But otherwise well done. Carry on.”

They cheered and returned to singing. Garcia went to his quarters and threw himself on his bed. He curled up into the fetal position and began to sob. Losira made her presence known, materializing and putting a hand on his back.

“Please don’t,” Garcia said.

“I will not tell anyone,” Losira said.

“No, don’t touch me,” Garcia said, correcting her misunderstanding. That was one of the problems with modern technology, you could never have a moment of weakness or display human frailties without safeguards kicking in to assure your well being. In the old days if a man lost his temper and punched a wall, he would just fix the wall. Now a days, not only did the wall fix itself, but it attempted to pacify the human, too, and usually made an appointment for the nearest psychological therapist.

“You’re in pain,” Losira noted. “I wanted you to know I am with you.”

Garcia didn’t respond to her. His breathing leveled out and became deeper as he practiced a meditation technique, and soon he was asleep. Losira put a blanket over him and de-materialized her body. She was still present, watching over him from ship board sensors, but this was less intrusive.

CHAPTER EIGHT

It seemed to Garcia that he had no sooner gotten comfortable than he was being paged, but indeed he had slept for twenty minutes, non REM sleep. He answered his communicator.

“Bridge to Captain Garcia,” Trini said.

“What?” Garcia said, sounding tired. He wanted more sleep. He wanted to go see Persis. It was killing him that she was on board and he hadn’t had a moment to try and spend with her. He needed to go see Simone. Perhaps he should just avail himself of the holo-technology that Path Finder offered. He didn’t even have to visit the holodeck, for he could just bring the hologram right to his room.

“There’s a call coming in for you on the NC from Star Fleet, Priority One,” Trini said.

“Patch it through the Gateway to me here,” Garcia said, wanting to maintain the illusion that he was still on the New Constitution. He nearly bit his lip when Admiral McCoy appeared on the screen.

“Captain Garcia,” Admiral McCoy said. “I’m glad to see you are actually on the New Constitution.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Garcia asked, his apparent grumpiness going away.

“That’s a good question,” Admiral McCoy said. “I have a report on my desk that says you and your officers assaulted a man in his home on Delta Prime.”

“Actually he assaulted me,” Garcia said, and then actually did bite his lip.

“You assured me the Starburst Project was dead,” Admiral McCoy snapped.

“I don’t actually have the authority to kill the Starburst Project, but it was necessary to make it appear so,” Garcia said.

“I want to see you in my office, ASAP,” McCoy said.

“I can be there in thirty seconds,” Garcia said.

“Thirty seconds?!” McCoy asked, surprised. “You got thirty seconds! And you better have some good explanations for what’s going on.”

“I can guarantee the thirty second part,” Garcia said. “On my way. Garcia out.”

“Trini, I’m leaving the ship,” Garcia said. “Losira, site to site, McCoy’s office.”

“Do you want me to come with?” Losira asked.

“No, but I’ll call you if I need you,” Garcia said.



“Look, I don’t have a starship, I don’t have a time machine, and I don’t have access to any of my technology,” the Garcia clone said. They had given him his clothes back, including the communicator that they had pulled free to examine closer. “My team and I were exploring a Preserver artifact and we were accidentally transported to Earth of this time period.” Part of that was true, Garcia figured. The whole truth was unnecessary and more complicated than anyone in attendance needed to know.

“There are more of you here?” Ket asked.

“Yes, three others,” Garcia said.

“But you have technology that can stop this asteroid,” Gilgamesh insisted, unable to get past the impending destruction of his planet.

“Look, even if I could stop the asteroid, I am ethically compelled not to. Doing so would literally kill billions of lives and has the potential to change the dynamics of the entire Alpha Quadrant,” Garcia explained for the umpteenth time.

“What is the Alpha Quadrant?” Ket asked.

“For our convenience, the map of the Milky Way Galaxy is divided into four quadrants: Alpha, Beta, Gamma, and Delta,” Garcia said.

“So, you would just sit back and watch my people die?” Gilgamesh persisted.

“If I could save your people, I would,” Garcia said. “But I don’t know how to even begin. You have spaceships. Can you not get in them and flee this solar system?”

“Our space ships are not capable of interstellar travel,” Gilgamesh said. “That’s impossible.”

“You have transporters, but you don’t have warp drive?” Garcia asked. “To have taken all the surface water off Mars, you have to have some pretty big ships and a reasonably sound engine concept to push that much mass.”

Ket clapped her hands, hopped up, and ran out of the room. When she came back, she was carrying a model of a space ship. “It’s a toy,” she said. “But it’s a fair replica of the ships we used to fetch the water from Mars. It opens up to reveal a cut away of the inner workings. It’s to scale.”

Garcia examined the ship and immediately began an analysis. There were large chambers where water had been stowed, but even ten of these ships couldn’t account for all the surface water of Mars being moved in two hundred years. He made a comment to that effect.

“We took the water into orbit, froze it, and ejected it like ice cubes,” Gilgamesh said. “Once a certain mass of water was achieved, a ship would push the collection of cubes back to Terra. Once in orbit, they were dropped into the atmosphere. We only lost ten percent due to solar activity. This method was slow, and not effective, but it gave us a start. Halfway through this project we perfected simple transporter technology and we aligned the ships up in a series and we transported water directly from the surface, transmitting the beam from ship to ship and mega relays to mega relays, until all the surface water from Mars was transferred to Terra. We moved more water in the last ten weeks of the project than we did in the entire two hundred year span of hauling.”

“That’s just crazy. It would take more energy to dematerialize, transmit, and rematerialize that much water than it would to just create new water molecules using a pattern replicator.”

“We didn’t have pattern replicators,” Gil said. “We could turn simple matter into energy, and because it naturally wanted to revert to its original form, the amount of energy to sustain it in an energetic form took less energy than physically pushing its mass through space, with only a twenty percent loss of its original mass.”

“The simple transporters frequency were modulated to be in harmonic resonance with the molecular frequency of H₂O, so only water was moved,” Ket added. “Once energized, it wanted to flow, like it had a will of its own.”

Garcia frowned, dismissing Ket’s supernatural perspective. He focused on the ship, since he didn’t want to get into a philosophical argument. They were successful at moving the water, and that was all that mattered.

“Are these Ion engines?” Garcia asked, more concerned about the logistics of saving the Voth. The transporter solution explained away many of the questions Garcia had had about how they had moved so much water with only ten of these ships. The simple transporter with harmonic resonance tuning did explain why converting that much mass directly to energy and back again was less energy than creating matter directly from

energy. The fact that matter tended to want to remain in a matter state, and energy pretty much wanted to stay in an energy state, was a paradoxical statement since in reality matter and energy were the same thing, just as light was both wave and particle at the same time. Still the amount of energy required to transport as much mass as they did would require either fusion or matter anti-matter engines, which meant warp drive was probably right around the corner.

“Yes. We have more efficient fusion engines now, burning deuterium fuel for a maximum thrust of one quarter the speed of light, but that’s still not practical for interstellar travel,” Gilgamesh said.

“You’re right and putting crews into suspended animation carries its own sets of dangers,” Garcia said, closing his eyes. He sighed, coming to terms with the potential of breaking the Prime Directive. “What if I gave you warp drive technology? Would you leave this system and never come back?”

“You’d ask us to leave our homes?” Gilgamesh demanded.

“I’m asking you to live,” Garcia said. “Giving you this technology would be a violation of my laws and a code of ethics, so asking you to leave this system, hell even the Alpha Quadrant, seems like a small price to ask to save your people from extinction. You’ve said you’ve already been collecting samples to prevent the loss of your bio diversity from the approaching ice age. Just consider this an extension of that effort, but instead of saving it from an ice age, you’re saving it from complete annihilation by going and finding a new home world to call your own. And maybe, one day in the distant future, twenty million years or so, our two people can meet again, realize that we share a common ancestor and genetic heritage, and become fast friends. This current age is coming to an end, but it doesn’t have to be all she wrote.”

“I don’t have the authority to make the kind of decision you’re asking me to make. I will have to confer with the Counsel,” Gilgamesh said.

“Dad, do you think that’s wise?” Ket asked. “You wanted to put Tam down. What do you suppose the Counsel will want to do with him?”

“Something of this magnitude must be brought before the people,” Gilgamesh said. “I will not waver in this. Will you speak before the counsel? Will you tell them what you have told me?”

“I will,” Garcia said. “Will you help me rescue my friends and give me a spaceship in return for providing you with warp technology?”

“I can not make you any promises,” Gilgamesh said.

“Can I have access to your technology? A computer, or the transporters?” Garcia asked.

Gilgamesh bobbed his head while considering. “What you ask seems reasonable,” Gilgamesh said. “But I want to wait and see what the counsel says.”

“Dad, he’s offering us technology,” Ket said.

“Your young mind is too easily influenced,” Gilgamesh snapped. “He could be lying. He could be an alien invader intending to bomb us with asteroids.”

“He could, Dad, and if he has the technology to move asteroids, then there is nothing we could do to stop them from destroying us,” Ket said. “And they would have already done so if that was their intent.”

“Maybe he’s a spy, ascertaining our technological prowess before they commit,” Gilgamesh said. “Maybe they don’t have transporters and that is our one advantage over them. We will wait and see what the counsel decides.”

Ket puffed her cheeks out in protest. “Your princess cheeks will not sway my decision in this,” Gilgamesh said. “Now, go get suitably dressed while I make the call.”

Ket did as she was told. Garcia sat down next to the fire and ate some more of the fruit. After all, he decided, it was probably going to be a long day and there was nothing he could do about his friends’ hunger at this juncture.



Seven of Nine had found a great spot overlooking the Gorn village and had been taking tricorder readings when the device alerted her to the approach of a number of air vehicles. She crawled back a little further into the bushes to better conceal herself. A moment later, a number of aircraft, looking very much like old Earth, Apache Helicopters, broke the silence overhead and swooped over the Gorn village. Larger, troop-moving helicopters hovered and military units began to rappel to the ground. As soon as their feet hit Earth, they swung their weapons around and began to seek out Gorn targets. She recognized the aliens almost immediately: Voth. She quickly scrambled back out of her hiding place, rushed down the hill, and started making her way back to the hide out, keeping to the trees to try and stay out of sight.

Seven halted her steps and took cover behind a tree. Her tricorder suggested her position was surrounded by Voth. She heard what sounded like multiple jeeps in the background, struggling with the terrain.

“Hold!” came a voice.

Seven managed to push a button on the tricorder to lock out all functions right before she was shot. The projectile was accompanied by a whisper. It hit her thigh, penetrating her suit, and stung like all get out. She pulled the dart out, frowned, and went down like a sack of potatoes. The next thing she knew was that Garcia was hovering over her.

“You okay?” Garcia asked her.

Seven sat up. “The Voth,” she said.

“You know about them?” Garcia asked.

“I thought they would already be gone by now,” Seven said.

“You know about the Voth?” Garcia asked again.

“They’re a species indigenous to the Delta Quadrant,” Seven said. “Species seven forty three.”

“They’re not from the Delta Quadrant,” Garcia corrected.

“I know,” Seven said. “They’re hadrosaurs, having evolved on Earth. Humans and hadrosaurs share a common ancestor in the primitive amphibian erops, your closest link. I am unable to tell you much more than that other than Voyager encountered them.”

“Voyager?” Garcia asked.

“My ship,” Seven said. Garcia seemed to be hanging for more. “Surely we have better things to discuss.”

“Perhaps, but we seem to have some time to kill,” Garcia said, looking about the cell as if to deliver a point.

“Look, I have determined that I have come from your future, five to ten years in your future, and telling you more information might be detrimental to the timeline,” Seven said.

“We’re all out of time,” Garcia said. He thought about it. “I mean...”

“I know what you mean,” Seven said. “Let’s drop it.”

Elika brought Seven a drink. “They also provided some fruit over there, if you would like,” she said.

“You seem to be taking this well,” Seven said.

“After being thrown in a volcano by those who supposedly loved me and enjoying the presence of gods, this is easy,” Elika said. “Do you gods always have this much fun?”

“We’re not gods,” Afu told her for the umpteenth time.

“What do you mean, fun?” Seven asked.

“We haven’t stopped moving since you took me. This is the first place we have actually sat and had food together and offered to share stories. Can I have one of these?” Elika asked, touching the implant above Seven’s eye.

Seven pushed her hand away. “No,” Seven said. She returned her attention to Garcia. “Tell me what you have learned of the Voth.”

“Well, all I can tell you is that I’ve made friends with one of their scientist, who, strangely enough, goes by the name Gilgamesh,” Garcia said.

Seven surveyed the jail they were in.

“Some friend,” Seven said.

“Tell her the name of the city,” Afu said.

“Why were we all captured?” Seven asked.

“It’s my doing, I’m afraid. I mentioned you to my friend, who reported me to authorities, and then they went looking for you,” Garcia said. “They have limited range scanners, an elaborate artificial satellite system, even transporters, and they can beam anywhere in the world on a whim, though they choose to stick to the cities they’ve created. They seem to be a highly social culture.”

A Voth came to the cell and clucked. “Tammass, I am really sorry for the way my people are treating you and your friends,” she said.

“Seven, this is Ketimer, or Ket for short,” Garcia said, standing up. “Ket, this is Seven of Nine, my friend Afuhaamango, Afu for short, and Elika.”

“You saved my life and this is how you are repaid,” Ket said, clucking and shaking her head. “You’re not even angry.”

“It is what it is,” Garcia said, approaching the bars of his cell, yet careful not to touch them again. “Don’t fret. If I am going to save your people, I will need you to keep your wits about you.”

“You would still help us?” Ket asked. “Even after this?”

“Your people are doing what is natural,” Garcia said. “First Contact with an alien species is always the most difficult of missions. There is always the chance for miscommunication or cultural bias negatively influencing the encounter. Don’t give up on us yet.”

“I was going to ask you not to give up on us,” Ket said, humbled by the message.

A heavily decorated Voth entered, followed by a number of soldiers. He approached Ket, his hands locked behind his back.

“You should not be here,” the Voth said.

“I discovered him, Mod Henlu,” Ket said. “And as the world’s most renowned biologist, I have earned the right to see to their treatment.”

“Biologist, indeed,” Henlu said. “You may have the record for classifying the most new species discovered, but you are hardly an expert in the field. You are reckless, a danger to yourself and society, and further, this is xeno-biology, and no one has any claims on expertise in that field.”

“I do,” Ket argued. “My father and I did the scans and treated this person, so I know more about him than any of you.”

“And I should arrest you for not coming straight to me with this information,” Henlu said. “There is no telling what sort of biological threats he has brought with him. Now go home, or I will throw you in a cell.”

Ket puffed up her lips and cheeks in anger.

“Ket,” Garcia said. “Please, go home. We’ll talk again.”

“But?!” Ket protested.

“Ket, trust me,” Garcia said. “It’s okay.”

Ket cooled her heels. “If he or any of his friends are harmed, I will see you punished for it,” Ket assured him. She departed.

Henlu turned to Garcia, scowling. “I am the Minister of Defense, Henlu,” Henlu said. “I want you to come with me.”

“Alright,” Garcia said.

Seven stood up and Afu took a fighting pose, putting Erika behind him. The soldiers dropped their weapons to the ready position.

“No!” Garcia said, hands up. “No. Afu, Seven, it’s okay. I’m going to go with them.”

Henlu opened the cell and Garcia stepped out. Henlu immediately closed the cell and locked it, before leading the way out of the room. The Soldiers followed, pushing Garcia to make sure he went in the right direction. He was taken to a large meeting hall where literally thousands had gathered to see a spectacle. Every Voth who was someone, and their friends, were present. Members of the Counsel were present, as well as the Ministry of Elders, and the Queen and her royal guards. Garcia was brought forwards and pushed into a clear space where all could lay eyes on him. There were microphones and cameras pointing at him, as well as a number of weapons. He was easily the best lit object in the room, lights shining down on him from all angles, and coming up at him from the floor. The lights made it difficult to see the faces around him, scrutinizing him.

A commotion occurred at the other side of the room and a Gorn male was brought forward. He was perhaps the largest Gorn Garcia had ever seen, but still the Voth managed to shove him into the lime light as if he were merely a human. The difference between Garcia and the Gorn was the fact that the Gorn was bound by chains. It hissed and growled, followed by a guttural sound that erupted in a spit. Garcia had understood its speech, but he was curious if the Voth had a clue.

His answer came soon enough. The Queen looked to one of her minions. “The Gorn has demanded that you let his people go, or face the wrath of god.”

“For invaders, I believe his people are being well treated,” the Queen said. “Is that not so?”

The translator queried the Gorn and Garcia squinted at how badly he spoke Gorn.

“This world is ours. It is the promised land,” the Gorn said. “Now let my people go, or face the wrath of god.”

The translator scratched his head. “He keeps threatening to call his god, my Queen,” the translator said. “His language is very primitive, as well as his understanding. There is no way that his people created the monolith.”

The Queen turned her attention to Garcia. “I am told that you are technologically savvy. Is this true?”

“Yes, your majesty,” Garcia said.

Everyone in the audience clucked in awe that the mammal could speak. The Queen tapped the floor with her staff to return the room to silence. “Your majesty?”

“It’s a term used by my people to denote respect to a Queen or King,” Garcia said. “If there is a title you would prefer I use, I would be happy to comply.”

“You speak well for a mammal,” the Queen said. “One of our religious texts has always warned us to be weary of people who speak well. Question their intent.”

“That is wise. To that end, your majesty, I admit some bias on my part. My first goal is to ensure the safety of my people,” Garcia said. “And the best way to do that at this particular moment is to avoid misunderstandings, so I am trying to choose my words carefully so as not to appear disrespectful. I hope you will forgive me in advance if I trespass cultural boundaries and taboos. It is not my intention to offend, but to communicate and better understand you and your people.”

“Did you bring these Gorn to my planet?” the Queen asked.

“No, your majesty,” Garcia said. “They were here when I arrived.”

“Gilgamesh claims you have said that you arrived here by mistake,” the Queen said. “He claims you say you are from the future.”

“My friends and I were exploring an artifact of Preserver origins, very much like the monolith in the Gorn village, but much grander in scale,” Garcia said. “We inadvertently activated a transporter type device and were brought here with no apparent way to return to our starting point. That starting point is in your future, some twenty millions years or so, give or take a few years.”

“You are from this planet in the future?” the Queen asked.

“My species, homo-sapiens evolved on this planet,” Garcia said. “I was born on an Earth type planet, in a different solar system.”

“There are other planets outside this solar system?” the Queen asked.

“Billions of planets,” Garcia said. “Life is much more abundant than you probably ever imagined. And sentience seems to be the natural progression that life wants to flow towards.”

“We’ll suspend the philosophical debate for now,” the Queen said. “Where is my astronomer?”

A Voth stepped forwards. “Here, my queen.”

“Can you confirm the existence of other planets, outside our solar system?” the Queen asked.

“No, my queen,” the astronomer said.

“May I speak?” Garcia asked.

The Queen looked at him.

Garcia continued. “With all due respect to your astronomer, I believe you have the technology in place to detect planets in other systems. If you observe stars with a

radio telescope, you can observe a variation in their frequencies which indicates the presence of planets. The variation is due to a wobble in their center of gravity caused by a shared center of mass. Further, with optical telescopes you can measure the light from these stars, measure the Doppler effect, and if the planet is in front of the star, you can detect a noticeable difference in the visible spectrum, and can fairly well determine what the planet is made of or if it has an atmosphere. I would be happy to point out several stars which will offer the best viewing results, given our relative distance and the optimum size of a planet for viewing that fits your technology, as well as provide you some formulas to help you arrive at the same conclusions..."

"In theory, my Queen, what he is saying sounds plausible," the astronomer interrupted Garcia.

"But?" the Queen said.

"No one has ever done this before," he said.

"And why not?" the Queen asked.

"Because, my queen, the question has always been a mute point till now," the astronomer said. "Even if we proved other planets exist, we can't get there. No one can travel faster than the speed of light. It's a waste of time and resources."

"Then how do you explain his presence?" the Queen asked.

The astronomer shook his head and puffed his cheeks in relative mental discomfort. "I really can't, my Queen," he said. "But his transporter explanation is not plausible. If we assume he was converted to energy and beamed from the nearest star to us that energy would propagate through space at the speed of light and would take over forty years to arrive here. So, it makes no sense that he would arrive at his destination before he was actually transmitted. He must have come from the past, not the future."

The Queen looked to Garcia.

"Sub-quantum transporting could theoretically allow for instantaneous passage to anywhere in the known Universe, even temporal passage to any time in the known Universe, but in this case, I suspect a wormhole in space-time may have been involved," Garcia said.

The queen looked to the astronomer. It licked its lips and let out a burst of air that puffed his cheeks out in rapid succession until the air was gone.

"Wormholes are interesting theoretical constructs, but nothing more than that," the astronomer said, his voice a bit nervous. "My Queen."

"What about his theory that Terra will be struck by an asteroid and destroyed?" the Queen asked.

The astronomer gave a nervous little laugh. "Well, that, actually has always been a fairly possible event," the astronomer said. "And because of the sudden interest, we have turned all our short range scanning systems towards space to determine if there is a potential threat, my Queen."

"And?" she asked.

"Well, the full data set is not in, but there does seem to be an immediate threat in the near Terra vicinity," the astronomer said. "We're trying to confirm with traditional radar and telescopes, and as soon as I have more information, I can tell you if it will be a near miss or a head on collision. More than likely, it will just glance off our atmosphere and head back out into space, very much like skimming a stone over water, but, well, it's hard to say, exactly, which is the outcome without further analysis."

The Queen turned to Garcia. “Can you prevent this asteroid from colliding with Terra?”

“Not with the technology available to me at this time,” Garcia lied. He was fairly certain if he got into the monolith, he could save Terra from being destroyed.

The Queen turned to the astronomer. “Assume this rock is going to hit us. Can we nuke the asteroid?”

“If we were to hit it with all the nukes we have available, all we would do is contaminate the asteroid with nuclear material, which would then be spread through the Earth’s atmosphere and the radiation poisoning would kill whatever the asteroid didn’t kill on impact.”

“What about a matter anti matter bomb?” the Queen asked.

“It would have similar consequences as the nukes and to make the bomb big enough to handle the current threat would potentially do more harm to Terra than letting the asteroid hit us direct,” the astronomer said.

“I want contingency plans,” the Queen said. “I want to know if it’s best to go into orbit and live on our ships, or build underground shelters. Perhaps doing both will guarantee that some of us will survive. We have come too far, been through too much, to simply be lay wasted by a passing stone. I want options. I want them now. Take these creatures back to their holding cells. I don’t like the way they smell.”

CHAPTER NINE

McCoy was alone, sitting at his desk staring out the window, a cup of coffee in his hand, when Garcia arrived via transporter. The office smelled like coffee. It was a bright place, with daylight streaming in from two sides of the room and the view was that of San Francisco bay. An old Earth song began to play in the back of Garcia's mind and the harder he tried to suppress it, the louder it got. "Seventy-three men sailed up from the San Frisco bay...Ride, Captain, ride, upon your mystery ship..."

"Sit down," McCoy said, having seen the play of lights of Garcia's transport reflected in the window.

Garcia took one of the seats in front of McCoy's desk. McCoy pivoted his chair, set his coffee down, and then leaned forward, his arms resting on the desk. And then he scrunched up his nose.

"Is that you?" he asked.

"Yes," Garcia sighed.

"Explain how you got here so fast?" McCoy said, trying to ignore the odor.

Garcia explained about the Gateways, given to him by the Grays, and how all his ships are interconnected by this wormhole technology. He named the ships currently at his disposal: the USS Constitution, the IKV Path Finder, the IKV Tempest, previously the SaLing, the Pa Nun, a Romulan War Bird that had been liberated from the Orion pirates during the Bliss incident, and two Gorn stealth predators, also from the same confrontation. The last three were parked in orbit at planet Bliss because Garcia simply lacked the resources to man them. There were other ships in orbit around planet Bliss, but most of them were too badly damaged to be of any service except for spare parts to be sold on the black market, which would not only help fund their secret projects, but it gave him connections to the underworld and the criminal elements which he could use to further his cause.

"That means you have a ship in Earth's orbit," McCoy said.

"I do," Garcia said. "The Path Finder is in orbit, investigating the disappearance of Nikita Carter, which I believe is connected to the disappearance of my own daughter, Tama Orleans."

"Tama is missing?" McCoy asked, softening a bit.

"It was made to appear as if she ran away, however, the evidence I have suggests she was kidnapped," Garcia said.

"And do you know who is responsible?" McCoy asked.

"I have a suspicion, but I have no proof," Garcia said. "Whoever kidnapped Niki covered their tracks well. Someone in Star Fleet would have had to have helped them, otherwise there is a real fundamental flaw in Jupiter's Station security that was exploited."

"How did you discover the Security issue?" McCoy said.

"The Path Finder is equipped with the best spy, surveillance, and computer hacking and espionage equipment ever assembled by the Federation and Klingon Empire," Garcia admitted, noticing his right hand reflexively gripping his left wrist. He forced his hands to be still in his lap. "The Starburst Project wasn't created primarily as a vehicle to deploy a weapon, but rather it was created to spy on our enemies. I'm using that technology to track down those responsible for the kidnappings. And I have a strong suspicion it's someone in Star Fleet."

“Do you know what you’re saying?!” McCoy snapped.

“I’m quite cognizant of what I’m saying,” Garcia snapped back. “And I’m not just being paranoid.”

McCoy got up and came around his desk and leaned against it in front of Garcia, crossing his arms in front of his chest. “What is going on?” McCoy said.

“There is so much going on, I don’t even know where to begin,” Garcia said. He sighed. “I’ll start with hard part. I’m currently in possession of technology, the IKV Path Finder, which is in violation of the peace treaty between the Federation and the Romulans governments. It’s not just the Starburst weapons, the modified Genesis devices which if word of their existence leaked out could start a war between us and the Klingons, but it’s the ship itself. It’s capable of cloaking. The surface material of the ship is comprised of metamaterials, which has a negative refractive index. The same way a current will go clear when it bubbles over a rock in a stream is the way light can be made to move across the surface of my ship, which makes it virtually impossible to see. But wait, it gets better. Because metamaterials doesn’t hide the mass of the ship, the ship has also been designed in such a way that it can camouflage itself with holographic matter. The whole ship is virtually a holographic emitter. I can make the ship appear to be anything I want. Another ship. A comet. President Lincoln in a chair floating in space. You name it, I can create it. Further, the ship is equipped with a traditional Klingon cloaking device, which can be used to hide the ship and the mass. Further, it is equipped with the prototype of a phasing cloak, which allows it to phase out of sync with normal matter, allowing us to pass through objects, or objects to pass through us, however you wish to look at it. And, you already know about the transwarp drive.”

McCoy didn’t say anything, so Garcia continued. “The transwarp is limited to jumps, but the range is sufficient that we can get almost anywhere in the Alpha quadrant in one jump, and tends to make the whole crew sea sick. The phasing cloak can only be sustained for a total of five seconds, and it knocks all the Klingons out cold. The only reason any of the prototype technologies work at all is because of the blending of Federation, Klingon, Kaladan and Kelvan computer systems. The latter, the Kelvan attributes of the ship, is why I was recruited by Admiral Pressman and Klingon Admiral Sheaar to be the Captain. My mission directives are to seek out enemies of the state, exposing and or eliminating all threats, whether they are foreign or domestic.”

“You’re going to have to blow the ship up,” McCoy said.

“That was my first impulse, believe me. Unfortunately, there are some problems with that,” Garcia said. “One, all that does is get rid of the evidence, doesn’t stop my bosses from starting over, or continuing with a team more compliant to their desires. Two, there are members of my crew, who though are currently loyal, have been put in place to stop me or kill me if I do anything to sabotage the project. Three, the aforementioned elaborate computer system manifests itself as a Losira agent. You’ve met her. ‘McCoy, I’m for you.’ Or, ‘I must touch you.’ Remember that? Well, she’s back. And she’s sentient. I can’t just blow up the ship. And I can’t remove her brain any more than you could remove mine and put it in a new body. The whole ship is her just like my body is me. Fourthly, during the time I was connected in gestalt via the Kelvan computer to take out the Borg, the ship and I telepathically bonded. So, though everyone thinks that I am just suffering from prolonged exposure to Kelvan technology and withdraw symptoms from the same, part of it is my mind seeking new balance from another

unsolicited mind meld gone awry. Killing Losira at this stage would have a profoundly negative effect on me. Fifthly, the only time I am completely free of the extra personalities in my head is on the Path Finder, partly due to the afore mentioned telepathic bond with the ship. That telepathic bond enables my extra personalities to utilize the Path Finder's computers and holographic projectors so that they can manifest themselves anywhere on or around the ship. They like to get away from me when they can just as much as I like the peace and quiet that ensues when they're not completely in my head. It's getting to the point where if I'm not on the Path Finder, I don't feel right. And, finally, I've got to find Niki and Tama, and if I can prove that Admiral Pressman is responsible for their abductions, I am going to kill him."

"I'm going to trust that you have not lost all sense of reality, and that that last statement was meant merely as a euphemism for taking Pressman out of the game," McCoy said. "Now, tell me why you suspect Admiral Pressman."

"Admiral Pressman is the one who created the Starburst project! He is either running illegal operations right under the Federation's nose, or is doing so with Federation approval," Garcia said. "He's the one that solicited Admiral Sheaar's help and he's the one who recruited me into this nightmare. I don't believe he's working on his own, otherwise I would have already taken him out of the game, metaphorically speaking of course. Admiral Pressman has encouraged me to believe that the Path Finder is not the only ship running illegal technology. And he has recently threatened to harm people I know if I'm not compliant to his orders. The latter is why I suspect him responsible for the abductions. It's the only thing that makes sense."

"And do you understand now why we don't play spy games and why Star Fleet has a strict code of ethics, specifically honesty!" McCoy snapped. "It's amazing you aren't more paranoid, Tam. As it is you barely even trust me, and don't say you trust me complicity, because if you did you would have come forward with this much sooner."

"I am more than happy to take this spy equipment and turn it against Pressman, but between my recent intelligence gathering against the Cardassians, Apollo trying to kill me, the Gray Queen's agenda, something about the gods preparing to go to war over me or around me, the Klingons pressing me to go through the fast track at the Klingon Academy, the recent kidnappings, my new orders to assassinate a Cardassian scientist within the week, coping with all the females that were recently impregnated by me via Kelvan technology without their consent, and keeping Star Fleet happy while I'm trying to hold the Universe from unraveling is becoming a bit overwhelming."

"Let it," McCoy said.

"Let what?" Garcia asked.

"Let it unravel," McCoy said.

"You don't know what you're asking," Garcia said.

"No, I'm just an old country doctor, I don't know jack," McCoy snapped. "Listen to me, boy. Look at me when I talk to you. You're standing in front of a dam that's sprung a leak. Now, you could stick your finger in it and hope that holds the water back or you can get the hell out of the way and let the damn water go where it will. You can pick up the pieces later."

"You just don't get it at all..." Garcia complained.

"Get over yourself!" McCoy snapped. "If the Federation Citizenry knew just how frequently that we were on the verge of complete disaster, there would be complete

pandemonium. Just because you made it your job to fix everything doesn't mean you're Atlas."

McCoy stood and walked across the room. He rubbed his forehead, muttering something, and then began to pace.

"I'm not a control freak," Garcia mumbled. "I wish you would stop suggesting that."

"You're not, eh?" McCoy asked. "You cheated on the Kobayashi Maru test and you think you're not a control freak."

Garcia paled. "How did you know about that?" he asked.

"The only way to beat the test is to cheat," McCoy said. "How do you think Kirk did it?"

"I knew it!" Garcia said, snapping his fingers.

"Don't act so pleased with yourself. You're so far in a pickle even Kirk would be hard pressed to get you out," McCoy said. "You should have disclosed the full nature of the Starburst Project to me earlier."

"I didn't want to bring you down with me," Garcia said.

"Oh, don't lie to me," McCoy said, stopping and pointing a finger. "You can find all manner of ways to rationalize this and there is just no excuse I'm going to take from you. Mind melded with the ship, indeed! Blow the damn thing up, Tam, or be a man and come forwards. You shouldn't be a spy. Hell, it's looking like you shouldn't be a Captain. I'm wondering if you should even be a Star Fleet Officer. I wish you had just been able to stay on New Fabrion and lived a quiet, happy little life."

"I want to serve," Garcia said, standing up.

"You want to serve your own interests," McCoy said. "The irony here is that I don't intend to interfere, which makes me complicit in this whole bloody mess."

"I don't understand," Garcia said. "If you really want me to expose this, then I'll go right to the BBC."

"Have you lost your ever loving mind?" McCoy snapped. "Do you want to put us on the brink of war with the Romulans and Klingons simultaneously? Besides, I have information you don't have."

"Can you share it with me?" Garcia asked. "I could use a bit of good news."

"It's not good news," McCoy said. He sat down on the couch, mumbling: "It's unfolding just as it said it would."

"I didn't catch that," Garcia said.

"Remember the letter from the Guardian of Edo Rivon gave to me?" McCoy said.

"Yes, I got one, too," Garcia said.

"Then you know," McCoy said.

"Know what?" Garcia asked.

"That you can't avoid your fate," McCoy said.

"Please, that's just as cryptic as the message I got, and almost as hard as pulling information out of Guinan and Aahla," Garcia said. "You might as well ask me to interpret a TS Eliot poem. Tell me what is going on?"

"There's a war coming," McCoy said. "A temporal war. From our perspective, it's coming and already happened simultaneously. The history you know of the first Enterprise isn't the complete history. A lot of it has been classified. There are even several temporal missions conducted by my Enterprise that are still classified. It wasn't

an accident that we were thrown back in time to Earth during the early sixties, and the ship's logs during our encounter with Gary Seven, don't believe a word of them. We went there looking for a temporal agent and Gary fell right in our lap. It not a coincidence that your birth mother was inundated with twentieth century trivia from America, specifically literature and music, which you picked up vicariously being a telepath from conception. And it's probably no coincident that I went crazy and wound up in the thirties after jumping through the Guardian of time. All of these things seem random, but they're not. The Guardian of Edo is only one faction in the war that's coming. Apollo's group is another. Q is another. Aahla and Isis are still others. They all have their own agenda and it is going to play out the way it's going to play out. No matter what we do we've been played, are being played, and continue to be played, like pieces on a chess board. Don't think for a moment that your Kelvan species aren't also being manipulated, just the way the Kelvan would try and manipulate you."

"And they've done a good job at that," Garcia said. He told him about Kelinda's cryptic statement in Pressman's office and about the number of grandchildren McCoy was about to have.

"I fairly well anticipated that," McCoy said quietly. "Didn't expect that many children, but I figured they wouldn't give up on a project that proved successful so easily. The Kelvan want to conquer the Universe and if it wasn't for their enemy's version of the Doomsday Machine, they might have completed their take over of the Andromeda Galaxy. Now that they have wormhole connecting our two galaxies, it looks as if they might try again here in the near future. And, given your ability to multiply, we may not have to wait for them to arrive. Humans breed faster than Kelvan, and your genetic line will guarantee them a modest success in repopulating their species. They've finally established a foothold in our quadrant. Fourteen to eighteen years from now, when your kids start having kids, assuming they're half as successful as you have been..."

"Are you saying there is no hope?" Garcia asked, massaging his left wrist

"There's always hope," McCoy said.

"And what am I suppose to do?" Garcia asked.

"Carry on," McCoy said.

"That's it?" Garcia asked. He adjusted a picture on McCoy's desk that seemed out of balance in relationship to the other items on the desk. "That's the only bit of advice you can give me? Carry on?!" His head began to ring with the lyrics to a song "Cary on my wayward son. There'll be peace when you are gone. Lay your weary head to rest. Don't you cry no more."

"You know all you need to know," McCoy said, shifting the picture back to where he had it. "What did your letter from Edo say?"

"I said it was cryptic at best," Garcia said.

"Try me," McCoy said.

"It starts by stating that I will have a confrontation with the Ancients," Garcia said.

"Ancients?" McCoy asked.

"More Specific, it said Old Ones," Garcia said. "They're coming to look for the Lost Two. That particular quatrain ends by stating that only a Kelvan will defeat the Transmuter."

“Korob and Sylvia!” McCoy said, making the connection the moment Garcia said transmuter.

“That makes sense,” Garcia said, reflectively. “Yes. Korob and Sylvia were alien explorers which Kirk encountered on Stardate 3018.2 and they were, with the exception of size, very similar to the Kelvan. They were extremely intelligent and they had no concept of emotions as humans experience them. In fact, that was a key component in how Kirk stopped them, just as he stopped Kelinda from commandeering his ship. The aliens were not accustomed to sensory perception as we know it and became mentally unstable, as if intoxicated, or inundated by all the neural information they were experiencing on taking human form, and Kirk was easily able to distract them. Further, their mind probes only scratched the lowest layers of the subconscious and so they mistakenly thought we were extremely superstitious, and tried to create a reality based on a more primitive but symbolic connection to reality. The device that made it possible for them to exist in our Galaxy was the transmuter technology. The transmuter gave them complete control over all matter, could even control people, and that device is very similar to the Kelvan computer, maybe even more powerful. How did I miss this?”

“You have been preoccupied,” McCoy said. He knew all too well that it had really only been a matter of luck that Kirk had been able to defeat these aliens so easily. Part of that was due to the aliens misperception of reality. They would not likely make the same mistakes they did a hundred years ago and the Federation didn’t have anything to defend against a transmuter. Except perhaps the Kelvan technology on the Path Finder, which only Garcia could use. “Is that all it said?”

“Again, cryptic, but I think it says I must journey through the Great Barrier,” Garcia said.

“The Galactic Barrier or the Great Barrier?” McCoy asked, sitting forwards. “The energy field surrounding the galaxy? That would be suicide for you.”

“Great, Galactic, tomato, tomahto, and, please, you passed through it at least once,” Garcia said.

“I also don’t have ESP,” McCoy said.

“Look, I understand why Star Fleet has banned anyone with an ESPer rating over twenty from attempting to fly into the Great Barrier, but it’s not because it will kill me,” Garcia argued. “I read the report Kirk submitted to Fleet on the Barrier, and I know you and Spock signed off on it, but you left some things out. I know what happened, thanks to that bond we share, and the one you share with Spock. I know everything both of you know. Of course, it’s not always useful information, or even easy to access, and it plays out like movies in my dreams, and it makes people think I’m obsessed with Kirk, but maybe it’s just a magnification of your and Spock’s obsession with Kirk. Admit it, you miss him.”

“You can’t seriously be considering passing through the Great Barrier. That’s not a trek you’re going to come back from,” McCoy said, ignoring Garcia’s verbose ramblings about how he missed Kirk. Of course he missed Kirk, but it wasn’t like he was obsessed with him. Kirk was family. Spock was family. But McCoy and Spock were only together and at their best when Kirk was there to balance them out.

“If it helps me evolve into a super being and I can save the Galaxy from these multiple invaders, the gods, these Old Ones, then what harm is there? I can possibly even

defend us against Q, maybe meet up with V'Ger and see how that baby you delivered is fairing," Garcia said. "A lot of good could come through it."

"Yeah, because you've really demonstrated a lot of self control when you're plugged into Kelvan technology," McCoy pointed out. "Absolute power corrupts absolutely. Going off to turn yourself into a god when you haven't even mastered being human yet doesn't sound like the smartest plan you ever came up with."

Garcia sunk in his chair. "There is that," he said, looking away.

"Look, I know your intentions are good, but people just weren't meant to be gods," McCoy said. "We're not evolved enough socially, much less biologically. Four hundred years ago we were still fighting each other over stupid things like the color of our skin and for the accumulation of wealth."

Garcia nodded.

McCoy sighed. "The best advice I can give you is to ask you to try and be the best Star Fleet Officer you can be. If you hit that ideal even half way, you'll come out alright. And, Tam, allow the Universe to unfold as it will. That's all anyone can ever do anyway. Control is an illusion, Tam. Stop trying to control everything. Why are you fidgeting?"

"I'm not fidgeting!" Garcia snapped.

McCoy frowned at Garcia, not bothered in the least that his son snapped at him. It was just a way of speaking. Still, he did take out a medical tricorder and took a reading, following his intuition. "Tam? Are you going through Pon Farr?"

"No!" Garcia shouted. "I can resist this!"

"You can no more resist this than you can resist breathing!" McCoy snapped. "You have got to get to Vulcan and take care of this."

"I don't have time for this," Garcia whined.

"You don't have time to not take care of this," McCoy said. "I'll go with you. But let's go. Tam, you have to. Your ability to make sound decisions will continue to deteriorate if you don't take care of this. If you want to help your daughter, you're going to have to go to Vulcan, and you're going to have to go now."

Garcia resigned himself to the task he had put off too long. "You don't have to go," Garcia said.

"I'm your family. I should be there," McCoy said. "And, I don't trust you not to follow through with my orders to go, so, I'm going with you. I don't know how you've managed to go this long without completing the ritual."

Garcia stood up and activated his badge. "Garcia to Path Finder," Garcia said. "Two to beam up. Plot a course for Vulcan, and prepare to transwarp jump as soon as we're on board. Energize."

"Transporting," Kitara said.

McCoy and Garcia arrived on the Bridge. The transwarp jump commenced almost immediately. McCoy steadied himself by taking hold of one of the monitors near the Captain's chair. "All this convenience is making me dizzy."

"Would you like something for it?" Garcia asked.

"No," McCoy said, noticing the ill affects the crew were experiencing. He still had his medical tricorder in his hands and he took readings of the Bridge crew.

"We've arrived at Vulcan," McKnight announced.

“Trini, contact Simone and tell her that I’ve arrived and that we’ll meet at the wedding ceremonial site in one hour,” Garcia instructed. “McKnight, prep a shuttle for me, please. You’re piloting. McCoy and I will be going planet side.”

“Wedding ceremony?” Kitara asked.

“It’s just a stupid ritual,” Garcia said, trying to pass it off as nothing. “And I’m obligated to show up.”

“I request permission to accompany you,” Kitara said.

“I don’t think so,” Garcia said.

“Does everyone suffer from vertigo during transwarp jumps,” McCoy asked, turning his tricorder on Kitara. “You’re pregnant.”

“Not everyone suffers. Almost all the Klingons,” Garcia said. “And Dryac, the Medusan. And yes, Kitara is.”

“What causes it?” McCoy asked, still taking readings.

“Pregnancies or air sickness?” Garcia asked.

“There’s a Medusan on board? Are all the females on this ship pregnant?” McCoy asked.

“Yes to the Medusan, and no, not all the women, thank you so much for rubbing it in after confiding in you. And we’re not quite sure why the people get sick,” Garcia said. “We’re studying the phenomena. Right now it’s just an inconvenience. There doesn’t appear to be any long term side affects.”

“That you know of,” McCoy said.

“I thought you and I came to see the conclusion to this affair,” Garcia said. “Not to study the affects of transwarp drive on my crew or conduct paternity tests.”

“I want all the current medical records and future medical records sent to me so I can follow this,” McCoy said.

“Fine,” Garcia said, paging a lift up.

“Have you noticed a correlation between airsickness and pregnancies?” McCoy asked, entering the lift with Garcia.

“It’s not random morning sickness, if that’s what you’re trying for,” Garcia said.

“Should I change clothing?” Kitara asked, the door closing the three of them alone on the lift.

“You’re not going,” Garcia said.

“Yes, I am,” Kitara said.

“So, the males also experience air sickness in conjunction with the transwarp drive,” McCoy said.

“Yes, again, it’s not morning sickness,” Garcia said. “It’s not even sympathetic morning sickness. “Deck five. Next line of inquiry, Doctor.”

“So, what should I wear?” Kitara asked.

“Formals,” McCoy answered her. He obviously could tell that Kitara was going whether Garcia wanted her there or not.

“Formals,” Garcia muttered. “Bloody hell.”



“Well, it’s just as I remember it,” McCoy said, as he reacquainted himself with the ceremonial grounds where the marriage ceremony would take place. This was the same place where he had watched Kirk and Spock fighting to the death. “Hot, dry, and uncomfortable.”

“You’re welcome to return to the shuttle,” Garcia said.

Simone’s party arrived, preceded by bells, and all dressed in ceremonial outfits befitting the party. McCoy was in his Star Fleet’s finest, Kitara in her best Klingon garb, designed for the Path Finder’s crew, and Garcia was simply in his uniform. He was not surprised that T’Pau herself was to be presiding over the ceremony. It did concern her great grand daughter, after all. She raised her hand and the bells stopped. Garcia did a double take off Doctor Selar, surprised to see that she was here. Had she taken a leave of absence from the Enterprise just to be a witness? Or was she drawn here, unable to resist the impulse that he was trying so hard to resist. They were still technically bonded, though Simone’s bond was now primary.

“Garcia,” T’Pau said. “I am surprised that you have brought this outsider.”

“This person is my First Officer, and, she does have an interest in how this proceeds,” Garcia said. Garcia raised his hand to try to communicate something, but found only frustration, probably because of the proximity of Simone. “T’Pau, I am at a loss to explain how complicated my life has become. I am not a good match for Simone.”

“You were brought together out of circumstances beyond your control,” T’Pau said. “There is nothing that can be done about this. Your minds and bodies were drawn here, to this convergence, as nature intended. And she has chosen you.”

A Vulcan male approached T’Pau. “I protest!”

“You have that right, Maurik,” T’Pau said. She seemed neither pleased nor disappointed, or even surprised. She had seen variations of this scene played out her entire life.

“Simone and I are bond mates. This will be the second time I’ve been drawn to her to participate in Pon Farr,” Maurik said. “This man is not pure Vulcan and he smells bad, even for a human.”

“That really isn’t my fault,” Garcia tried to explain.

“I will not allow him to have her,” Maurik said.

“He is here, is he not?” Simone demanded. “His blood boils for me as mine does for him.”

“You belong to me!” Maurik shouted. “Our families have been one for centuries, and you would break our House ties for that creature?!”

“I love him!” Simone said.

“You are suffering delusions induced from an improper mind meld,” Maurik snapped, his rage boiling over his face.

“Enough!” T’Pau said. “Simone’s wishes are clear. She has the right to seek a new partner.”

“And I have the right to challenge, ritual combat,” Maurik said.

“You have that right,” T’Pau said.

“Now, wait just a damn minute,” McCoy said. “T’Pau, we’ve been down this road before.”

“Yes and we will have none of your trickery this time,” T’Pau said, waving a finger at him.

“Trickery? Kirk was technically dead, because of the meds I gave him. It just so happened that I was able to get him to the ship in time to revive him, and if Maurik here kills Garcia, I am going to demand the paternal right to try and resuscitate him.”

“I recognize your paternal rights to his remains,” T’Pau said. “But you may not have his body until society’s needs have been met.”

“There’s no need to fight,” Garcia said. “Simone, Maurik is your husband.”

“He is not you,” Simone said, pouting. She put her hands to his chest. “I will have you, or I will die.”

“Oh, stop being a drama queen. That’s so cliché. I am not capable of being with you. I’ve not been, and will not be, monogamous,” Garcia said.

“I don’t care about that,” Simone said. “Our minds are one. I can not go back to the way I was. I don’t care what you do during the seven year intervals that we are parted, but I will have this now or I will have death. You decide.”

“You’re talking nonsense,” Garcia said.

“Then death will be the only way I can be free of you,” Simone said.

“And I will kill you before I allow him to have you,” Maurik said.

Maurik pulled a weapon free from a guard and lunged towards Simone. The weapon was very much like a whip and he snapped it just right to encircle her neck and pull her towards him. Garcia was on him in a flash and the fight was on. McCoy moved towards Simone out of reflex, years of medical training prompting him to act, but he was prevented from acting by the Vulcan guards.

“Let them settle this,” T’Pau warned McCoy.

“I thought you were supposed to have some control over this ritual!” McCoy snapped.

“Things are still proceeding within the context of law,” T’Pau said.

“I like this,” Kitara confided in McCoy. “It’s almost Klingon.”

Kitara’s eyes were all for the fight so she did not observe the look T’Pau had given her for comparing the Pon Farr ritual to a Klingon scrap.

Maurik fell away and Garcia turned to check on Simone, but Maurik was back on his feet before Garcia could do anything useful. T’Pau interrupted the fight so that they could both be better armed in an effort to resolve the conflict faster, to facilitate a quicker return to ‘normalcy.’ It became apparent to Garcia that the only way Simone would get medical attention was that he was going to have to render medical treatment and the only way he was going to be able to do that was to kill Maurik. He took the new weapon and charged his opponent as soon as T’Pau had released them to commence fighting. He found it strange to be so out of control mentally that he couldn’t check his rage and return to a calm state of mind on his own, and yet T’Pau only had to say ‘halt’ and he obeyed. Did she really have that much power over him? And if she had that much power over him, couldn’t she just command them to snap out of this madness?

Garcia and Maurik met like two rhino’s fighting for territory. The weighted end of Garcia’s staff broke Maurik’s staff, punching through it and pounding him in the chest. Garcia spun the staff, bringing the bladed end around. Maurik blocked the slice by binging his two pieces of the staff up to form an x, but it did not prevent Garcia from pushing it through towards him. Maurik twisted his body to let the blade pass, but Garcia was closer now, and as Garcia dodged Maurik’s blade, Garcia hit him in the face with a fist. Maurik fell back, dropping the bladed end of his staff. He tried to hit Garcia with the weighted end, but Garcia deflected it and knocked it away. Garcia hit Maurik in the head with the weighted end of his weapon and before Maurik hit the ground, Garcia had brought the bladed end around and sliced through Maurik’s neck. Even though Maurik

was dead before he hit the ground, Garcia drove the blade into Maurik's chest as if to make certain it was finished. He didn't even hear McCoy yelling "No!" He just stood over the body, all his weight on the weapon.

Garcia threw down his weapon and ran to Simone. He checked her vitals and found that she was still alive. He untied the whip from her neck and touched her face. She opened her eyes and smiled faintly. He raised his hand up to hit her but at the last second changed his mind and hugged her fiercely. Though part of him was angry that she had just laid there so that he would assume she was more hurt far worse than she was, he was so happy that she was uninjured he couldn't help but surrender to her embrace.

"Plak-tow," Simone said. "Your blood does burn. It's made you victorious."

Garcia kissed her to shut her up. The moment his face came into contact with her, she drew him into a mind meld. As the stronger of the two, and being completely consumed by her own plak-tow condition, the blood fever, Simone negated all of Garcia's rationalizations for why they shouldn't be together. No longer restrained, Garcia's passion for her was overwhelming, but mutual. T'Pau stopped them from proceeding to the next insane level.

Doctor Selar had the right to interrupt at this point and make her own challenge for Garcia, but she managed to hold onto enough logic to know that she would not beat Simone in a fight to the death. It took most of her remaining strength to walk away from the ceremony. She would never be completely free of the Garcia influence on her, but she could hope that it would continue to diminish with time. And, by staying alive, there was always hope that she might be with Garcia again. As she passed Maurik's family, she actually felt hate and rage flowing from several of Maurik's siblings. The parents were unreadable, which was odd because these sorts of ceremonies were supposed to be open telepathy, no blocks. In fact, the ceremony was intended to get all the issues out in the open in order to resolve them. That was to prevent further animosity or the continuance of grudges.



Simone and Garcia emerged from her room and both went right for a table where food was prepared and waiting. T'Pau and McCoy were there, most likely drinking tea, Garcia guessed by the smell of it. He felt much more level headed and at peace, but looking at McCoy reminded him of just how badly he had failed. He had killed Maurik. True, no one in this culture would say anything, as it had happened with a social context that was permissible, and even McCoy wouldn't say anything, but McCoy saw the act in a certain light and there was no changing that.

T'Pau knew what was going on in Garcia's head, for she was the strongest telepath on the planet. She had also mind melded with Garcia, and often with her grand daughter Simone, so there was no hiding anything from her. "Do not brood about Maurik," T'Pau said. "He understood the consequences of his choices. His katra was preserved."

"Maurik's house was prominent member of Vulcan society. They will see this as a loss," Garcia said.

"Their house has not lost favor," T'Pau said. "But it is true, that the house of McCoy is now aligned with the house of T'Pau, and this relationship will have significant social ramifications. You now have new obligations. For starters, I know of the Path Finder and her mission. The Vulcans do not disdain intelligence gathering. In fact, as a

peaceful society, we believe that knowledge and information can maintain peace better than the potential threat of violence, or military might. All data and intelligence you gather will be shared with me, through my associates. I will assign you several people to add to your crew.”

“Alright,” Garcia said. For a top secret project that was quite on the illegal side of Star Fleet, he was finding the amount of growing support a little odd.

“Simone, you will lead the scientific endeavor to study the Preserver Technology being taken to Planet Bliss and learn as much as you can about the Grays and the Preserver’s agenda,” T’Pau said.

Simone bowed. Under the table, she touched Garcia’s hand. He felt the compulsion to be with her rising again. He wondered how long Simone’s blood fever would last. A week? Two? Was this is fate with her, every seven years a few days of most intense hunger followed by satiation and then hunger again.

“I feel this whenever I’m in your presence,” Simone told him telepathically. “Haven’t you noticed? My logic goes out the window when you’re near.”

Simone rose from her chair, extending her hand for Garcia to take it. He was famished, but he couldn’t resist her. He surrendered and took her hand and stood up, embracing her.

“I’m sorry to interrupt the honeymoon, but you’re going to have to get me back to Earth,” McCoy said. “Before I’m missed.”

Garcia seemed unable to make a decision, so Simone made it for him. “It’s okay.”

T’Pau observed Garcia as a cat might a mouse. She looked at him as if she knew a secret that he didn’t, one that she wasn’t about to share.

“Really, Tam,” Simone said. “I will leave for planet Bliss immediately and can be there in thirty six hours at maximum warp. You have a Gateway there. We can meet again soon enough.”

“Not soon enough. I’m still…” Garcia said.

“It will pass,” Simone said, touching his face and helping him to feel some peace.

“Fine,” Garcia said, activating his communicator. “Path Finder, prepare to beam two up, site to site, to the Bridge,” Garcia said. He turned to his host. “T’Pau, thank you for your hospitality. Live long prosper.”

“Garcia, you are a blessing on my family,” T’Pau said. “Live long and prosper.”

“I only hope I can live up to how you all see me,” Garcia said.

Simone kissed Garcia and took a step back as McCoy stepped closer.

“Energize.” Garcia said.

Garcia and McCoy were whisked away in a wave of coalescing lights of different hues that seemed to spiral around them from head to toe, flushed with vertical streaks and mixed with flaring sparkles like a rain of glitter. Several brighter flashes of lights that seemed to correspond with the concept of chakras from the ancient Eastern religions flared and winked out, from the lowest chakra to the highest. There were always variations in visual displays from transporter to transporter due to variation in the actual parts and circuit pathways which caused the quantum nature of matter/energy to flow differently, but Simone had never seen such a brilliant display from a transporter wave, nor had she ever heard anything so melodious. McCoy reacted differently, imagining it even felt different than any transporter he had been in. The sounds only reaffirmed his

position that there were too many variables in transporting for him to want to subjugate his body to being broken down into energy. And after discovering that the Preservers could actually steal a copy of his body during transport, he was even more reluctant than ever to be subjected to this form of transportation. Unfortunately, it was still necessary from time to time to submit to powers greater than himself.

CHAPTER TEN

The Path Finder escorted McCoy back to Earth in the matter of seconds. While Garcia's crew continued with the investigation where they left off, Garcia accompanied McCoy back to his office where they had lunch together. Garcia was famished, having not eaten in a sixteen hour period. He had been too distracted by Simone to want to eat. It was just as well. He realized it was nice to be able to have time to share a meal with McCoy, since he could barely remember the last time they had had the time to have a quiet meal together. After finishing off all the food that McCoy had replicated, plus seconds, McCoy poured them both a glass of Romulan ale, which Garcia at first refused, but McCoy insisted. Garcia gave in to his senior Officer's prescription and closed his eyes to study the taste and the texture as he took it in. He could feel the slight tingle in his nervous system as its warmth began to spread through him. His wanting for Simone and for the Kelvan computer system eased a bit, as he examined the quiet buzz in his head.

"Wow," Garcia said. "That's kind of nice."

"Just don't over do it," McCoy said. "The stuff is addictive as hell. It's one reason it's banned. Addictive personalities, and those with the gene for alcoholism, can't resist it."

"And you're giving me a glass because I need another monkey on my back?" Garcia asked.

McCoy chuckled. "I'm not going to allow you to drink that much," McCoy said. "And you need a drink in the worst way. Consider it a prescription. If you need another, make an appointment with me and we'll sit down together."

"Deal," Garcia said. Garcia's comm. badge rang several times before he touched it to open the channel. "Garcia here."

"Sorry to disturb you, Captain, but the New Constitution is having another crisis," First Officer Kitara reported. "Our presence is needed immediately."

"What sort of crisis?" Garcia asked.

"There's about to be a confrontation between several Cardassian ships and our Klingon escort," Kitara said. "The Cardassians seem hell bent on destroying the NC with you on it. Trolos is not likely to let that happen."

"Oh bloody hell," Garcia cursed. "Can't people just leave me alone?!"

McCoy shrugged, finishing off his drink. He collected Garcia's empty glass.

"Fine, prepare to beam me up, site to site, to the Bridge," Garcia said, standing. "Admiral McCoy, thank you for your time. Energize."

Garcia gave McCoy a questioning look, as if asking 'does it get any easier,' but he was gone before McCoy could respond.

"God speed, son," McCoy said. "God speed."

Garcia appeared on the Bridge, the reassembly matching that of the transport from McCoy office, only the chakra flared in reverse, from head to toe, blossoming in brightness until completion of the transport. Each flare blended with the total composition of lights as the silhouette took form. Then Garcia was whole again. "Are we ready for the jump?" he asked, taking his seat, center stage.

"We need two more minutes," Losira said, taking her position next to the Captain, standing.

"Captain," Trini interrupted. "Do you have time to speak with Nancy? I've got her online now."

“Tell her I’ll be in touch,” Garcia said.

“She really wants to speak to you,” Trini said. “And you did want to speak with her.”

“Put her on,” Garcia said, sighing. “Lt. Carter? This is Tammias.”

“Tam! You have to come to Earth and see me. I have a message from the kidnapers. I’m supposed to deliver it to you personally,” Lt. Carter said.

Garcia stood up. “You’re on Earth now?” Garcia asked.

“Yes,” Carter said.

“Transmit your coordinates and prepare to be transported,” Garcia instructed

“Wait just a moment! You’re not going without me,” came a male voice.

“My ex husband Boris is with me,” Nancy said.

“We need to make this quick,” Garcia said. “Transmit your coordinates. Lt. Kletsova, let me know when you got them.”

A moment later, Tatiana answered, “They’re on board, Captain.”

“Get them in guest quarters, use a site to site, and post a guard, they are to remain there until I speak with them,” Garcia said. He pushed the intercom button on his chair.

“All crew, stand by for a transwarp jump, in five, four, three, two...”

Garcia looked to McKnight holding two fingers up, and then pointed at her with one, and she pushed the button. Garcia loved everything about transwarp! So much faster, he thought. While most of his crew were recovering from the disorientation involved with the jump, Garcia was already accessing the situation on one of his personal displays. The Path Finder had come out of transwarp space practically on top of the New Constitution. The Klingon warships had raised shields and were preparing for battle. Three Cardassian warships were fast approaching, also battle ready.

“Losira, activate primary cloaking system and put on the IKV Tempest skin,” Garcia ordered, toggling through various informational screens on his display. “As soon as the skin is in place, drop the secondary cloak and open hailing frequencies.”

On one of secondary monitors, he was able to watch the Path Finder’s “skin” change to that of the Tempest. The graphic declaring the boundaries of the Klingon cloaking device fell away, so that every one utilizing short range sensors could see them.

“We are now visible as the Tempest,” Losira announced.

“Trini, tap into the New Constitution’s systems and broadcast a signal using their subspace array. Make it look to the NC crew as if the signal is coming from holodeck one.”

“Aye. Hailing frequencies open, Captain,” Trini said.

“All ships, stand down from battle conditions,” Garcia said.

Trolos appeared on the screen. “These fool Cardassians must be taught a lesson.”

The screen divided as the lead Cardassian ship’s commander came online, too.

“Captain Garcia, I will see you dead at my feet before this battle is done.”

“Both of you, stand down,” Garcia said. I’ve done enough killing, Garcia said to himself. For some reason the fact that he had killed Simone’s legitimate husband, bonded to her at age seven, less than twenty four hours ago was sinking into him rather hard. The Vulcan never had a chance against him; Garcia the great, Destroyer of Worlds.

“I have orders to bring you in alive, Garcia, and I will not allow this targe dropping to threaten that mission,” Trolos said.

“I will fight my own battles, thank you very much,” Garcia said.

“Prepare to die,” the Cardassian said.

Garcia waved at Trini to mute their end of the conversation. He turned to Losira. “Can you put an agent on each ship with a gun to each of their heads?”

“Easy,” Losira said. “And I would be glad to eliminate the threats, if you like.”

“No, just let them think you’re going to,” Garcia said. “Trini, take me off mute.”

Garcia watched as the Cardassian and Trolos exchanged taunts and then they both fell quiet when a Losira agent appeared next to each one of them, a phaser to each of their heads, and a hand on their shoulder to prevent them from escaping their chairs.

“Do I have your attention now?” Garcia asked them.

They both nodded.

“Good,” Garcia said. “Trolos, have your ships stand down.”

Garcia looked to Kitara who confirmed that the ships had powered down their weapons. He turned his attention to the Cardassian.

“What is your name?” Garcia asked him.

“Gul Tormin,” the Cardassian said.

“Gul Tormin, you can either stand down and give me your grievance in person as my guest aboard the New Constitution, or you can lie dead at my feet before the battle even starts. Do you have a preference?” Garcia asked him.

“I will speak to you in person,” Gul Tormin said.

“I am so happy to hear that,” Garcia said. “You may bring three of your personal guards with you. Notify the New Constitution when you’re ready for transport. Oh, and I recommend not arming your ship’s weapons for the duration of the cease fire.”

Gul Tormin’s image fell away as he closed out the channel.

“I would like to be present,” Trolos requested, his image now more prominent on the screen.

“Do you not trust me to protect my own Captain?!” Kitara challenged.

“I only wish to be of service and finally meet this strange, new Klingon,” Trolos said.

“You and three of your men will be welcomed to join us on the New Constitution,” Garcia said.

“How did you get your personnel past our shields?” Trolos asked.

“At the risk of sounding cliché, I’d tell you, but then I would have to kill you,” Garcia said. “And I’m starting to like you. So, don’t ask about trade secrets.”

Trolos nodded and his image faded.

“Call your agents back, Losira,” Garcia said. “Kitara, go to the NC and prepare to meet our guest. I’ll be over as soon as I finish speaking with Lt. Carter. And if anyone asks, tell them Captain Gowr of the Tempest is here delivering a message to me, in private.”

“Aye,” Kitara said. She turned to Losira and asked for a site to site transport from where she stood and was quickly delivered to the New Constitution, holodeck one. She was gone before Garcia stepped into the turbolift.

Garcia wasn’t alone in the turbo lift. The Deanna Troi rogue program was in the Turbo lift, waiting, and everyone saw that she was there. He didn’t need to actually touch her to know that she was there. He just knew.

“Tam, I really think you should schedule an appointment with me so we can talk,” Troi said, as soon as the doors closed.

"I'll put it on my list of things to do," Garcia said. "Losira, what quarters did Tatiana assigned Carter?"

Losira's disembodied voice answered. "Room three fourteen."

"Deck three, then," Garcia said. The lift started moving.

"Tam, we're worried about you," Troi said.

"Who's we?" Garcia asked.

"Me, Diana, Ilona, and Lal," Troi said. "Who did you think? Just the four of us who know you more intimately than anyone else ever will. The ones who live in your head full time."

"I'm just a little tired and worried about my daughter and Niki," Garcia said. "And making very little headway in that direction, and these constant interruptions are getting annoying."

"You threatened to gut Kitara where she stood the other day," Troi said.

The lift arrived at deck three and the doors opened.

"Close doors, hold lift," Garcia said. The doors closed and Garcia gave his full attention to the Troi program. "When speaking with the Klingons, I have to use my Klingon verbiage and mannerisms. They won't respond well to, 'do that again and I'll put a demerit in your file' kind of language."

"You are not a Klingon," Troi said. "You can be firm without sounding weak."

"I appreciate your concern, but I do not see that I have done anything that warrants this level of scrutiny," Garcia said. "However, I will file the information and try to be more reflective on my behavioral choices for the near future. Happy?"

"You know what would make me happy?" Troi asked, stepping a little closer to him, touching his arm.

One of the problems with sharing the same physiology and brain with another mind was that both minds felt the same level of tension radiating through the body. She was no doubt picking up on his urge to be with Simone again. Distance had failed to alleviate any of his wanting. Had his wants failed to diminish because there was no spatial limit to telepathy, or because he had the means to go to her in a moments notice if he chose to act? And could Troi quell his thirst so he would have one less distraction, or would it just make his wanting worse? He touched his left wrist as he resisted the rogue Troi's offer. "Sorry, but I don't have time for that," Garcia said, opening the door to the lift and stepping out.

"You know it would help de-stress you," Troi said, as she followed him to room fourteen.

"Or distress me more. Besides, I'm thinking about becoming a monk," Garcia said.

Troi laughed. "You wouldn't make it a week," she said.

Garcia looked at her to see if that was a challenge or just good humor. The Klingon assigned to guard Nancy and Boris stepped aside and opened the door for the Captain, using a security card. Garcia entered to find his guests rather upset, perhaps because of the situation and perhaps because they were being locked up. Nancy had obviously been crying. She proceeded to do more crying, falling on Garcia's shoulders the moment he entered the room.

“Okay,” Garcia said, patting her on the back. He hated to sound so callous, but he needed the information, and he needed to be on his way again. “Talk to me. What’s the message?”

Lt. Nancy went and retrieved an object that had been given to her. Garcia nodded at Boris, who stood apprehensively in the center of the room. He appeared to be angry, but before he could say anything, Carter handed Garcia the object. For all intensive purposes, it appeared to be a stone that would fit at the tip of a spear. He turned it over in his left hand and traced the markings with his right finger. When he was done examining the marking, his right hand went to his left wrist and he began to grind his teeth.

“Do you know what it means?” Nancy said.

“Who gave this to you?” Garcia asked.

“Some girl. She said her name was Harmonia and that you would understand the message,” Lt. Carter said. “She said they’re responsible for the abductions.”

“What ship is this?” Boris asked.

“I need to ask you both to stay in this room for now,” Garcia said. “If that is too much of a hardship, I can transfer you over to the New Constitution.”

“Are you holding us prisoner?” Boris asked.

“We’ll stay,” Lt. Carter said, motioning Boris to be silent while trying to assure Garcia that they would comply with his instructions. “We trust you. Will this help you find Niki?”

“Trust him? He’s probably the reason Niki was kidnapped in the first place,” Boris said.

“You’re right, Boris,” Garcia said. “She was kidnapped because of her connection to me. And if my archaeological knowledge serves me well, this symbol tells me that her abductors are Gorn, of the Grilisan clan. I didn’t expect that. I thought... Well, never mind what I thought.”

“Why would the Gorn want my daughter?!” Boris said.

“They don’t want her,” Garcia said. “They want me. They want me dead. And I have no clue why, but if that’s what it takes to get your daughter back, then I will let them have what they want.”

Lt. Carter started crying again. The Troi program reflexively pulled Carter to her to try and comfort her. She managed to sneak a look to Garcia that seemed to say that he was being a bit harsh, not reaching out to her and all, not to mention his offer for self sacrifice didn’t make Carter feel better.

“If you’ll excuse me, I have another fire to put out,” Garcia said, excusing himself. Once outside the room, he paused in order to get a hold of his own emotions. “Losira? Would you accompany Persis to room fourteen. I think she and Nancy should talk.”



Lt. Commander Undine and First Officer Kitara met Garcia at the transporter room as he arrived on the New Constitution. “The Cardassians are in the conference room, however, before we attend to that, your immediate presence is needed in Jurak’s quarters,” Kitara said.

“And keep our guest waiting?” Garcia asked.

“This has priority,” Kitara said.

Garcia frowned, but followed along with the game, hearing McCoy's voice tell him, 'let the water go where it will.' There were guards posted outside his chief medical officer's quarters and more guards inside, weapons drawn. Doctor Jurak was holding Doctor Misan to the wall and a knife to his throat.

"Let him go, Doctor," Garcia said.

"He has trespassed in my quarters with no authority," Jurak said. "It is my right to gut him."

Garcia moved forward until he was standing neck to neck with Jurak. "You will have to cut through me first," Garcia said. "Now let him go."

Jurak lowered the knife and retreated. The moment Doctor Misan felt the slack, he started to fight. Garcia popped him in the head with a closed fist, dropping the Andorian to the floor.

"That goes for you, too," Garcia snapped.

Doctor Misan pointed a hand at Jurak. "He has overstepped his authority, broken your orders, and violated one of your officer's sanctity," Misan said.

"If you have a grievance, you come to me," Garcia said.

"I want that thing killed in accordance with your decision and in accordance with the mother's wishes," Misan said, now pointing to the artificial womb in Jurak's quarters.

Garcia saw the cradle and turned to face Jurak. "What have you done?" Garcia demanded.

"Lt. Kelly gave me instructions to remove the fetus growing within her," Jurak said. "I complied with her wishes."

"She told you to abort it!" Doctor Misan said.

"Her exact words were 'remove this thing growing in me' and I complied, per the Captain's orders," Jurak said. "I recorded her words, if you doubt me."

"You know as well as I do that she came to you for an abortion," Doctor Misan said.

"Doctor Jurak," Garcia said, his voice very calm. "Pull the plug on it."

"I will not!" Jurak said, spitting and shaking with rage.

Security brought their weapons back up to the ready position, but Garcia motioned them to stand down. Garcia went to the cradle to do it himself and Jurak pushed him away. A fight ensued. Garcia beat Jurak to the floor, taking the knife away from him and probably would have killed him had Undine not interfered.

"Captain!" Undine shouted, command voice, her hand on his arm. "This is not Star Fleet's way. Your rules expressly state there will be no Klingon style executions or assassinations on this ship."

Garcia tossed the knife away and got up off of Jurak. He went over to the artificial womb to find the off switch.

"Wait," Jurak pleaded. "Star Fleet rules and regulation, under Federation law, prohibits you from terminating that life form."

Garcia turned back to Jurak. "I'm the law on this ship and had you obeyed my instructions there would not be any moral uncertainty in this matter."

"It is not a moral uncertainty," Jurak said. "By Star Fleet's definition, it is life! It exists outside the host, its mother's womb."

"It's an artificial womb!" Garcia said.

“Technically, it’s a life support system,” Jurak argued. “It is a self contained space ship for one. No different than the spaceship we’re currently on, which provides us life support.”

“Captain,” Undine said. “He may actually have a legal argument. There may even be a precedent.”

“God damn it,” Doctor Misan said. “You’re not going to fall for this crap, are you?! He’s just stalling for time. And by the time this argument has been brought to a judge advocate, the fetus will have developed past the point of legal abortion. Kill it now.”

“Put both Doctor Jurak and Doctor Misan in the Brig. I want everyone out of here,” Captain Garcia said.

“Captain?” Undine asked.

“Everybody out of here now,” Garcia said.

Doctor Jurak and Doctor Misan were led away. Kitara and Undine were the last ones to leave, their eyes not leaving Garcia until the door closed. Garcia stared at the artificial womb. He activated a small display which allowed him to view the life inside. There was an actual window to see it without technology, but exposing the child to visible light before its eyes had completely developed would cause it to be blind. Garcia magnified the view. Beside the image rolled a genetic breakdown, identifying it first as female, but also marking out the genes he shared in common. It was definitely his child. Was this the one Apollo was referring to when he said that he would decide if it lives or die? Was this the one he was cursed to have to kill? He felt a presence beside him and he turned to see one of his mental companions. It was Lal. Her father, Data, and he had had their minds connected via Garcia’s implant and Lal had been downloaded into him. Out of all his mental companions, he had spent the least amount of time with her and none of it had been alone time. Whenever he saw her, she was either with Troi or she was with Duana.

Lal looked at the fetus.

“Baby,” Lal said. “Human.”

“Yes, Lal,” Garcia said.

“It deserves a chance,” Lal said.

“You don’t understand,” Garcia said.

“I understand, Captain Garcia,” Lal said, very careful in how she pronounced each word. “I understand that humans like to play games, like to exercise authority over things that do not belong to them. This does not belong to you, not in the way you are thinking about it. If you kill it, it will haunt you. And not like I’m haunting you. It will be worse, because it will be your imagination.”

“I don’t consider you to be haunting me,” Garcia said.

“You would rather not see me, or the others,” Lal said.

Garcia frowned. There was no point in arguing that with her. It would be like trying to lie to himself. It was true, he would rather not have these minds sharing his brain space.

Garcia nodded and then hugged Lal. When he pulled free, he told her: “I’m sorry for not welcoming you, or embracing our unique situation as a gift. I will try to be more hospitable.”

“You have a lot on your mind,” Lal said. “It is difficult to be peaceful when so many threats loom over you, both real and imagined.” She placed a hand on the artificial womb. “This is not a threat, however. This is a baby, human. Female. Like me.”

“Yes, Lal,” Garcia said. “Like you.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The guest, as Captain Garcia had referred to, were on the verge of becoming violently restless when he entered the conference room. Gul Tormin spit at the floor when Garcia entered, Trolos and his men stood simultaneously as Garcia's Officer went to attention. The guest seemed impressed by the tight control Garcia seemed to have on his crew. Tormin was also impressed and surprised that Garcia had instructed them not to confiscate their weapons.

"You wanted to see me," Garcia asked.

"How dare you keep me waiting!" Gul Tormin demanded.

"I'm not going to apologize for having a life," Garcia said. "My time is precious, so if you will get to the point of your visit, I'd appreciate it."

"You know why I'm here," Gul Tormin said.

"Because you're a fool who wants to earn a Garcia badge for battling me?" Garcia asked.

"You have destroyed my family honor!" Gul Tormin said. "And I will have satisfaction."

"I don't have a clue what you're talking about," Garcia said.

Gul Tormin pulled a device from his belt. Garcia's officers and Trolos and his men became hyper alert. Gul Tormin slowed his motions. "A communicator, if you will permit me."

Garcia nodded.

"This is Gul Tormin, beam the package over," Gul Tormin said. "There's a table right in front of me."

A Cardassian female was transported in, arriving in the prone position on the table. She appeared to have been beaten severely, perhaps to within an inch of her life, and she was unconscious. Garcia went to her right away, checking for a pulse.

"Gil Shuliette," Garcia said, calling to her.

"She is pregnant with your child," Gul Tormin said, coming around the table.

"You have desecrated my family line, ruined any chance of her getting a descent marriage, and have bastardized my genetic heritage! Your life, as well as hers, are now forfeit."

Gul Tormin was pulling a knife as he came around the corner, thinking Garcia was too wound up in his concerns for Shuliette to notice. Garcia's anger exploded like a bomb and the next thing Gul Tormin knew was that he was pinned to the far wall, an arm to his neck, and Tormin's own knife, pushed firm to his chest. Gul Tormin's men had gone for their weapons as well, but between Trolos and his men, and Garcia's Officers, they didn't have a chance. They surrendered their weapons without putting up a fight. Undine had gone to pull Garcia off of Gul Tormin, but Kitara had stayed her hand.

"This was my fault!" Garcia screamed in Tormin's face, spit flying with rage. "Not hers. You didn't have to punish her like this."

"Whether you kill me or not, your plight is sealed," Gul Tormin said. "My family will come for you. You're as good as dead."

"Captain," Undine said. "This is not our way."

"I am not Star Fleet!" Garcia snapped at her, but his eyes never left Gul Tormin.

Undine stepped closer to him. "You are a Star Fleet Officer," Undine said. "You are not a Klingon, there is no justice in this, and the only thing that his death by your hands will change is that you will hate yourself."

"There is too much estrogen on this ship," Trolos said. "Kill the cretin."

"Let him face Cardassian Justice for his crime," Undine said.

"He hasn't committed a crime!" Trolos argued. "The Cardassians condone this kind of behavior. If a daughter has done the family wrong, he could have her publicly stoned to death if he so wanted."

"Like Klingons don't have similar traditions," Undine said.

"We do not condone the killing women or children," Trolos said. "Only warriors."

"This does not appear to have been a public stoning," Kitara said. "I want justice for her as well, Captain. She should have the right to decide her father's fate, not you."

Garcia tossed the knife up, caught it reversed, and clobbered Gul Tormin on the head with the butt of the knife. Tormin fell to the floor. He turned to Gul Tormin's men as he secured Tormin's knife to his belt, intending to keep it. "Get him off my ship. You have ten minutes to get your ships out of my line of fire, before I start blasting the lot of you."

The Cardassians hustled to get their Captain out of Garcia's way before he changed his mind.

Garcia returned to Gil Shuliette and picked her up, activating his badge.

"Emergency transport, site to site, sick bay," Garcia ordered.

By the time Garcia had finished treating Gil Shuliette's wounds, Undine and Kitara had arrived, accompanied by Trolos. They waited for him to give his attention. He signed a chart and handed it to the nurse.

"She's stabilized, but keep me informed of any changes," Garcia said, and then turned to face his audience.

"Is she?" Kitara asked the question both she and Undine wanted to know.

"Yes," Garcia said. "The fetus was unharmed."

"You actually care for this creature?" Trolos asked.

"She did not ask for any of this," Garcia said.

"Still, she is a Cardassian," Trolos said. "If she doesn't try to kill you, her child will. There is nothing good that can come from this."

"I don't share your philosophy," Garcia said. "And if you don't like mine, you can be on your way."

Trolos stepped closer to Garcia. "You saw Tormin going for his knife before I or my warriors did," Trolos said.

"I didn't see him going for his knife," Garcia argued. "I just lost my temper at the same time Tormin made his knife available for me to use against him."

Trolos laughed. "Your secret is safe with me. You could have claimed your honor in that victory and I would not have suspected anything other than what I saw. What sort of human aberration are you?"

"I don't know," Garcia said. "I'm still searching for that answer."

Trolos pushed Garcia playfully. "Good answer. The Klingon challenge will help you find clarity. Dine with me this night."

“Perhaps another night,” Garcia said, and then hit Trolos square on the jaw with a fist, dropping him to the floor. Trolos eyes grew wide with surprise. “Don’t ever insult my First Officer again. Do we have an understanding?”

Trolos stood up, slowly. “She has taught you well,” he said. “When your business with Gowron and the Counsel is through, you and I are going to fight.”

“Loser buys the first round of drinks,” Garcia said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need a word with my officers.”

Trolos departed sickbay. Garcia noticed the two security officers waiting outside Sickbay that had been assigned to escort Trolos back to the transporter room. As soon as the doors shut, he turned to his two senior officers.

“I want an end to this,” Garcia said. “Senior Officers, both ships, in the conference room, one hour.”

Kitara and Undine didn’t even try to argue, something in his voice, in his quiet demeanor suggested he was going to have a way in this. They turned to go prepare for the meeting. Garcia turned to the nurse, thanked her for her assistance with a silent touch to the arm. He then departed Sickbay and sought out Lt. Kelly. He found her in her quarters and rang for admittance. She answered the door and went to attention on seeing that it was the Captain.

“At ease,” Garcia told her. “I would like to speak with you.”

Lt. Kelly withdrew into her quarters and he followed. She went back to the couch where she had been sitting in the dark, surrounded by used tissues. A new box of tissues just freshly opened sat next to her.

“I am sorry for what happened,” Garcia said.

Lt. Kelly refused to look at him.

“I know that’s not enough,” Garcia said.

“Did you kill it?” Lt. Kelly asked.

“No,” Garcia said. “I was unable.”

“It didn’t stop you from killing mine,” Lt. Kelly said, her eyes meeting his with a vengeance.

“How would you like me to fix this?” Garcia asked.

“I want my child back!” Lt. Kelly demanded.

“You have refused to pursue legal justice against me,” Garcia said.

“Like I would win,” Lt. Kelly said, drawing her feet up on the couch and hugging her knees. “They’ll just cover it up, or give you a pass, saying you were not of sound mind and body, or some such nonsense. You’re one of Eric Pressman’s men.”

“Excuse me?” Garcia asked. “Look, Lt. Kelly. Janet. I can not change what I’ve done. And I know that there is nothing I can do to repair the damage or ease your grief. I can offer you a transfer.”

“Ah, just make me go away, too, uh?” Lt. Kelly asked. “No. I’m not going to let you off the hook that easy. I want to work close with you so every time you see me, by chance or by design, you will remember what I lost here. Besides, Admiral Pressman would not allow me to transfer and you know it.”

“How long have you known Pressman?” Garcia said.

“Since the Pegasus,” Lt. Kelly said. She saw by his expression that Garcia didn’t know. “The Pegasus was his ship.”

"I've not heard of this," Garcia said. With all his dealings with Greek gods, he wondered if it was just coincidence, or some hidden irony looking him in the face.

"Are you telling me that he didn't tell you about the prototype phasing cloak he developed?" Kelly asked suspiciously.

"No," Garcia said.

"Not like it matters," Kelly said. "I was serving with him on the Pegasus and when the crew discovered his intention, they mutinied. If it wasn't for Riker, Pressman and I wouldn't have made it off the ship alive. Only seven of us made it, escaping in a life pod. The Pegasus was destroyed. And I was ordered to keep silent. We all were."

"You kept silent?" Garcia asked. "Did you ever consider that if you had come forward that maybe we wouldn't be in this mess right now!"

"He would have killed me," Kelly said. "Just like he'd kill you if you were to double cross him. You don't know how many people work for him. People in high places. That's why I'm here. I couldn't refuse him. You don't know what Pressman's capable of. Oh, but then again, perhaps you do, being a baby killer and all."

Garcia fumed, but held back his first response. It wasn't like he could argue that he wasn't a baby killer. He had killed her child in favor of his own genetics. He had killed Simone's husband in a blood lust. He was a monster. He his hand sought the wrist band that wasn't there, and the power that his ship made possible.

"You mentioned Riker. Did you mean William T Riker?" Garcia asked, trying to ignore the tape playing in his head. "Captain Picard's Riker?"

"Is there any other?" Lt. Kelly asked.

Garcia bit his lip. Was Riker one of Pressman's sleeping agents? Would Riker Kill Picard or Worf just to teach Garcia a lesson? Or worse, would he kill Troi? Riker definitely knew that Garcia loved Troi. Garcia couldn't help but agree with Kelly's assessment of Pressman: he would have Riker use Garcia's love for Troi against him, especially if it gave either of them the edge. The hatred Garcia had held towards Riker as a youth reignited as he contemplated ways to eliminate the Riker threat and the rivalry for Troi's love. He was going to have to kill Riker. Too bad Troi wasn't a Vulcan, he thought, for then he might be able to warn her telepathically from a great distance. No, she would never hear his warning because she loved Riker too much. He would have to handle the Riker problem without Troi's knowledge, or she would interfere.

Garcia could clearly understand Kelly now that he realized they were in the same boat. He felt compassion for her that extended further than the loss of her child. She was trapped. She was just as trapped as he was. The only difference that he could see was that she was resigned to her fate, where he was still ready to fight to the death. The fact that he seemed to have no qualms about killing people frightened him. He couldn't remember having ever felt this in his youth, outside the context of telling a story. Anger, certainly, but anger to the point of killing? Was this another symptom of having been plugged into the Kelvan technology? Or was it his training or the fact that he was actually Kelvan?

"Is there anything else?" Lt. Kelly asked, interrupting Garcia's brooding.

"Is there anything I can do?" Garcia tried, his words failing him partly due to his Riker tangent, but mostly because there was nothing he could do to make this right with Kelly.

“You can’t give me what I want,” Lt. Kelly snapped. “And I’m not going to be your friend, or act like everything is okay, and I’m certainly not going to become one of your harem girls and act like we’re some big, happy family, or a loving mother like Rivan, and bow to your every whim. I’m going to do my job and you’re going to be my senior officer and that is the only relationship you and I are going to have, so you might as well take all those romantic fantasies you obviously hold for me and throw them out of your head, because I’m not game. And you’re obviously going to keep the kid, whether I agree to it or not. Well, I want nothing to do with it. Kill it, keep it, do whatever you’re going to do, but don’t ask me to be involved.”

“You finished?” Garcia asked.

“What did you expect to hear?” Lt. Kelly demanded, standing up defensively. “Oh, Captain, you’re so wonderful, I don’t hold any animosity towards you. I love you. Now get the hell out of my quarters before I call security and file harassment charges against you.”

Garcia nodded, turned, and departed Kelly’s quarters. He walked the corridor heading for the conference room, squeezing his left wrist. He allowed his anger and frustration at the situation to strengthen his grudge against Commander William T Riker. Somehow, if he could only twist reality so as to make Riker responsible for all his woes, life would be so much easier, but he was not yet at that point. Riker was a threat, but nothing more than that. If he could prove Riker and Pressman were conducting illegal experiments by finding the Pegasus, he could take them both out of the game without firing a shot.

“Losira, get me everything you have on the Pegasus, Pressman, and Riker,” Garcia said in a private email he sent to Losira via his implant. Instead of trying to get a few more moments of sleep, he spent his time on research.



Garcia was sitting alone in the conference room, reading over the files concerning the Pegasus as his Officers started to arrive. The fact that Garcia was now at war with Apollo only made the irony that Eric Pressman’s ship was named after a Greek myth more prominent in his head. Irony, coincidence, or synchronicity always disturbed him and he wanted to find deeper meaning, as most humans do in such situations. As for the Pegasus and the crew, Garcia saw it the same way the judge advocate ruling over Captain’s Pressman’s loss; the lack of evidence could be nothing more than incriminating. Judge Advocate Lance Eisenmann had expressed his suspicion that he believed Pressman’s crew had mutinied, based on the unconvincing testimony provided by the seven survivors and by the surprising lack of physical evidence to that event. Coincidence, synchronicity, possibly, but a damn cover up was more likely.

A few Officers arrived together in their little click, chatting amongst themselves. They became instantly silent as they assessed the mood of the room, and came in tentatively. Many found it strange that Garcia sat alone, apparently staring out towards space, his chin resting in his hand, an elbow on the arm of his chair. His brooding filled the room with thick malaise that was almost tangible. All had seen his moods of late, and their were rumors that he was going through Pon Far. There were counters to that rumor that he was going through with-drawls from using the Kelvan computer, and there were rumors that he was just simply over stressed, or that he was punishing himself for the crimes he committed while under the influence of Kelvan technology. But as bad as he

had been lately, they all wanted to see him as a good person who was just temporarily lost, so they were doing their best to be patient and understanding. Not to mention, he was their commanding officer, so very few were willing to broach the subject with him personally. Some saw it as evidence that such a young man should not be made Captain, waiting for him to make a significant mistake so they could justify taking him out of service.

“Did someone die?” Owens asked.

Someone slapped Owens and motioned him to be quiet. Garcia kept on reading via his implant. When Lt. Nancy Carter and her ex-husband Boris Chekov entered, Garcia stood up and offered Nancy his chair.

“No, I’ll stand,” Carter said.

The two closest officers surrendered their chairs to the guests.

“Thank you,” Garcia told them, looking around the room to count if everyone was now present and accounted for. At least twelve officers were forced to remain standing. Garcia rubbed his forehead, wondering how he was going to start this. He turned to Trini. “Lt., make the transcripts of this conference available to any personnel who wants to follow along in real time. Anyone on duty that can’t read, can catch it later, make it mandatory reading. Questions can be fielded to department heads following the meeting.”

Garcia used his chair for a prop, something to hide behind as he took in a deep breath before the final plunge. “Here’s the deal,” Garcia said. “I’ve been treading water for too long and now I’m in over my head. I need your help. Several months ago I was recruited by Starfleet Intelligence for a number of qualifying reasons we can get into at another session, with a top secret mission to spy on our enemies. To facilitate that endeavor, I was put in command of prototype starship, a starburst class ship, basic specs and blue prints now available to your PADDs if you brought them, and on the screens behind me. You will find a list of attributes of the ship with the files you’re receiving. Take special note that it has a functional phasing cloak, which is in violation of Treaty of Algeron. Further, there are five remaining Starburst weapons, which were developed to take out enemies, specifically the Borg. The Starburst weapon is basically a modified Genesis Device, minus the life creating effects, and is capable of taking out an entire solar system in one shot. When I rescued those of you from the Einstein, I was in the process of recovering two of those weapons that had been stolen before I was officially placed in command of the New Constitution, which I had originally hijacked from dry dock mostly to cover my tracks and provide me and my crew an alternative out.”

Garcia flexed his fingers against the back of the chair while he allowed this information to sink in. “Many of you were led to believe that the Starburst project involved the Klingon ship the SaLing and that it was destroyed. That was a deception. The SaLing was not destroyed and had nothing to do with the Path Finder, the Starburst class ship. Further, the SaLing is still at my disposal even as we speak and has been rechristened the IKV Tempest. To be more specific, it is currently at Pollux Five, raiding a Preserver supply cache. The ship aft of us posing as the Tempest is the Path Finder, utilizing holographic technology to appear as the Tempest.

“You are aware that some of my Officers and I have engaged in war game exercises on holodeck one,” Garcia went on. “Those exercises are a ruse to provide my Away Teams with a cover story for extracurricular missions involving the Path Finder, or

the Tempest, or any one of the other ships at my disposal. There are currently five ships, including this one. All five ships are connected via wormhole technology, allowing us to go from ship to ship as easily as stepping over the threshold of that door. The data on this technology is now available to you. The technology is cloaked and only those wearing these rings can see the Gates. So, no, we're not Free Masons, but it is a club, so to speak."

Owens raised his hand to ask a question.

"Not yet, Lt.," Garcia said, disappointed his attempt at Mason humor had not been as strong as he anticipated. "I was recently at Pollux V and had a confrontation with Apollo, a Preserver who first introduced himself to Kirk some hundred years ago. Eight Klingons died in that encounter. Though I killed Apollo, he is not dead, and we are going to have more encounters with him. Well, I am for sure. If any of you stick with me, you can expect to be in for a rough ride. For reasons unbeknownst to me, I am the convergence point for a temporal war that was raged, is currently being raged, and will be raged, depending on how you view temporal mechanics. Something happened in this war that pissed off a Gorn somewhere, some-when, somehow, and that is why the Gorn, or more specifically, a faction thereof, intend to kill me."

Garcia threw the stone spear head on the table. "One of the gods, Harmonia, think Greek gods, or Preservers, one and the same group, gave that to Lt. Carter and informed her that this particular group of Gorns are responsible for the abduction of my daughter Tama Orleans and Boris' and Nancy's daughter, and my friend, Nikita Carter. Before the spearhead evidence came to light, which may or may not be truth, I believed Admiral Eric Pressman responsible for the abduction of my daughter and Niki. I thought this because he recruited me into this nightmare and because I'm refusing to play nicely with him after the discovery of the illegal technology which I was to utilize to perform my job. Further, Pressman recently threatened me, saying that if I didn't play ball, people I know would start suffering the consequences. There is good reason to believe everyone assigned to the Path Finder had orders to kill everyone else if the Path Finder's mission was put in jeopardy, but we seemed to have found a way to manage our truce and have agreed on certain end goals. My latest orders, though, given to me by Eric Pressman in person, are to find a secret Cardassian military research lab, copy all the research, destroy the lab, and assassinate the lead research department head, a Cardassian by the name of Sio Trelengton. I have a week to conclude this mission objective."

Lt. Owens raised his hand.

"Not yet, Lt.," Garcia said. "Destroying the technology I have, the Path Finder, is not an option. First, I don't want to destroy the evidence for that makes me complicit in furthering Pressman's agenda. Two, the computer system on Path Finder is so sophisticated that it has become sentient and destroying it would be tantamount to murder. Three, I am telepathically linked to that computer system and killing it may cause me some harm, besides the fact I've grown a little attached to it, no pun intended. Four, divulging this information about its existence could start a war with the Romulans and the Klingons simultaneously. And five, I have evidence to support the conclusion that my ship is not the only ship with phasing-cloak technology, which means Pressman may have other ships at his disposal. If this is so, we will need my ship to determine how many others and how deep this cancer goes. Lt. Janet Kelly was one of the seven survivors of the USS Pegasus and she claims that the Pegasus had a working phasing

cloak. Supposedly the Pegasus suffered a warp core breach and all hands were lost minus the seven that escaped in a life pod, but I don't believe that for one second. There was no debris field, and even a warp core breach would leave something behind, if not tangible, then at least a radio wave signature. We need to find that ship and we need to put an end to Pressman's and Sheaar's reign of black ops terror."

Owens started to raise his hand.

"No," Garcia said. "The problems are these: I want to find my daughter, I'm being summoned by Gowron and the Counsel, which is no doubt maneuvering on Admiral Sheaar's part to beat me into submission, or kill me out right, the war with the gods, setting up a planetary defense of planet Bliss and the new colony of Grays, taking care of the Trelengton problem, maintaining appearances with Star Fleet and the New Constitution, all the while avoiding confrontations with the Gorn, the Cardassians, and the Kelvan. Just recently I discovered that the Kelvan are still in play, as well. One of them has made a temporary alliance with Pressman and I have no doubt that she is the one responsible for making Kelvan technology so addictive to me. Her name is Kelinda and she is directly responsible for making me who I am, by selecting genes, neural imprinting, and inserting the Deanna Troi rogue program that you have all no doubt heard of, and perhaps seen me speaking to when you thought I was talking to myself. I have no doubt left things out of my ramblings, but this is where we are, and you all have a choice to make. Do you continue to act as my crew and help me resolve these conflicts in a manner Star Fleet would ultimately approve, or do you abandon ship and run for your lives. I'm all for the running for my life bit and don't blame any of you who decide to do so, but that isn't an option for me at this point."

Garcia sat down and put his hands on the table, palms down. "Any questions?" Garcia asked, looking first to Lt. Owens.

Lt. Owens no longer seemed interested in being the first to ask a question. In fact, no one seemed eager to respond. The Path Finder's crew were already privy to much of the Garcia dilemma, so mostly it was just a wait to see how the Einstein's crew would react. Garcia sighed.

"If those of you from the Einstein need more time to respond, we can convene this meeting for now," Garcia said. "That's a reasonable thing to do at any rate. We can also go our separate ways, now. None of you signed up for this, so, all of those not wishing to partake in this fiasco, I would be willing to make the New Constitution available to fly all of you to the nearest Starbase for reassignment."

One of the Einstein original crew members, a Bajoran, raised a hand.

"Zural, Monce," Garcia called on him.

He seemed please that Garcia knew his name and knew the protocols for calling his name. "At the risk of calling into question my loyalty to Fleet," Zural said. "I would like to point out for the record that it wouldn't be a bad thing if Sio Trelengton were eliminated."

Quite a few protests were issued. Zural tried to defend his position by pointing out that not only had Sio butchered women in children at Bajor, but he had conducted genetic experiments that were still taking its toll on certain populations of Bajorans presently today. Garcia raised his hands to stop the dispute.

“That’s enough,” Garcia said. “When I call a meeting, people are free to state their opinions. Bottom line is, Lt., Star Fleet does not assassinate people, and we are Star Fleet Officers.”

“All I’m saying is that if Star Fleet Intelligence says to take the man out, they must have a reason,” Zural said.

“I agree,” said Tuer. “It is not unreasonable to sabotage a research lab and kill a scientist in the act of creating bio terror. It doesn’t have to be a sniper shot. We can allow Sio to see us coming and he can defend himself if he is able. If he is not, then he should not have engaged in warfare to begin with.”

“And when the Federation or the Klingon Empire officially declares war on the Cardassians, I will condone that operation,” Garcia said. “Until then, I can’t justify killing him. I don’t have a problem, on the other hand, of making his research agenda public and allowing the crucible of public opinion to neutralize him.”

“Public opinion won’t phase him in the least,” Tuer said. “Otherwise the information of the atrocities that he committed on Bajor would have already immobilized him.”

“Maybe it did,” Smith said. “He’s no longer at Bajor, but it is still being occupied.”

“The Bajorans have made all sorts of claims against the man,” Lt. Owens said. “It doesn’t mean it’s accurate. Further, the court of public opinion is hardly fair.”

“And genetic warfare is fair?” Zural asked.

“What I’m saying is, if we have intel gathering capabilities, lets use that to determine whether Sio is guilty or not, and then take it to the authorities,” Owens said.

“We are the authorities,” Tuer said. “And our justice will be swift.”

“That’s not justice,” Owens said.

“You can’t just go to the Cardassian authorities and say look, he is doing bad stuff,” Zural said. “Their government condones what he’s doing.”

“Then we take the information to the Federation and they push for social reform in the Cardassian government,” Owens said.

“Meanwhile, people go on dying due to his experiments,” Zural said. “And what happens if the Cardassians don’t change? What if while we wait for social paradigms to shift he develops a genetic agent able to wipe out the entirety of our species?”

“I suppose nothing happens or maybe eventually there will be a war,” Owens said.

“We could just save a step and kill him now,” Tuer said. “That would eliminate the threat and save lives by avoiding a costly war.”

“We have more important things to be discussing here,” Anderson interrupted. “What about the phasing cloak?”

More chaos ensued which had to be interrupted by Garcia. “Nothing is going to be decided at this time,” Garcia said. “There is too much at stake for a quick decision. I want a debate, I want all of you to have time to discuss this with each other, and I want some clear cut, reasonable options for all of us that doesn’t end up with all of us dead or in prison. Until we come up with those resolutions, the current command structure stays in place. You all understand the dangers of letting these secrets out, so lets try to confine them, at least for now, to amongst ourselves. That’ll be all. Dismissed. Kitara, your ship. I’m going to the Tempest. Nancy and Boris, I would like you to join me.”

“Why are you going to the Tempest?” Undine asked.

“I want to speak with god and see if she can confirm that the Gorn are responsible for the abductions,” Garcia said.

“May I go?” Owens asked.

“Why not,” Garcia said. “Tuer, you’re going as well. I want the entire Away Team equipped with projectile weapons, just in case we have another demon encounter.”

“Demon encounter?” Boris asked.

“Hell cats or some such nonsense. We haven’t exactly classified them as of yet,” Garcia said.

“Are you taking the orbs so you can manifest Duana and Ilona?” Kitara asked.

“Are you kidding?” Garcia asked. “I’m never leaving home without them.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

The number of Voth soldiers guarding the prisoners had increased since they were initially locked up. Garcia paced the cell, contemplating their escape, but all his plans required severe injury or death to the Voth soldiers. It would require that level of harm in order to overcome their superior strength, so there would be no half measures with creatures three times as strong as a human. It was victory or death. Seven had come to the same conclusions as Garcia, but she had done so without pacing or otherwise seeming distressed. Elika proved to be the most content of the group.

Garcia turned at the sound of commotions and welcomed the change. Gilgamesh and his grand daughter Ketimer entered the holding area, accompanied by a group of Voth. They all approached the cell where the prisoners were being kept, most of them as timid as medical interns new to doing rounds would be. Ketimer did not look happy.

“I’ve been asked to collect some tissue samples,” Gilgamesh said. “Will you give them without issues?”

“It depends on the amount and the tissue type,” Garcia said.

“Blood, blood gasses, skin, hair, urine, feces,” Gilgamesh said. “From all of you. I will also need to makes scans.”

“Do you wish us to discard our clothing?” Seven asked.

“It isn’t necessary,” Gilgamesh said. “However, if your cultural bias towards modesty can be ignored, I have brought a professional photographer to document the event for posterity.”

“There won’t be any records remaining if you don’t heed my warning,” Garcia said.

“The asteroid dilemma is being fiercely debated,” Ketimer said. “I’m sorry about this part, but it was live tissue samples or they kill you to get a closer look.”

“We’ll provide samples,” Garcia said. “I am a Doctor. Will you allow me to perform the procedures?”

“I’m sorry,” Gilgamesh said. “The results might be considered tainted or bias unless we do the work. I will be open to receiving any information you might provide that would reduce stress and or pain during the sample collection.”

Garcia nodded, offering himself up as the first guineas pig. More soldiers gathered, both inside and outside the cell. A table was set up and computer equipment brought in and activated. As Gilgamesh’s team went about the process of doing a complete scan on Garcia, Gilgamesh continued to ask questions.

“You and this female are the only two with implants,” Gilgamesh noted. “Is this a cultural bias? Are you leaders?”

“I received my implant to improve health,” Garcia said.

“My implants were inserted against my will by a species known as the Borg,” Seven said, allowing a technician to draw blood. “I must warn you. There is technology in my blood referred to as nannites, miniature machines capable of reproducing themselves. You must be extremely cautious when it comes to handling them. There could be adverse affects if you fail to contain them.”

The technician looked to Gilgamesh for instructions as she stepped away with the sample. Her hands shook as she disposed of the needle. The people working the scanning equipment finished with Garcia and moved onto Seven. The phlebotomist technician came to draw Garcia’s blood. He offered his arm to her and pointed to a vein.

“Don’t worry,” Garcia told her. “I don’t have any nannites in my blood, that I’m aware of, anyway. Doctor Gilgamesh, I was thinking, you could also analyze the natural flora and fauna growing on our skins. The bacterium would probably still be similar to present day bacterium, easy enough to categorize, and it might be interesting to see the changes and deviations that 20 plus millions years have had on them.”

“Indeed,” Gilgamesh agreed. “It is my intent to leave this computer with you when I am gone. You said you would be willing to provide us warp technology and the astronomers are interested in some of your formulas concerning stellar observation that you said you would provide them.”

“Specifically, they want to know if you have a universal theory of cosmology that confines all the forces of nature into one, eloquent equation,” Ketimer said. “ E equals MC squared is the simplest formula our society has come up with which all transporter technology is derived, but it hardly explains the quantum fluctuation and gravity at the micro levels of reality.”

“Sorry, I can’t help you with that one,” Garcia said. “And my offer for warp technology was conditional on you providing me and my people a spaceship. I would settle for just the opportunity to accompany you on your voyage.”

“You belong in the Delta Quadrant,” Seven of Nine said. “If you have a stellar map of reasonable accuracy, I can provide you the coordinates of the planet you are destined to inhabit.”

Gilgamesh looked to Garcia. “You said nothing of this. You said you knew nothing of our species?”

“He doesn’t know about this,” Seven said. “Before I encountered Garcia, I was on a Federation Starship lost in the Delta quadrant. We encountered your species. Your species is one of the most advance technological societies in the Delta quadrant, next to the Borg.”

“You are not telling me everything,” Gilgamesh said.

“I have given you the simplest explanation,” Seven said. “The full account would require several days, perhaps weeks, of explanation giving the necessary back ground information you lack and whatever tangents you bring about through unnecessary questioning.”

“So, you were in the Delta Quadrant and then you met Garcia,” Gilgamesh said.

“I was abducted by the alien species known as the Preservers,” Seven explained, becoming impatient. “So was Garcia. Garcia managed to escape his abductors and in the process freed me. While searching for a way to flee the Preservers, we came across technology which allowed us to come here. We did not know here was in our past, we simply knew that here was better than there. Or so we had thought,” she corrected as the technician made another stab for an artery in Seven’s wrist to get a sample of blood gasses.

“So, you and Garcia didn’t know each other before you met on the artifact,” Gilgamesh said. “Does this explain the different technology utilized in the implants?”

“Again, my implants came from a species known as the Borg,” Seven said.

“The Borg?” Gilgamesh asked.

“I was abducted by the Borg and turned into a drone, an automaton, doing the bidding of the collective,” Seven said.

“Was this before or after you were abducted by the Preservers?” Gilgamesh said.

Seven raised an eyebrow. "I see no further point in continuing this dialogue if you are not going to listen," Seven said.

"You're very adversarial," Gilgamesh said. "Is that the nature of all women?"

"Dad!" Ket said, appalled by her father's comment.

"Gil," Garcia interrupted. "We're being held against our will. You're taking specimens from us. We're all feeling a little adversarial."

"I'm trying to understand you," Gilgamesh said. "What you're telling me is different than what she's telling me."

"There is no disparity in what we have told you," Seven said. "Terra is going to be virtually destroyed by an asteroid collision, which will happen soon. Your species is going to relocate to the delta quadrant. These things have already happened."

"Sort of," Garcia said, trying to soften Seven's abruptness. "If we assume that I gave you warp technology and you were to go to the Delta Quadrant, then that would explain how Seven encountered your species there. Or, you could ignore our warnings, do nothing, and you don't go to the Delta Quadrant, which will create a paradox and your species just ceases to exist."

"Which makes us responsible for a change in the time line," Afu said.

"How can it be different than it already happened?" Gilgamesh asked.

"Time travel is an inherent problem with warping space for interstellar travel," Garcia said. "Our experience in interstellar travel has taught us to avoid these sorts of situations in order to maintain the continuity of the time line. Not to mention our sanity."

"What happens if you break the continuity of the time line?" Gilgamesh asked.

"The entire universe unravels and implodes," Afu said.

All the Voth became suddenly very concern. Garcia looked crossly at Afu.

"That's not funny," Garcia snapped at him.

"Yes it was," Afu said. "Did you see the look on their faces?"

"Gil, he's kidding. The ramifications for changing the time line seems to be the creation of alternative time lines. Several of our ships have experienced freak temporal and quantum storms which have allowed them to see and actually visit time lines that coexist with our present time line. It's really the only way to explain how Seven can maintain her memory of you in the Delta Quadrant while simultaneously preventing that reality from coming about. I don't know if our presence here stops you from going or helps you on your way, but if her memory is accurate, then I prefer that outcome to your extinction on this planet."

There was a commotion and the guards turned to find another human approaching them. None of the Voth soldiers were able to get their weapons before the new comer had incapacitated them with his own weapon. All the guards in the cell fell to the floor, as well. The man, wearing a 1968, Italian suit, turned to incapacitate the scientist and technicians gathering samples. They were hoping to flee, but they were just as trapped by the prison bars as their prisoners.

"Wait!" Garcia yelled.

The man was accompanied by a black cat that squeezed through the bars. It went right to Garcia and brushed up against his leg.

"You lied to me," Gilgamesh said. "There is yet another human present!"

"Gilgamesh, this person's name is Gary Seven," Garcia said. "And this is his cat, Isis."

“Cat?” Ketimer asked, grabbing up a camera from one of the techs. “A new species?”

“Cats are another mammal species that will evolve on this planet. Gary and Isis are time travelers, but not associated with us,” Garcia said. “Gary, what are you doing here?”

“I’ve come to prevent you from giving the Voth warp technology,” Gary said. “Doing that will change the face of the alpha quadrant. I can not permit that.”

“What are you saying?” Garcia demanded. “I already gave them technology and the timeline has been disrupted?”

“The Voth are destined to become extinct,” Gary said. “You will come with me now, or I will be forced to kill you in order to maintain the integrity of the time line as I know it.”

“Are all humans this violent?” Gilgamesh asked.

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As Kitara prepped the Away team that was to proceed to the Tempest, word came from Captain Glor of the Pa Nun that they had arrived at Iotia and there was a situation that required his presence. Garcia passed command to Kitara and was about to go through the Gateway to Iotia alone, but she over ruled him, passed the command on to Undine, and they went through the Gateway together, Duana and Ilona accompanying them. They arrived on Pa Nun, inside the mess hall, the only space big enough to house the Gateway the drones had built. They were met by a guard and were escorted straight way to the Bridge.

“Situation?” Garcia asked.

“We’re cloaked, in orbit around Iotia prime,” Captain Glor said. “And we’re monitoring a situation unfolding with the USS Memphis.”

“That would be the Star Fleet ship sent here to hold dialogues with the Iotians,” Kitara said.

Garcia nodded. He really appreciated how informed his First Officer was.

“The Memphis is being held in place by a combination of tractor beams and force fields,” Captain Glor said. “In the shape of a human hand.”

Garcia frowned. “On screen,” Garcia said. Indeed, the USS Memphis, an Ambassador Class Starship was being held by what appeared to be a human hand. “Have there been any demands made?”

“An entity claiming to be Apollo has demanded that the crew surrender the ship to him, or he will crush it and kill everyone on board,” Glor said.

“Their shields won’t be able to withstand the onslaught much longer,” Kitara said, observing the tactical display over the operator’s shoulder.

“Have you been able to identify the power source?” Garcia asked.

“Yes,” Glor said. “The force field and tractor beam is originating in an ancient ruin which lies buried underneath a modern day city of about two million people. We’ve narrowed it down to a city block.”

“Lovely,” Garcia said, crossing out the option of a phaser strike. “How long does the Memphis have.”

“Twenty minutes,” Kitara said.

“Glor, if you’ll hold your position here, we’ll be right back,” Garcia said, and departed the Bridge. Kitara followed him back to the Gateway. “This is getting old,” Garcia said, as they crossed over to the Path Finder.

“It is,” Kitara agreed. “What are we going to do?”

“I’m working on that,” Garcia said, as he closed down the gate. “Losira, STS to the bridge.”

A moment later Kitara and Garcia were on the Bridge. “Shields up, red alert. McKnight, set coordinates for Iotia Prime. Attention crew, prepare for a transwarp jump.”

The crew was rather efficient by now at handling the red alerts out of no where and scrambling to assume their places and a few of the Klingons were beginning to tolerate the transwarp jumps a little better. Only one Officer on the Bridge was sick to their stomach. Or more precise, only one had to use a plastic airsickness bag this time around. They arrived in Iotia orbit and Trini announced that subspace communications were being blocked.

“I know,” Garcia said. “Apollo doesn’t want the Memphis calling for help. Losira, I want you to project a holographic image of our ship, semi overlapping our ship so that the forward section of holograph is twenty meters forwards of the cone section. As soon as that’s ready, drop the secondary cloak, but maintain the primary cloak.”

Losira looked up and to the right and then nodded. “Ready,” she announced.

“Do it,” Garcia said. “And open hailing frequencies. Apollo, this is Garcia. I want you to release the Memphis now.”

A moment later Apollo appeared on the screen. “Your destruction of the Preserver base has left me stranded on this planet. I will have this Starship.”

“If you release the Memphis, I would be willing to offer you transportation to another planet,” Garcia offered.

“Like I’m going to trust you,” Apollo said. “You know as well as I do that my manifestation orb would be limited once I’m off the planet, away from the technology platform.”

“You either accept my offer, or you don’t get off this planet,” Garcia said.

“The Memphis shields just burned out,” Kitara said.

“Sensors have detected a transport from Iotia to the Bridge of the Memphis,” Undine reported. “They’re powering up their warp drive.”

“Target their engine nacelles,” Garcia said. “Fire.”

A torpedo flew from the Path Finder and struck true, separating the engine nacelle from its support beam. The Memphis pivoted about on impulse engines and returned fire.

“Take out their weapon systems,” Garcia ordered. “Fire phasers.”

Garcia was pleased with the accuracy and performance of his crew. The phaser strike was surgical perfect, and hopefully didn’t kill anyone.

“Direct hit to their weapon systems,” Kitara said, reigning in on her excitement.

“They’re still coming at us. They’re going to ram us,” Undine said.

“Helm, full reverse,” Garcia said. “Lower our shields and start beaming people off the Memphis.”

“We’re being hailed,” Trini said.

Garcia motioned her to put it on. Apollo appeared. “I will kill every one of these people if you do not surrender your ship to me,” Apollo said.

“No you want,” Garcia said. “Because the moment you do, I will destroy that ship and you with it. And if you don’t surrender now, I may just blow it up with you and everybody on it.”

“I want out of this system!” Apollo said.

“No, you want your HROV manifestation orb out of this system,” Garcia said. “Which means, what? Iotia doesn’t have an operational Gateway? That you’re isolated from the rest of your clan? How is it that a god of your caliber is suddenly in need of a starship? You seem pretty desperate. Desperate enough to negotiate, perhaps? Have the others banned you from jumping to another Orb, or do you appear at random when someone kills you? This is very interesting. It stimulates the scientific part of my brain.”

“You’re making assumptions that I am limited in my ability to strike back,” Apollo said. “I’m no longer rule bound when it comes to dealing with you.”

“Which means, you simply lack the technology to strike back,” Garcia said. “Surrender now and I’ll have you beamed over to my ship. It’s the only way you will get out of this system.”

Undine shot Garcia a look that suggested he was crazy.

“Why would I surrender, when I can just take your ship?” Apollo said.

Apollo disappeared from the Bridge of the Memphis and was suddenly on the Bridge of the Path Finder. He immediately unleashed his power on them, multiple, sustained lightening ripping from his finger tips and surrounding everyone on the Bridge, driving them all to their knees in pain. He turned to Garcia, who was resisting. Dramatically, Garcia stood completely unaffected and amused by Apollo’s display of power. The shock on Apollo’s face was priceless and then suddenly, the holographic image of the Bridge faded and Apollo found himself in space, twenty meters forward of the Path Finder. His body faded and he became just an illuminated manifestation orb. The orb began to accelerate away, heading back towards the only refuge available to it: Iotia.

“Fire phasers,” Garcia said.

The manifestation orb exploded, harmlessly, not even achieving orbit.

“McKnight, bring us along side the Memphis,” Garcia said. “Medical teams, stand by to transport. Lets move, people.”



Captain Mike Farrow was not happy. And Garcia was the object of his unhappiness.

“You fired on my ship!” Captain Farrow said.

“Your crew was incapacitated and your ship was being hijacked,” Garcia said. “I think I acted reasonably well. I think the fact that none of your crew was killed or seriously injured demonstrates the amount of restraint I used in containing the situation.”

“I had the situation under control,” Captain Farrow said.

“Really?” Garcia said.

“Yes, really,” Farrow said. “I expect you to tow my ship back to the nearest Starbase, where I intend to press charges against you.”

Garcia gritted his teeth, wanting to scream, “I just saved your ship and your crew!” Instead, Garcia forced himself to remain calm. “I’m sorry, but I have other obligations to tend to. I will stay long enough to ensure that your ship is capable of minimum warp and then I will be on my way.”

“Why don’t we just call Star Fleet Command now and see if your obligations don’t change,” Captain Farrow said.

“Well, I would love to help you with that,” Garcia said. “But, whatever it was that Apollo used to jam your communications seems to have burned out your subspace antennae array and you don’t have the security clearance to use mine. I would be willing, however, to send Star Fleet a message to alert them of your grievance at my next available opportunity.”

“I want you off my ship,” Captain Farrow said.

“Are you saying you want me off your ship, or me and my crew off your ship, because if it’s the latter, I want it on the record that you are refusing my assistance in affecting repairs,” Garcia said. “Quite frankly, you’re in no condition to perform all of this on your own, it’ll just take you longer, but since the things I need to be doing require my attention now, I will be happy to leave you here to manage on your own.”

Mike Farrow approached Garcia. “You are off my ship. As for your crew assisting in repairs, they will remain and perform their duties as per Star Fleet regs concerning ship’s in distress, and you will remain here until I have repaired my subspace communication array. Is that understood?”

“I understand what is required of me according to regs,” Garcia said. He hit his comm. badge and had himself beamed back to the ship. Tatiana smiled at him, trying to give him a peaceful moment. “Beam me down to the planet, will you?” he asked.

A moment later he was standing in a military conference room on Iotia, with the top command of the planet assembled before him. Captain Eggers of the Iotian aircraft carrier ‘Enterprise’ was present, along with General Hammond, and a man that went by the name Jay, who had been one of Garcia’s greatest opponents when he was on Iotia last, but now they were good friends. They all met him affectionately.

“We didn’t expect to see you back so soon,” General Hammond said.

“But we’re glad you’re here,” Jay said. “We couldn’t get close enough to Apollo to take him out. He had turned all of New NewYork into slave labor, trying to create a vehicle capable of warp speed, and it was all we could do just to sabotage that operation.”

“We didn’t know that our efforts would jeopardize the Memphis,” Captain Eggers said.

“What happened to the Memphis wasn’t your fault,” Garcia said. “But we do need to send a team to excavate the ruins under New NewYork so that we can prevent this from happening again. There’s no telling how many gods might still be here attempting to affect cultural change.”

“There are others here?” General Hammond said.

“Possibly,” Garcia said. “I’m just rather surprised they don’t have a Gateway here. If there is a Gateway here, then that means Apollo is locked out and operating outside of his given authority in his pursuit to exact revenge against me.”

“If that’s so, then you have some gods on your side,” Jay said.

“I haven’t seen any evidence of that,” Garcia said. “None the less, I want to set up a base of operation here, if it’s okay with you. What that means is, I will construct a lesser Gateway capable of allowing me to come and go, regardless of where I am in the Galaxy. This way I can monitor the excavation of the ruins and guide you with that project, but also, I will teach you how to use the Gateway to contact me if another God shows up and tries to force you into slave labor. But the main reason I had originally

wanted to set up a Gateway here was so I could be involved with any children I may have coming. I'm doing this on my own, outside Star Fleet's jurisdiction and knowledge, if you understand what I mean."

"I understand. And, we know about your offspring. Susana is with child," General Hammond said. "She's on the base now, if you want to see her."

"She's on the base?" Garcia asked.

"We brought in most of the women you were with," Jay said. "For their protection."

"A woman, a Jenna Williams, claimed to be carrying your child and was killed by Apollo," Hammond said. "After that happened, I brought the Susanna here for her own safety. It didn't make sense to bring them all here, since we feared our base might be compromised by Apollo worshipers."

Garcia frowned, feeling sorry for the woman and her unborn child. He didn't recognize her name, so perhaps she had just been crazy, or had wanted so desperately to change her economic position that she had made the claim. "There were a few people I was intimate with here," Garcia said, simply confirming what the Iotians already knew to be true. "And apparently the male birth control I was taking was ineffective, so I imagine I'm going to be a father a few times over. The USS Memphis was going to check in with these women for me, but I wanted to set up some kind of financial arrangement so that none of mine would lack for support. But, also, they may have some medical needs that you wouldn't be able to help with. There's some biological variables due to the complexity of my genetics... I just want to be involved."

"Tammias," General Hammond said. "You don't have to say another word. We will do anything to help you in this. We owe you our lives."

"No, you don't owe me anything," Garcia said. "I'm asking you to allow me access, and in exchange, I'm going to help you on your way towards warp drive. This is just between us. Star Fleet would not approve of this trade, but quite frankly, I need your help with this, and maybe more down the road, based on my growing needs. I really..."

"Don't say anything else," Jay said, putting a hand on Garcia's shoulder. "We're here for you."

"Thank you," Garcia said.

"Come on," Jay said. "Let me take you to see Ms. Hoff."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

It took two days, of round the clock shifts, to get the Memphis up to its minimum specs that would allow Garcia to legally be able to depart without fear of repercussions. The moment Farrow's subspace radio was up and working, he was on the horn to Star Fleet. Meanwhile, Garcia had passed a request to the Queen for a couple of drones to establish a Gateway on Iotia and to explore the ancient ruins for anything useful. What he got was a couple dozen and they immediately went to work planet side on the Gateway, while simultaneously upgrading the Pa Nun. Since the Grays were coming from the Tempest, and Garcia had business there, he put together an Away Team to go investigate where all the Grays were coming from.

Garcia and his Away Team arrived at the Tempest and were met by Captain Gowr and a child who appeared to be six years of age. Her facial features suggested that she was a Human Gray hybrid. She had a slight pug nose, semi fluorescent blond hair, a mouth that resembled a character from a Japanese anime book, the slightest hint of Vulcan ears, and large, black, almond shaped eyes, with no visible iris. There were perhaps three dozen Gray drones pushing equipment about the landing bay.

"Admiral Garcia," Gowr said. "These things are crawling all over my ship! Your ship. Our ship."

"It was necessary to pass the drones through a duplicator recovered from the cache, in order to expedite the removal of technology," the hybrid said.

"And who are you?" Garcia asked.

Nancy Carter let out a start as one of the Gray drones touched her, encouraging her to move aside. The whole Away Team moved to allow the drones room to push equipment up the ramp towards the Gate and beyond.

"Tam!" Carter said. "Those are the ones from the artifact? The ones we rescued?"

"Yes," Garcia answered, and then turned his attention to the hybrid. "But I haven't met you," he told the Human Gray hybrid.

"Technically, you have," the hybrid said. "I am the first daughter of the Gray Queen, Princess Okuda. My growth has been accelerated to facilitate communications between you and the Queen. I know all that she knows. I know all that you knew from the point you became one with the Queen. I am your daughter."

"You certainly get around," Tuer said.

"That's the truth," Kletsova agreed.

"Progress report?" Garcia asked Gowr, ignoring the peanut gallery.

"We will be done shifting technology from the cache back to planet Bliss in two hours," Okuda answered for Gowr.

"They're very efficient workers," Gowr said. "It's been all I can do to keep them from giving the Tempest a total makeover."

"Do you not want the Tempest to be as versatile as the Path Finder?" Okuda asked.

"No," Garcia said. "I want the Tempest to remain as I left it."

"Very well," Okuda said. "I will have the Grays undo the modifications to the cloaking device and shields."

"Now, hold on just a moment," Gowr said. "We could leave those in place. Couldn't we?"

“What kind of modifications?” Garcia asked.

“The shield functionality was improved five hundred percent,” Okuda said. “That should provide sufficient defense against the gods should they attack. The caveat being they attack one at a time. It will also prevent the Kelvan from incapacitating the crew, should you encounter them again. We’ve also modified the transporters so you can transport with shields operating, except when maximum power is applied to the shields, for that setting is what will block out a Kelvan transporter. I was about to instruct the Grays to proceed in upgrading the warp drive, making this ship capable of transwarp jumps. I can also provide communication nodes to each of your ships that would allow Losira to be present on all of your ships simultaneously without using the Gateways. Every time we utilize the wormhole technology to pass communication signals through, it draws the attention of the gods. We should minimize the time that the Gates are opened.”

“Proceed with all that,” Garcia said. “Losira will probably appreciate being able to visit the other ships and it would make communicating with my various team leaders easier. Just no phasing cloak.”

Princess Okuda nodded. “With your permission, I would also like to continue upgrading the Pa Nun and the shields on the Path Finder.”

Garcia nodded. If his ships were going to be grabbed by the hands of gods, well, he wanted them to have a chance to resist. He couldn’t allow what had happened to the Memphis to happen to his people. And preventing the Kelvan from beaming in or beaming people off was a nice treat, too.

“Any more manifestation orbs?” Duana asked.

The Princess exchanged glances with Duana and then turned her attention back to Garcia. “The gods are stingy with manifestation orb technology. The orbs provide the gods with their primary access points to this universe. Without the orbs, they would require willing hosts of sufficient telepathic strength to maintain a connection with their minds outside the known Universe.”

“How can something exist outside the known universe?” Boris asked. “That’s impossible. Everything is what it is. There is no outside.”

“Belief is unnecessary,” the Princess told him.

Boris was angry by the answer and how easily the child, alien though it was, dismissed his statement. “Garcia, we’re wasting time,” Boris said, anger blushing his cheeks. “All these tangents you keep going off on. We need to get back to rescuing my daughter.”

“I haven’t forgotten about that,” Garcia assured him. He turned to Gowr. “Where’s Athena?”

“She and Aahla are on the planet’s surface,” Gowr said.

“Prep a shuttle,” Garcia said.

“Are you purposely wasting time? Use the damn transporters!” Boris said.

“The transporters would be more efficient,” Princess Okuda agreed.

Garcia rubbed his forehead, fighting his reluctance to be transported. He had used the transporters too much in the last couple of days. And he could justify taking the shuttle because he could get a thirty minute nap in. Of course, he also wanted to know what he wanted to know as soon as humanly possible, and after all the delays in getting here, the transporter expedited that outcome. “Fine. Site to site,” Garcia said.

A moment later Garcia's Away Team, plus the Princess and Gowr, were on the surface of the planet. The stench of the previous battle was still in the air, made worse by the fires. The Grays had piled the bodies of demons and were burning them. Most of the Grays were presently working around what appeared to be a large tomb, removing items, and scurrying to and fro the same as ants might. Garcia saw Athena sitting on the large marble stone chair, supervising the theft of the cache. Her two companions had been eating, but they came to her side as soon as Garcia's team appeared. Aahla sat beside Athena's chair, resting in the manner of a large cat. Garcia led the way as they approached the gods, Athena and Aahla. Athena focused on Garcia as they approached, but she did not bother to stand.

"Had the Iotians been more technologically advanced, Apollo would have beaten you. If he were on Earth, he would have taken over Earth's complete technological infrastructure and used it to destroy you and all those you care about. The greater the technology at his disposal, the greater the threat," Athena said. "You have been extremely lucky, but your luck will eventually run out and I can not protect you from him if you refuse to ignore my request. Are you prepared to finalize our deal?"

Garcia retrieved a small vial from his pocket and handed it to her. "You know where to put it, right?"

Athena blushed with anger and embarrassment and then threw the vial at Garcia. He didn't bother to catch it.

"This is not the way it will be done. We will engage in rituals," Athena said.

"I don't think so," Garcia said.

"We have a deal," Athena said.

"I agreed to father a child with you, I did not agree to rituals," Garcia said.

"It is necessary for us to consummate our relationship in order to create a child. It is also necessary to engage in rituals in order to formalize the truce," Athena said. "This has been the way of Kings and Queens for all of time. Any other method invalidates the claim."

"I'm not a King," Garcia said.

Princess Okuda looked to Garcia. "Yes you are, father," Okuda said. "And this truce is necessary to provide the colony sufficient time to grow."

"You do understand that the truce is only in effect for as long as you are alive," Athena said.

"No, I was expecting the truce to last a little longer than that," Garcia said.

"Why do you think the gods want you dead?" Aahla asked. Only Garcia, the Princess, and Athena heard the question. Everyone else heard a tiger's growl.

"Because they're bored and have nothing better to do with all eternity than to make my life miserable?" Garcia asked.

"Even with your Kelvan brain, your mind is inadequate to grasp the bigger picture," Athena said. "You must simply trust that I have your best interest at heart."

Garcia laughed. "I'd rather not," he said. "We'll discuss this another time. How did Apollo get trapped on Iotia?"

"You destroyed Hades base of operation," Athena said.

"You didn't have a Preserver base on Iotia? You had technology there. Why not a Gateway?" Garcia asked.

“Too many cultures have discovered hidden Gateways and used our technology against us,” Athena said. “In order to prevent that, we isolated Gateways off the habitable planets to maintain better security. When you destroyed Hades’ base, you destroyed the only functional Gateway in that system.”

It was almost exactly as Garcia had imagined. Garcia removed the stone spear head from his pocket and handed it to Athena. “Can you explain this?”

Athena frowned. “What would you like to know about it? I can tell you when the atoms were formed in the heart of a star, when they were flung out and crystallized into this composition, where they pooled, when and where each molecule was reheated and cooled again into this crystallized form. I can tell you where it laid waiting for sentience to come cull the excess to create this tool.”

“Is it of Gorn heritage, or is it a red herring,” Garcia asked.

“It is a stone, not a herring,” Athena said.

Garcia sighed. “A person claiming to be Harmonia gave this to Nancy Carter and said the people who made this kidnapped my daughter and hers. Can you verify this?”

“It was not Harmonia that presented this to Carter,” Athena said.

“How do you know?” Garcia asked.

“Because Harmonia likes you. She would have insisted on delivering the object and message in person,” Athena said. “That, and Harmonia no longer has a manifestation orb on Earth. This stone is of Earth origins, on the order of twenty plus million years since it was carved.”

“That’s impossible,” Garcia and Boris said simultaneously.

“If you are unable or unwilling to believe the gods, then who else will you go to?” Athena said.

“Great question,” Garcia said. “Because in all the stories I know of gods and mortal mixing, it never faired too well for the mortals involved. And I happen to be the mortal involved here and I don’t wish to go the way of Odysseus. And I know my crew doesn’t want to go the way of Odysseus’ crew, because almost all of them end up dead. And though Odysseus’ men start out fairly smart, they must be drinking from led cups, because by the end of it, Odysseus is the only one learning, and they die because they’re getting dumber.”

“You could use some of the humility Odysseus learned through his interactions with us,” Athena said.

“We didn’t come here to discuss literature,” Boris interjected. “We came to find clues to my daughter’s whereabouts.”

“How can the stone be of Gorn origin and Earth origin simultaneously?” Carter asked. “Are you saying the Gorn evolved on Earth? And as Preservers, you felt compelled to relocate them to prevent them from going extinct with the dinosaurs?!”

“Can you keep your feet on the ground for two whole seconds!?” Boris snapped at her. “We’re trying to recover our daughter, not go off in a fantasy world with Garcia.”

“We’re standing in front of Athena herself and you want to question my perception of reality?” Nancy snapped back.

“I want my daughter back,” Boris said.

“So do I!” Nancy said.

“The message was not from Harmonia,” Athena explained. “But it is true, the Gorn have Nikita Carter and Tama Orleans Garcia.”

“There are other gods on Earth then?” Garcia asked. “Who are they? How can I find them?”

“There are gods on every major planet in the Milky Way Galaxy,” Athena said. “And you will not find those who do not want to be found. When they want you, they will find you. And most of them are too caught up in their own agendas to care about what happens to you. They will not interfere with Apollo unless they are to profit from doing so.”

“Well, someone is obviously helping him. Who else could have captured Nikita without getting caught on a security camera?” Garcia demanded. “I want you to help me recover my daughter and Niki,” Garcia said.

“I will not,” Athena said. “I will not be involved in the affairs of mortals.”

“You are involved in the affairs of mortals!” Garcia snapped. “To be more precise, you’re asking to have an affair with a mortal, pun intended.”

“Do not raise your voice at me,” Athena said.

“I need your help,” Garcia pleaded.

“Our agreement was for the truce and the return of Afu,” Athena said.

“Then I want to amend our agreement,” Garcia said.

“There will be no amendments or further negotiations until you and I have engaged in rituals and consummated our relationship,” Athena said. “And the further you delay in this, the more difficult your plight will become. Even as we speak Apollo is negotiating trades, buying a manifestation orb from another god that would place him in an arena near you. He is determined to remove you from the game, even at his own peril and loss of fortune.”

Garcia silently fumed, biting back on his words. He grabbed the stone back from Athena and then activated his communicator to call the ship. “Garcia to Tempest. Lock on to the Away Team. Jol yi-CHOO!”

The Away Team materialized back on the Tempest, in the cargo hold where they had been previously.

“As soon as the Grays are done planet side, you can bring Athena and Aahla back on board. Apparently there are a few objects that won’t fit through the Gateway that you will need to ferry back to planet Bliss. Just wait there for further instructions,” Garcia said to Gowr.

“We’re leaving?” Nancy Carter asked, grabbing Garcia by the arm. “What about finding our children?”

“Athena doesn’t have our children,” Garcia said. “The Gorn have them.”

“But she can help, right?” Nancy asked. “You just have to be a little nicer to her.”

“I’m not going to grovel to the likes of her,” Garcia said.

“You have made a deal with her,” Princess Okuda said. “You must follow through with your promise.”

“And I will,” Garcia said. “As soon as I have some free time, I will take care of business. Gowr, your ship. Carry on.”

Garcia recycled the Gateway to allow passage to the Path Finder and was the first one through the Gate, followed by Duana and Ilona. Nancy and Boris followed, resigned and uncertain of what to make of this. Tuer and Kletsova were the last ones through the Gate before it closed.

On the other side, Garcia arrived and was greeted by Losira, who insisted on her own bit of ritual. Once she was satisfied, she smiled at Garcia. "Welcome back."

"I want the entire compliment of Path Finder's crew from the New Constitution on board in five minutes," Garcia told her. "Prep the transwarp drive and notify Dryac we'll be making a jump in six minutes."

"Shall I notify the helm of the coordinates?" Losira asked.

"Cestus Three," Garcia said.

"The Gorn colony on Cestus Three is small," Boris said. "What makes you think you're going to find Niki there?"

"Intuition," Garcia said.

"You can't just go flying in there and start making accusations," Duana said. "You might start an uprising or a riot which would spill over into the Federation Colony on that planet."

"They've lived in peace for years on that planet," Ilona said. "I doubt anything Garcia does will inflame them into killing each other."

Duana looked crossly at Ilona. "Have you not been sharing the same brain space that I have? You've seen what happens when Garcia goes off on the war path half cocked."

"I didn't start this war," Garcia snapped. "But by god, I'm going to finish it."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The problem with transwarp jumping from point to point, Garcia decided, was that it allowed no travel time in which he could get a well earned nap. Though he had been able to get some sleep while visiting with his friends on Iotia, he had not slept as much as he should have. He had felt his time there was too short to spend the majority of it sleeping and he wanted to assure all his partners, especially Miss Hoff, that he would be there for them and his children, at least, as much as he could. This modern life was going to be the death of him! Lt. Tuer stared at Garcia as they took the turbolift up to the Bridge. Garcia stared at the door. If he didn't hate the transporter so much, he would have just executed another site to site, but he had already done one too many of those. They ought to mandate carrying a badge to gauge transporter use the same way old x-ray techs had to wear a badge to gauge their exposure to radiation. He wondered what would have happened to him if he was in transporter flux at the same moment that the Path Finder jumped to the Cestus planetary system. Probably nothing, but still, he wondered.

"You do understand that if the Gorn have your daughter and Nikita, we're being led into a trap," Tuer said, accompanying the Captain to the Bridge.

Garcia looked at the Officer as if he were stupid. "You're joking, right?" Garcia asked. The Turbolift doors opened and he stepped off the lift, heading for his chair. "The Gorn evolved from ambush predators. Of course it's a trap."

Kitara was in the command chair, examining one of the displays, a touch screen option allowed her to move items. Garcia tapped on her shoulder and she spun the chair to face him, and then relinquished the chair.

"Status?" Garcia asked.

"All Path Finder personnel are on board, plus several senior officers from the New Constitution who accompanied us to familiarize themselves with our procedures," Kitara said. "Coordinates are laid in for Cestus Three, waiting on your word to make the jump."

"Captain," Trini interrupted. The quality in her voice sounded urgent.

"What?" Garcia asked.

"Star Fleet has sent orders for us to accompany the USS Memphis to the nearest Starbase," Trini said.

"Just don't respond to that," Garcia said. He paused as she seemed in sudden distress by another message that was just coming through.

"We're getting a message through the Gateway from the Gray Queen," Trini said. "Planet Bliss is under attack. She's requesting help."

"Change coordinates to planet Bliss," Garcia said, extracting gum from a pocket on his sleeve. Here was another tangent keeping him from his goals, but he had made a promise to the Gray Queen to see to her security, and so, if she was being attacked, he was obligated to go. "Red alert, shields up, engage primary and secondary cloaking devices, and McKnight, make the jump as soon as you're set."

Garcia put the stick of gum in his mouth and reflexively took hold of the grips at the end of the arm wrest. The grips were covered with a Velcro sleeve to prevent him from accessing the Kelvan technology available to him. The sleeves were unnecessary though, because Loisra had electronically disengaged the mechanism. The stars on the screen began to drift as the Path Finder oriented itself into the direction it was about to jump. Kitara took her station at tactical, bracing herself for the jump which would give

her vertigo. Trini received a message from the Memphis, ordering them to stand down and prepare to be boarded. The stars paused on the screen and then suddenly they spun around a center point of the screen, star points becoming star lines, tracing circles around the center point, the lines becoming more numerous until the whole screen whited out. Then the star lines returned, winding down in the opposite direction of spool up, and then the star points returned. There was planet on the main view screen. Everyone was in their place when they arrived in the shadow of moon orbiting planet Bliss.

“Detecting five Orion pirate ships,” Kitara said, holding her stomach as if resisting the urge to be sick. “They’re outside the planetary defense, firing at the orbital batteries. The T’Pau is in orbit. Their shields are down to ten percent. They’ve sustained heavy damage.”

“Tempest skin, drop the secondary cloak,” Garcia said. “Trini, open hailing frequencies.”

Trini pointed to him when he was on. “Orion ships, you will cease your attack against my planet,” Garcia said.

“The ships are coming about,” Kitara said. “They’ll be in firing range in ten.”

“Arm AP torpedoes,” Garcia instructed, meaning anti-photon torpedoes.

“We’re being hailed,” Trini said.

Garcia brought both hands up, flexing his fingers in a gesture that said ‘give it to me.’ The lead pirate appeared on the main viewer. He was dressed in the typical accouterments one might find on an Orion pirate, including scraggly beard, ear rings, a gold tooth, and loose fitting garments that ballooned at the sleeves.

“So, you are Garcia the Great,” the man said.

“Right now, I’m Garcia the angry that’s come to kick your ass,” Garcia said. “What are you doing in this system?”

“I came to confirm for myself that Bliss was gone,” the man said. “Judging by your appearance here, the rumors must be true.”

“Listen, Jack Sparrow, you will leave this solar system at once,” Garcia instructed.

“Jack who?” he asked.

“I’m sorry the literary reference is lost on you, but the message is clear, you’re in my space, and I want you gone,” Garcia said.

“Or what? You’ll blast me out of the sky?” the man said. “On who’s authority will you do that? Star Fleets? The Klingon Empire? Your own? This system is claimed by no one. And, since Bliss is no longer here to hold onto his real-estate, I’m taking over.”

“This solar system has been deemed quarantined by Star Fleet,” Garcia said. “You will depart immediately, or I will be forced to open fire.”

“You don’t seem to understand the big picture,” the man said. “Bliss was a major player in the Orion Syndicate. With him gone, the whole power structure has been toppled. There’s going to be war, and more than likely, nine systems are going to suffer economic collapse and all because you wanted to put a dent in the Orion slave trafficking. This system is key to holding it all together, so unless you’re taking over as the new boss, you best just be on your way, Star Fleet.”

“Captain!” Kitara said. “Seven more ships uncloaking. Two Romulan warbirds and five Klingon K’tinga class ships.”

“You didn’t think I would come alone, did you?” the man said. “Thank you, Garcia, for making me the new Boss.”

“They’re firing,” Kitara said.

“Evasive,” Garcia said.

“AP torpedoes firing,” Losira said.

“McKnight, full impulse, towards the Orion Pirates,” Garcia said. “Kitar, unlock the Kelvan computer and give me access.”

“No,” Kitara said.

Undine shook her head, saying no as well. It would require two people to agree to make the Kelvan technology available to him, and Kitara and Undine were the highest ranking officers on his ship.

Losira agreed with their assessment. “The situation is still under control,” Losira said.

“I can stop this battle and save lives!” Garcia said.

“They knew the risk when they came here,” Kitara said. “Permission to return fire?”

“Commence firing,” Garcia ordered. “All batteries, fire at will. Losira, start the holographic projectiles orbiting our ship. McKnight, take us in closer to the bad guys.”

“Romulan and Klingons fighting together?!” Tuer cursed.

“They’re probably the Other Klingons,” Kitara said.

“Why aren’t you firing on that ship?” Garcia demanded.

The explanation came soon enough. Kitara was allowing for them to finish their battle maneuver, which resulted in the ship turning right into a torpedo that had already been fired. Garcia sat down in his chair and allowed his First Officer to finish conducting her battle. Kitara seemed to relish the opportunity to prove herself against so many opponents. The battle was over practically before it even started.

“Looks like we have more spare parts for the black market,” Trini said.

One of the ships erupted into a nova as its warp core breached.

“Well, less parts,” Trini corrected.

“Any survivors from the remaining ships?” Garcia asked.

“There are a few scattered life pods,” Kitara said. “And several ships showing life signs.”

“Kitara, take some shuttles and go round us up some prisoners. Treat them Star Fleet way, unless they resist, then treat them the Klingon way, but give them medical aid if they need it. McKnight, put us in orbit. Release Misan and Jurak from the Brig. All medical teams prepare for wounded from the T’Pau,” Garcia said, getting himself ready for work.

♪♪▶

After participating as a surgeon during the crisis, Vulcan Princess Simone greeted Garcia with more control than she had presented at their previous meeting. She seemed extremely secure in her self control, but then, there were others present and she may have just been putting on a good front. She introduced Garcia to Captain Renic in command of the T’Pau. He was a tall, thin Vulcan, pale lips, severe eyes, and a traditional hair cut that looked like someone put a bowl on his head and cut everything that wasn’t under the bowl.

“Thank you for your assistance,” Captain Renic said. “I can’t say that I have ever seen such a performance. Nor have I heard of a functional anti-photon torpedo system. I would be interested in touring your ship.”

“I hope to be able to offer you that privilege one day,” Garcia said. “But for now, the system is top secret.”

“I understand,” Captain Renic said.

Kitara approached, bringing the Ferengi Brock to Garcia’s side. She saluted.

“Captain,” Kitara said. “All enemy combatants have been contained and those requiring medical attention have been treated. Brock would like a moment of your time.”

“Brock, can’t you see that I’m busy?” Garcia asked.

“I know that you don’t concern yourself about economics, but Mosley who you just killed in battle, was telling you the truth,” Brock said. “I tried to tell you this earlier, but you wouldn’t listen to me. With Bliss out of the picture, there will be a power struggle like you’ve never seen before. Hell, even the House of Grilka may try a power grab in this, especially if her husband Quark is half the Ferengi he claims to be and advises her on the opportunity here to make a killing in a number of markets, from gun running to slave trading. Bottom line, Bliss may have been a really awful guy by Star Fleet standards, but he kept a balance of power in the Orion constellation. If this continues the way I see it going, Rigel and Betelgeuse will suffer an economic collapse, and when they go, so will Troyius, in the Tellun system, followed by Sherman’s Star System, the near by Klingon outpost, Kelari, Starbase K7 will either be attacked or destroyed, and then from there, your looking at least a minimum of ten star systems falling into a severe economic depression, which usually ends up in war.”

“Such an instability would display sufficient weakness to the Romulans that they might wish to take advantage of the situation,” Simone said. “This battle has already confirmed that an element of Romulan and Klingons are participating in the underground market with the Orions. And we know the Romulans are anxious to get a toe hold in Federation space, if the recent attempt to grab Vulcan was any indication.”

“What do you want me to do about it?” Garcia asked, using his implant to plug the names Grilka and Quark into a database search engine to find out who Brock was speaking of. Grilka was a Klingon of a prominent family and she had recently married a Ferengi named Quark in an attempt to rule that family vicariously through Quark, since a Klingon male would not give her control. That in itself was nicely played by Grilka, but Garcia hardly considered her and this Quark chap to be in the same league as Bliss or Mosley. Still, it only took a handful of minor players to make life difficult for a whole bunch of folks.

“If rumor has it that Bliss is gone, then the power struggle will have already begun,” Brock said. “The best way to end the power struggle is to find someone willing to take on the Orion Syndicate, if not as a full member then as an outsider coming to claim his piece of the action.”

Garcia noticed everyone was looking at him. “What?” Garcia asked, as he constructed meaning from their faces. “No. You can’t expect me to take on the guise of a crime lord just to keep star systems from suffering economic hardship. I’ve strayed too far from the law as it is.”

“Our mission is to seek out the enemies of the Federation and Klingon Empire,” Kitara said. “Not only would we be serving our function by eliminating a potential threat

that could lead to stellar economic instability that would definitely lead to war, but we could also get a better grip on the criminal element that's been plaguing these systems for over three hundred years."

"No," Garcia said.

"No one is going to eliminate the slave market a hundred percent," Brock said. "Not even you. The Orion animal women are too highly valued as a commodity. But you could change how the market is run by being involved. It's the same thing with the drug running. Regalian drugs, for example, are probably the best in the underground market because they work on so many different species, too many species to stop the flow of drugs completely. You could, however, get in there and force some regulations, which, consequently, raises the price of the product which we will control."

"We're not regulating slave trading, because there isn't going to be any slave trading," Garcia said, putting his foot down. "Not on my watch."

"We could call it adoption or mail order brides and we could screen the potential customers to make sure the animal women get good homes," Brock offered.

"No!" Garcia shouted.

"Vulcan would be severely impacted by an instability in the Orion Constellation," Captain Renic said. "Cardassia is already occupying several worlds in Federation space. As opportunists, they will not let this one go by."

"It wouldn't hurt if we just went in and put a good face on it," Kitara said. "Let people think we're taking over and that we expect our share of the trade."

"I can take you to a bar on Sherman's planet were four of the biggest Orion Crime syndicate hang out on a regular basis," Brock said. "It's kind of a seedy, loud music, lots of exotic dancers, and dabo girls galore kind of place, but..."

"No," Garcia said.

"If you don't make this appearance then we will be jumping back here every few days just to defend the place from those who think they can take it," Kitara said. "The best defense is a good offense. I say we go and drop the evidence of this battle on their table and declare the new boundaries."

"Tam," Simone said, putting a hand on his arm. "If our goal is to keep the Gray's safe here, it's the only way. Star Fleet doesn't have the resources to leave a ship here or open a new Star Base, or they wouldn't have asked Vulcan to lend them a research vessel. This is not a war ship. So, the sooner this message is sent, the sooner the message will get out that this place is off limits."

"I can't believe you're condoning my participation in the crime syndicate," Garcia said. "We're supposed to be mates. Have you considered the shame that will be brought on the House of T'Pau if your association with me is seen as complicit in illegal activities?"

"Are you asking me to transfer the bond we share to another?" Simone asked, actually showing some signs of hostility.

"Because that would really answers my question," Garcia said. "All it does is change the variable of who's family is affected."

Simone stepped forward and took Garcia's right hand with her left hand and mated it up to hers, her palm against his. Then she intertwined her fingers with his. "We are one," Simone said. "Whether you are free of me in seven years or decide to stay with me for another seven is now irrelevant. We came together and I am with child."

Garcia took in a sharp breath and closed his eyes. No wonder she was in control! The biological function of Pon Farr was to bring mates together to produce little ones and so she was now completely free of the madness. Several things occurred to him at once; one, here was another child, which shouldn't have surprised him knowing what he knows, and two he was still wanting to participate in more madness with Simone! He was still being affected by her presence. "Oh, god," Garcia cringed.

"Forces greater than all of us have brought us together, it is your destiny to lead and shape the future," Simone said. "It is not logical to resist. I believe that you will find a way to take this situation that appears bad on the surface and turn it into something positive. In three hundred years no one in authority has been able to end the slave trading, not even the Federation. Since what we are doing isn't working, then it would be illogical to not to consider a new strategy."

Garcia rubbed his forehead with his freehand. He really needed some sleep. He wasn't thinking straight and he kept checking to see if he was dreaming or writing one of his "Escape" novels. His worry for his daughter was wearing on him and he seemed miles away from resolving that conflict, with every new interruption and tangent bringing him closer to despair. He wanted to give up. Simone took his left hand as well and leaned into him, her forehead touching his. "You are not alone in this," she said. "When push comes to shove, you will have enough people on your side to demonstrate that your intentions were, and still are, honorable."

Garcia sighed. "All of you are going to be the death of me."

"You will not escape your destiny that easy," Kitara said.

"Captain Renic," Garcia said, committing himself. "Would you be willing to allow the Gray drones to come on board your ship and do some minor upgrades?"

"You mean more than the Gateway they installed?" Captain Renic asked.

Garcia looked to Simone.

"He needed to know," Simone said. "T'Pau knows everything, Tam. McCoy and she have had several conferences concerning you. She knows just how crucial your role in this matter is. That's why I'm here. That's why this ship is here. My crew is completely loyal to me. Because you are my mate, approved and openly sanctioned by T'Pau, his loyalty is bound to you as well."

"I don't deserve this loyalty," Garcia began.

Kitara hit Garcia in the back of the head, causing him to shuffle his feet to keep from falling. "How dare you insult her like that," Kitara snapped.

"I didn't do anything to earn this loyalty," Garcia persisted, unable to add anything to that. "From any of you."

"He's human," Kitara said to Simone, as if that was sufficient.

"No one is perfect," Simone agreed.

"If you have everything under control here, we need to be leaving," Garcia said. "I'm pursuing a lead that might bring me closer to finding my daughter."

"Is this lead time dependant?" Simone asked. "Can you at least put in an appearance with the Orion Crime syndicate?"

Garcia sighed heavily. "Fine," Garcia said. "I hope you guys are still loyal enough to visit me when I'm in prison."

"I promise we'll bust you out of any prison they put you in," Kitara said.

“You all are going to be the death of me,” Garcia said again, hitting his comm. badge. “Trini, three to beam back. Site to site, Bridge for me and Kitara. Set Brock down on the transporter pad. Captain Renic, pass all the enemy combatants over to the Tempest when he arrives, and have Gowr turn them over to the Klingon Authorities. Any Romulans should be turned over to the Federation to determine if they are spies, smugglers, or both. We’ll talk later, Simone. Energize.”

Garcia stepped away from her, reluctant to let go of her hands, but he did, and stood firm. The transporter whisked him away from her once more. Once on the Bridge Garcia took his seat, pushing Simone out of his head.

“Cestus Three, sir?” McKnight asked.

“Negative. Set in the coordinates for Sherman’s planet,” Garcia said. “Prepare for a jump.”

“Sir,” Kitara said. “We can be there in fourteen hours at warp nine point two.”

“And we could get there in thirty seconds with transwarp,” Garcia said.

“Fourteen hours would allow some of the Path Finder’s senior officers to get some rest,” Kitara said, not specifically saying “the Captain needs to go to bed.”

Garcia thought of several smart ass things to say, but he bit back on his comments and stood up. “You’re right, number one,” Garcia said. “McKnight, best speed to Sherman’s planet. I’ll be in my quarters, on the NC.”

Garcia departed the Bridge, made his way to the Gateway, and crossed over to the Tempest where he met his daughter, Okuda. She seemed puzzled to see him back so soon.

“If you can spare the gray drones, I would like some upgrades made to the T’Pau and the New Constitution,” Garcia said. “Same as you did for the Tempest. I want shield upgrades, transwarp capabilities, and communication nodules so that Losira can report to the NC when she needs to.”

“I anticipated this,” Okuda said. “The communication nodule has already been installed on the NC. These drones will return with you to perform the remaining upgrades.”

“Can they do anything about the misalignment to the inertial dampeners?” Garcia asked. “They’re not up to specs and battles and sudden maneuvers toss people about.”

“It will take six months to complete that assignment, but I will have them start on it as soon as the other upgrades have been installed,” Okuda said. “Would you like me to supervise their work, or remain here?”

“Stay here for now,” Garcia said. “I’m going to find it difficult to explain these Grays as it is.”

Garcia dialed in the NC’s coordinates and stepped up to the Gateway, turning back to face the twenty drones that had suddenly lined up in formation to accompany him. Were they technically his children as well? Or were they transporter clones of the original three that had accompanied the Gray queen to planet Bliss? Did it even matter? “Come on, folks. We got a lot of work to do, and after the upgrades, if you wouldn’t mind hanging out to affect other repairs, the NC needs lots of work. I’ll buy you all pizza.”

The drones rushed for the Gateway, jumping through, eager to get to work.

“Let me guess, they love pizza,” Garcia said.

Okuda nodded. "They will work for food," she said. "These drones were instructed to stay with you for as long as you have need. They will come and go between your various ships and planet Bliss and will always stay busy, but they will listen to you and the members of your crew. Just tell them what you need or want or expect."

"Thank you," Garcia said.

"You're welcome, father," Okuda said.

Garcia paused at this, proceeded down the ramp and hugged the child. She seemed genuinely surprised by this. After that, he followed the Grays back to the NC. He closed the Gateway and went to the nearest console to make a ship wide announcement. "Attention all personnel, this is Captain Garcia speaking. There will be a number of Gray drones affecting repairs and upgrades, so please do not be alarmed if you notice an unusual alien in your area. They don't speak, but they will follow your instructions. Allow them to do their work," Garcia said. He then paged the Bridge. "Bridge, I'll be in my quarters if you need me. Try not to need me. I'm tired."

And with that, he went straight way to his quarters. He was intercepted by Shuliette who literally attacked him in the corridor.

"You did this to me!" Shuliette said, pounding him.

Garcia grabbed her by the wrists to stop her attack. She struggled to pull free and then tried to collapse to the floor, hoping her body weight would tear her loose or bring them both down. When that failed, she tried to kick Garcia, but he pulled her up and pulled her in closer to him. She began to sob and he tried to comfort her with an embrace, but she pushed away, slapping him in the face. Two security officers arrived along side of Losira, but they held back to allow the Captain to handle the situation.

"Why did you do this to me?" Shuliette demanded.

"I don't know," Garcia said. "I'm sorry."

"My life is over," Shuliette said. "You should have let me die."

Garcia shook her. "Stop that nonsense," Garcia said. "You need to live, even if the reason you have to live is to hate me for the rest of you life, but find your strength and passion somewhere and decide to live."

"Where am I to go?" Shuliette said. "What am I to do?"

"The whole universe is open to you," Garcia said.

"I don't want the whole universe!" Shuliette said. "I want my home. I want my career. I want a husband and a family and my father's love. You did this to me. You didn't even tell me."

"I didn't know until well after you had departed," Garcia said.

"Did you even try to notify me?" Shuliette said.

"No," Garcia said.

Shuliette pulled free of him. "What sort of monster are you?" she asked.

"Me? Your own father tried to kill you and I'm the monster?" Garcia asked.

"That's pretty screwed up, don't you think?"

"How dare you!" Shuliette said. "You want this child?! Fine, I'll raise this child. I'll raise him full of hate and spite and teach him how to kill and send him for you. How's that for a passion and purpose in life. You will rue the day you came to my planet and kidnapped me and stole animals from the wild life preserve."

Shuliette turned to leave and the security detail escorted her back to her quarters, four doors down from Captain Garcia's quarters. Losira made sure that the security detail

locked her door this time. He was glad to see the communication nodule was fully functional, allowing Losira to move freely on this ship as she did her own. He smiled faintly, thanking her for coming to his aid.

Garcia entered his quarters and paced, suddenly so wound up again that he doubted he could sleep. He replayed Shuliette words over and over in his head, eating them and making them a part of him. He wanted to become the monster his sister had thought he was when they were still living together. He thought about calling Persis, but instead he forced himself to lie down without turning the sheets back. He had to meditate before sleep could come, but sleep did finally take him. Losira appeared in his room, starting as a dot, becoming a line, then a two dimensional image that blossomed into her full form. She removed Garcia's boots and then covered him with a quilt. Then, she proceeded to watch him sleep, happy that no matter which ship Garcia was now on, she could watch over him.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Away Team arrived planet side, across the street from the seedy tavern that Brock had been raving about. The club itself was cut directly into the side of a mesa. The natural features of the rock not only added to its functionality and beauty, but added greatly to its defense. Whoever had established this club had spent his time and money wisely. It was a virtual fortress, with shuttle landing available on the top of the mesa for high class clientele, and no doubt secret party rooms and hotel suites, perhaps even a few dungeon cells. Along the top of the entrance at the ground level were flat screen monitors that stretched the length of the main entrance. At the center of the primary screen flashed the words, "Club Bliss," in a metered rhythm, along with advertisements describing which famous dancers would be entertaining the patrons this night. Garcia turned to Brock.

"You didn't tell me this was Bliss's club," Garcia told him.

"It was a small detail. I simply forgot to mention," Brock said.

"That means you now own this club," Tuer said to Garcia.

"Another small detail I simply forgot to mention." Brock chuckled nervously.

The doors to the club opened and two Klingons in full gear came out, carrying a drunken patron that they threw to the curb. They brushed their hands and returned to the club, satisfied with their work. The music from inside the club could only be heard on the street when the doors were open, and the doors being opened to allow the Klingons egress gave them all a sense of the volume which was full of base, driven by a strong tempo, typical of a club with exotic dancers. As a musician, Garcia knew the music was the same music that has been played at such establishments for several hundred years. After all, most music was composed of the same twelve notes, meaning the only variation was in how the twelve notes were strung together, and some music simply fitted this scene better than others. A strong beat was a must if you wanted to reach the primal centers of the brain.

"Remember, don't drink any drinks. The girls put tears in the drinks to keep the men coming back. Now, when we go in, the Syndicate always sits in the back, occupying several booths that over look the whole club, giving optimum viewing of the main dance floor and stage. They're going to see you coming a mile away. There is also a cat walk made of transparent aluminum that gives a nice view of the dancers, I mean, could give you a strategic view if you could get someone up there," Brock said. "Oh, and one other thing, the Club employees are probably taking Venus drugs, so don't be fooled by their appearance. They may look unusually beautiful, but it's all an illusion."

"Let's get this over with," Garcia said.

Garcia, followed by Duana and Ilona, led the way as they crossed the street. Pedestrians got out of their way, or stopped to watch, expecting something was happening as Garcia and his posse entered the club. Kitara, Undine, Tuer, Owens, Kletsova, Kors, and finally Brock entered behind Garcia. The receptionist leaned forward smiling at the new comers, especially Garcia, who was obviously in charge.

"Why, hello, there," she said. "My name's Cleo. How many in your party?"

Garcia blinked, noting the effect Cleo was having on his nervous system, his blood pressure increasing with an increase in heart rate and change in breathing. He forced himself to alter his breathing and relax, realizing Cleo's affect on him was actually the Venus drug, which was designed to give a person an overdose of sex appeal so that no

one could resist them. Well, people could resist, but it was extraordinarily difficult. And apparently, because Cleo was human, Garcia was the only one in his party greatly afflicted, with the exception of maybe Duana, who also seemed star struck. Ilona hit Garcia on the back of the head.

“Ten,” Garcia said, giving Ilona a cross look. “You are definitely a... I mean, we... There’s ten of us.”

Cleo battered his eyes at him, amused. “That will be...” Cleo started to ring it up on the register.

“Ah, honey, we’re not paying,” Ilona said. “We own this establishment.”

Cleo looked from Ilona to Garcia to see if they were kidding. Brock handed her the data chip.

“Bliss retired,” Brock explained, using his PADD to lock out the register using Bliss’s codes. “Garcia is the new manager.”

“And you’ll be looking for new employment,” Ilona said.

“But I’ve never skimmed from the profits, honest!” Cleo said.

“She’s lying,” Kors said. “But other than that, she’s trust worthy. Bliss kept her around because of the favors she did for him, even though he knew she was skimming. All his employees have a vice that can be exploited.”

“There will be no staff change, Cleo” Garcia assured her. “Unless you can’t stand working for me.”

“I would be happy to work for you,” Cleo said. “Anytime you need a favor...”

“Um, yeah, well, just tell me who’s inside the club,” Garcia said, trying hard to keep his eye contact professional.

“The place is packed!” Cleo said, enthusiastically. “Oh, you mean like, important people?”

“Never mind, honey,” Ilona said, pushing Garcia further into the club. “Don’t tax your little brain.”

“It’s one of the possible side affects of the Venus drugs,” Brock said, trying to explain Cleo’s bubbly nature suggested a real low IQ, the “ideal” stereotypical blond, but that she was probably fairly smart. The Venus drug simply amplified the ideal attractors.

Garcia wondered if there was a corresponding drop in IQ for both the user and the men affected by Cleo’s Uber-charm. He was still struggling to stay focus as he found it hard to look away from her, even as he was led away. Kitara tapped on Garcia’s shoulder to remind them that they were on a schedule.

“Do you want me to start counting the profits at the front door? Or after I take inventory?” Brock asked.

“Later, Brock,” turning back to Cleo. “Cleo, no more patrons in tonight. Set the doors to allow egress only,” Garcia said.

“Yes, boss,” Cleo said.

Once into the heart of the club, the volume made it a bit more easier for Garcia to distract himself from the memory of Cleo and the number of attractive females in his line of sight. He led the way deeper into the club, noting members of his team that were spreading out, mixing in with the patrons. The main dance floor allowed the clientele to dance with the girls. There were couples dancing on the main floor, but most of the patrons of Club Bliss were men. For continuous distractions, Orion slave girls danced on tables, in elevated cages, on the stage, and along the invisible cat walk. The room was

dark and one couldn't see the color of the carpet. There were lights strategically placed to highlight certain dancers. The main dance floor was awash in changing light patterns, self illuminated, and there were disco lights that came on sporadically. The carpet and walls had flecks of paint that glowed in the dark, making it appear as if they were walking on and around stars. All the waitresses' shirts were illuminated by black lights, which also illuminated Garcia's uniform and Kor's outfit. His Klingons were wearing traditional Klingon Armor so that they could blend in better with the other Klingons in the establishment.

Brock went straight to the dabo tables to inspect the games. He was practically drooling, the same way Garcia had been over Cleo. The flashing lights and the sound of money dropping gave the illusion that people might be winning. That was an old trick run by casinos since the beginning of casinos that still worked to this day at drawing people in and keeping them there, even after all hope of winning was gone. Duana and Ilona went right to the dance floor and started to blend in. Kitara and Tuer held back. Garcia and Kors made their way for the Syndicate's tables. A waitress intercepted Garcia.

"Drink honey?" she asked.

"Not right now, thank you," Garcia said, raising his voice to make himself heard over the music. The DJ, a Phylosian, a plant person with multiple arms, was practically unintelligible as he introduced the next dancer and mix. Garcia became distracted by another female, most likely hopped up on the Venus drugs, as she led a patron by the hand to a private booth. Garcia was disgusted at how easy the man was led towards a loss of his money, but the disgust was more pronounced when he realized the man's condition only reflected Garcia's on faults and how easily led astray he would be. If he wasn't on duty, he would have allowed himself to be led away by any number of girls working the crowd. Self hatred enabled him to resist looking at the girls further, though he knew it wouldn't last. A second booth opened and Losira came out, dressed like a dabo girl. She winked at him, bouncing a little to shift her hip suggestively, showing off her outfit, and then approached. Orion girls danced in sync, mixing routine like gypsy grind, the shimmy, and a sixties go-go walk.

"Like some booth time honey?" Losira asked, encircling Garcia's neck with arms.

"I can't afford your prices," Garcia said, currently able to resist her flirting because of his recent resolve to stay focus.

"Maybe you'll strike it rich at the tables," Losira said, hugging him closer. She leaned in to whisper his ears. "I managed to deactivate all their security screens. They don't know you have weapons on you. I got your back." And then she pushed on to inspect the club, stopping to dance a with working girls, 'sinking with shimmy.'

Kors came up along side of Garcia. "I still can't read her mind," Kors said, shooting a conversation to him via telepathy. "How is it you can?"

"Bad luck," Garcia said. If Kors knew what he was going through mentally, she kept it to herself. Most telepaths employed a version of the Prime Directive, where they didn't interfere with the thought processes of others, allowing the individuals to make their own conclusions. She gave no clue to what she thought about his inner dialogue, with one exception; every now and then he noticed that she was wincing as if in pain when one of his self loathing tapes played in his head. Perhaps with her help he would be able to reduce the frequency that these tapes played. "Come on."

Another girl interrupted their progress. "Hello, Kors, it's been a while since you've been here," the girl said, and then she did a double take off of Garcia. "Tammias Garcia?" she asked, touching his arm. "Oh my god, Kors, you said you knew him, but I never imagined you would bring him here. Oh my god. You're really Tammias?"

Garcia nodded, assuming she was a fan of his music. His resolve weakened. He was ready to surrender to her beauty. If she took his hand, he would go with her.

"I can't believe I'm actually meeting you," she said. "I've read all of your sociology papers. Are you here conducting research?"

"What's your name?" Garcia asked, surprised she was a fan of his academic work as opposed to his art.

"Uh? Oh, my name, I'm sorry," she said, laughing at herself for forgetting her manners. "My name's Leeta. I'm the lead dabo girl for this establishment."

Ilona maneuvered closer to Garcia as she continued to dance. She seemed annoyed, tapping her wrist as if to remind Garcia they were on a time table.

"Leeta," Garcia said. "Well met. Perhaps we can talk later?"

"Absolutely!" Leeta shouted, bouncing on her toes, and hugging Garcia. She moved closer to his ear so she didn't have to shout as loud to be heard over the music. "I'm filling in a hole on table six, but I'll be through in a couple hours, unless you want to come over and try your luck."

"We'll see how the evening goes," Garcia said.

Leeta nodded, kissed him on the cheek, and headed off towards the dabo tables, touching Kors' arm in a friendly gesture as she passed. She glanced back to see if Garcia was still looking at her. She smiled warmly and Garcia had to wonder if he was being unduly influenced to go try his luck at the tables. He was certain it had to be the Venus drugs.

"She doesn't use the Venus drugs," Kors responded to his mental query.

"Hey, A-D-D boy," Ilona said, snapping her fingers in front of his face. "You already have a Bajoran girl friend."

Garcia frowned at Ilona and put himself back on target. Kors followed him. Two Klingons met them, preventing them from proceeding to the private tables.

"You're not welcome back here," the Klingon said.

"But your Andorian girl is," the other Klingon said, reaching out for a feel.

Garcia grabbed the Klingon's hand and punched him in the face at the same time, twisting the hand at a pressure point which enabled him to capture it in a joint lock. He had the Klingon completely under his control just in time to respond to the second Klingon, which he kicked in the gut, put an elbow in his face, and then dropped him with a Vulcan nerve pinch, applied to the neck as the Klingon's armor protected the shoulder. He led the other back to the table where the Orion Syndicate people were sitting, directing his captured Klingon by applying pressure to the arm. When they arrived before the Syndicate members, he drove the Klingon to his knees with a boot behind the knee cap, and then hit him on the back of the neck with a blow that sent him to the floor.

The four Orion men at the table and the two 'Other' Klingons didn't move. They neither looked upset or perturbed, they merely stared at Garcia. Kors didn't have to tell him that several other body guards were coming directly at him from various angles, drawing weapons as they approached, but she alerted him anyway. Garcia drew his weapons, one for each hand, and so did the rest of his Away Team, and suddenly there

was a seeming impasse. Garcia knew that the Syndicate members were going for their own weapons under the table because Kors was reading their minds and because he saw the subtle shift in their bodies, but they didn't have time to even touch their weapons. Losira came through the wall and sat down between the two groups of Orion Syndicate members and put weapons to the heads of the two sitting to either side of her.

The music came to a screeching halt. Everyone in the club turned to the spectacle about to take place.

"The bar is closed," Garcia said, loudly enough to be heard by everyone present. Just in case there were any hard of hearing, he activated his communicator pin via his implant and had his remaining words pumped through the intercom system. Everyone in the club heard: "Everyone who isn't an employee needs to leave immediately." He shut the intercom down and spoke to those in his immediate presence. "With the exception of you four. We need to talk."

The Klingon at Garcia's feet stirred as if he might get up. Garcia stomped on his head and he went back to the full prone position, completely knocked out.

The patrons departed and so did some of the employees, not wanting to be a witness to crime lord business, or risk getting shot during the execution of crime lord business. Brock yelled at people who tried to take their chips, and whatever extra fell in their bags as they grabbed and fled. Garcia's Away Team collected weapons from all the bad guys. Kitara felt compelled to hit a few of them. So did Tuer.

"Here's the deal," Garcia said to the members of the Orion Crime Syndicate before him. "I'm taking over the Bliss territory. This club is now mine. Planet Bliss is off limits. Trespassers will be shot."

Garcia dropped a PADD on the table in front of them. "Just in case you don't think I have the firepower or the skills to back that up, this is for you and your bosses to scrutinize over. If any of you on the Syndicate want to speak to me, you will find me here. You just have to ask for me. I will, however, not be as hospitable as Bliss was. Further, when it comes to the trafficking of slaves or illegal animal smuggling, if I find that any of the live merchandise is being abused or inhumanely handled, I will personally hunt down and kill the offending smuggler."

"You can't just come in here and give orders as if you were a member," one of the Orions protested. "You have to buy your membership and a committee has to approve you."

"I'm special. We're going to change the rules just for me," Garcia told them. "I will not be buying into your Syndicate. Instead, you will be paying me to allow business to continue to operate. I know all of Bliss's connections, routes, and partners. I now know all of your connections, routes, and partners. At any time, I could conveniently drop a line to a friend in Star Fleet and you will find your ships impounded for inspections. And if that doesn't work, I will turn the same list over to my friends in the Klingon Empire, and you know what Klingons do to smugglers. Have any of you met Kors?"

"I've met her. She's a telepath," one of them said. "She belongs to Bliss."

"Bliss is dead. She is now mine and whatever you know she knows and whatever she knows I know, so all your little plotting against me, just forget it. If I wanted to, all of your ships in orbits could be destroyed on a whim."

"You're bluffing," the Other Klingon said.

“Contact your ships,” Garcia said, showing signs of impatience. “Go ahead.”

Each of the Orion Syndicates called their ships. Several of them paled at the news that a saboteur had gotten on board and downloaded all of their computer files and shut down all ship systems except for life support. Further, the saboteur was on the Bridge of each ship holding what appeared to be an antimatter bomb that only needed to be dropped or turned slightly to set it off. Klingons wearing pirate garb were currently conducting inspections and seizing all illegal contraband.

“Do I have your complete attention?” Garcia asked them.

“Who are you?” one of them asked.

“I’m your new boss,” Garcia said. “And I don’t want to be trifled with, nor do I want to be bothered by the every day trappings of business. I just want my cut. And I want business to be done fair and square. And if you even think about double crossing me, I will remove you from the game so fast you won’t have time to collect your monopoly money. I’m too busy and too paranoid to be looking over my shoulders every time I see a shadow. I will shoot first and ask questions later. Any smugglers I catch who haven’t paid his or her dues to me, or is violating the rules I have given you on that PADD is subject to my wrath. And if you don’t believe I mean business, just call Admiral Pressman at Star Fleet, or Admiral Sheaar of the Klingon Empire. They put me in charge of this little operation because some fool tried to rip them off when they came to you for merchandise on the black market. Guess which fool that was? If you said Bliss, you just won a pressed latinum bar. Now, go tell your bosses that I’m cleaning house and I expect to see money flowing in soon. Ya’ll can leave now.”

They all got up to leave.

“Wait,” Garcia said, as if he had just remembered something. “Rumor has it there might be a shipment of kemacite missing? Not passing blame or anything like that. I would just like that found and brought here. I’ll pay twice the going rate. Okay, you can go.”

They started to leave and again Garcia stopped them. “Wait. I did mention that I expect the merchandise to be handled humanely?”

They nodded.

Garcia continued, “That means there is no putting down overstock, if you know what I mean. Any damaged goods or property that you believe can’t be sold, you bring it here, and I’ll compensate you for your loss. Now, you best get out of here before I change my mind.”

They started to move. “Wait,” Garcia interrupted them again. “There’s this one other thing that’s bothering me. The clientele that buy our product, I want them screened. No more anonymous sales or second party sales and, for now on, one to a customer. If a man can’t be a man and come get his own, then he aint man enough to be buying our products. Consider frequent shoppers suspect, and ask what happened to their previous purchase. If they’re killing them, or turning around and selling them again, we’re going to put a stop to it. I want to know who my clients are and I want to know how they’re treating my products.”

“That will drive our customers away,” one of them protested.

The Klingon at Garcia feet began to stir again and Garcia stomped his head back to the floor. Even the Orions seemed to have sympathetic pains towards their downed man.

“I’m a very sentimental guy,” Garcia said, admiring his Gorn weapon for a moment. “I think animals have rights and one of those rights is being treated a certain way. Now, you and I both know I can’t shut the market down completely, but I could come so close that I’m certain none of you will be playing in the game, and the few that are left in the game will be me and those I intend to kill. Now, we all know that Rigel is inundated with merchandise. I’ve made arrangements with the Rigel High Counsel to find homes for all of those poor girls who the state can no longer care for because no one wants to adopt an older slave, or one that has been cut, tarnished, or otherwise damaged. Part of the deal I worked out gave me exclusive rights to all of the merchandise on that planet, even the ones you intended to take back and resell on the underground market. I think you’re about to find that the price of Orion animal women is about to go through the roof, due to a sudden scarcity, and I intend to be in control of that market. You will play ball with me and you will play by my rules or you can take your balls and go home. I am sure there will be more public support for the way I am running things than the way you use to run things. Now get out of my club.”

They hesitated. Garcia waited till they were moving.

“Wait,” Garcia said, scratching his head with the weapon he was still holding. “Oh, and this is really cool. You might like this. I’m going to be offering holographic alternatives to slave owning. Any of your clients that would be willing to trade their current slave for a holographic robot, created and programmed by me, can get it from me here. It doesn’t require a holosuite, nor does it require a lot of maintenance typically associated with owning a slave, like feeding, housing, health. My self sustained, mobile holographic robotic emitters will be guaranteed to be sold less than what anyone can get a live slave for. And I can make my robots faster than you can train more slaves, so don’t think you’re going to try and breed me out of competition. And, I have locked out a copy right on it, so they can’t be duplicated, easily.”

“The purist will not go for robots, holographic or not,” one of them said.

“Well, they haven’t seen my holographic robots,” Garcia said. “But true enough, the purist, due to psychological issues, will want his real slave, but is also more likely to provide the proper care for a slave, especially when the market prices for slaves has more than quadrupled. The purists are going to pay premium. Oh, you’ll also find a ban list on your PADD of people who you will no longer sell to. If they want products, they have to come to me direct. Anyone even rumored to be selling to those on the ban list, guaranteed wrath from me.”

“You’ve just signed your death warrant,” the Orion said.

“Oh, like I haven’t heard that before,” Garcia said. “Get out of here before I kill you.”

They hesitated.

“Go on,” Garcia yelled, acting like a crazy man. “Get out of here.”

They started to leave.

“Wait!” Garcia snapped, powering up his weapon and aiming it at one of them. “I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Tammias Parkin Arblaster-Garcia, the Great. Now run!”

Garcia fired his weapons into the floor, making it seem as if he shot the Klingon at his feet. The members of the Orion Crime syndicate ran for dear life. Garcia allowed

them to hear his insane Klingon laugh as they departed. As soon as the doors went shut, Garcia stopped laughing and looked to Kitara.

“You think they got the message?” Garcia asked.

“It would have been better had you actually killed one or two of them,” Kitara said. “The Orion Crime Syndicate will not take this well.”

“I know. We’ll deal with them later. Now, let’s have the employees gather around so we can discuss the new manager’s preference for the way business will be conducted,” Garcia said, putting his weapon away. “Kitara, get the Gray drones in here so we can upgrade my office and Club Bliss’ holographic feature to my standards, plus a Losira communication nodule. Also I want a complete security sweep of this place, look for trap doors, secret compartments, anything out of the usual, and I want recommendations on how to improve security. I also want both Doctors Misan and Jurak, plus several nurses down here conducting health screens on my employees. Brock, anyone not submitting to a health screen, you will give them a severance of half a years pay and send them on their way.”

“Half a year’s pay?!” Brock protested, but decided Garcia didn’t appear to be in a negotiating mood, especially when he was holding a weapon. “Yes, boss. Are you sure you want to sell your holographic remotely operated vehicles for less than the slaves? We could make a killing, you know, since we now own the patents on the new hardware arrangement and the software necessary to run it.”

“My intentions are to destroy the slave market,” Garcia said. “I’m probably going to regret this, but in addition to your other duties of running my accounts, you’re now in charge of Club Bliss. We’ll mass produce the HROV’s here and offer service contracts to repair or replace any that malfunction. Also, Club Bliss will now be known as a safe house for any slave or woman or child seeking sanctuary from abuse.”

“Tam,” Kletsova interrupted. “Rescuing slaves could become a full time job.”

“Someone’s got to do it,” Garcia said. “And apparently we can’t trust the Orions to take care of their own, so I promoting myself to the task. All of my share of the profits the Orion Crime Syndicate turns over to me, willingly or not, is going strait to the Rigel government to improve their program of caring for the ex slaves.”

“All of it?” Brock asked, whining a little.

Garcia answered with a look. Brock backed down.

“You think the crime syndicate is actually going to accept these changes?” Duana asked.

“They will not,” Kitara said. “They will organize and try to move against Garcia. They will bid their time and do it right.”

“Good point,” Brock said. “I would like permission to hire some protection for Club Bliss. I also would like to bring in a few more Ferengi to help me run this place and your accounts.”

“Hire whoever you need, Brock. Just remember our deal,” Garcia said. “For now, Kitara, assign a security detail of Klingons to remain here until the drones have completed the security upgrades and installed a functioning Gateway. Brock, I expect to see the first of the HROVs off the assembly line and ready for market in three business days.”

“But,” Brock began.

“Three days, Brock. Clients are going to want to see functioning models and I intend to be ready to supply the same,” Garcia said.

“I hope they all buy the Brittany robot and she punches all the clients in the face,” Kletsova said.



“Gary Seven,” the Garcia clone said, his voice monotone and calm. “You will have to kill me, because I am going to do everything in my power to save the Voth from extinction.”

“Do you hear what you’re saying?” Gary Seven said. “That’s the same thing as committing suicide for yourself and genocide for the whole human race!”

Ketimer approached Gary Seven. “What if I could convince my people to leave the Alpha Quadrant and never return? What if I were willing to make sure there was never any knowledge of Earth being our origin planet? Would that help guarantee the continuity of the time line?”

“Your people are destined to become extinct,” Gary Seven said. “There is nothing we can do about that. I am sorry.”

“But they don’t go extinct. Seven of Nine says they are thriving in the Delta Quadrant,” Garcia said. “And if you don’t know about that, then something is already wrong with the time line.”

“What do you mean?” Gary asked. “What have you done?”

“I haven’t done anything,” Garcia said. “But killing me to prevent me from sharing technology with the Voth is the least of your problems. The Preservers established a Gorn settlement on Earth and left technology. The same kind of technology that you find on Miramee’s planet, if you remember your Kirk history. And you know what that means, don’t you?”

Isis mewed.

“I remember my history,” Gary Seven told the cat. “Are you saying, whether you give the Voth technology or not, the future has already been altered?”

“I’m saying you’re going to need my help to destroy the Preserver artifact,” Garcia said. “And the price for my help is that we save the Voth from extinction.”

Gary pocketed his weapon. “What is your plan?”

Afu looked to Garcia and said, “That wass easy.”

“If the Omegans are here, trying to change the time line, and have an actual monolith established, I will need help,” Gary Seven said. “So, do you have a plan, or not?”

“I’m kind of making it up as I go,” Garcia said, scratching his head. “But let’s start by getting us out of here.”

“Take me with you,” Ketimer pleaded.

“Ket, no,” Gilgamesh said.

“Dad,” Ket said. “You know I have to do this.”

“They will shoot you as a trader to our species!” Gilgamesh said.

“Perhaps,” Ket said, kissing her father on the cheek. “But I have to try. There’s a transporter console near by or I can take us to a shuttle.”

“A transporter,” Garcia said, weighing the odds of stealing a shuttle, and deciding time was of the essence. The transporter just made more sense.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

After providing medical care to the Klingon he had injured, Garcia spent time convincing the staff at Club Bliss that though Brock would be the immediate supervisor, Garcia was indeed the boss and that if they had any grievances, they could bring it directly to him. He gave them PADDs with the new rules and expectations, their new salaries and benefits, such as Star Fleet quality health care, and the means to further their education if they so chose. All of the Orion Animal Women were given a reprieve from their previous duties as slaves, and if they wanted to retire completely, they could do so and be own their way if they had a place to go, or if they had no where to go, invitations were extended for them to live at Planet Bliss, a sanctuary for their kind where they could get the treatment they needed to repair the damage done to their brains that made them animal women in the first place. That, and beaches, and sunshine, and luxury, resort style living for the rest of their days. All and all, they spent three hours working out the new arrangements, fielding questions, and actually rewriting some policies on the spot to accommodate the workers' needs. The security detail reported in that defending the place would be a piece of cake due to the fact that Bliss had chosen the property well. One of the girls wanted to know if they would be servicing Garcia in the same manner they had been servicing Bliss. He assured them that that was not going to be the case. A couple of them expressed disappointment. Cleo, who had managed to sit right next to him, dropped her hand in his lap. He removed it, several times through out the meeting.

After the meeting Garcia did his own inspection of the club, noting things that needed to be repaired or altered to meet his new standards and submitting it to Brock via his implant's email option. A security task force, led by Kitara, had gone through and mapped out the base, looking for any secret caches, exits, or rooms. The Grays were already at work on the Gateway in a room they presumed was Bliss' main Office. Now Garcia's office. There was a balcony cut into the cliff, offering a nice view of the cityscape and the wilderness beyond. Metal blast doors could be closed in a pinch, an outer one flush with the mesa, and an inner one separating the balcony from the office. Both inner sides of the door had screens that allowed one to see outside, as if it the blast doors were merely windows, allowing light to shine in.

One floor up from the office was a master bedroom, living area with a waterfall and pool, and a rather nice kitchen. All and all, it wasn't a bad place he had acquired, and he felt only a little shame for having absconded it through the death of Bliss. But only a little, for he had no intentions of letting it go to waste. He considered bringing Rivan here to allow her to relax in the hot mineral water, bubbling over the falls and collecting in a hot tub size pool cut directly into the stone. The water gave the living area a nice aroma and no doubt added ions to the air, which helped to relax the body at the same time as increasing mental faculties. Garcia intuitively moved a picture and found a safe, blended with past and future technologies to help lock it. He closed the picture back to the wall, deciding to save it for another day, when he would have more time to enjoy safe cracking. His staff no doubt had scanned the safe and downloaded the combination into a tricorder, so he would have to ask them not to tell him, if he were to enjoy the moment.

Below the office was a security room that monitored the entire club and the surrounding area. Another set of Grays were finalizing the work on the communication nodule that would allow Losira to be a permanent resident at the club. By the time the Grays finished updating the security and holographic features, Club Bliss would be

practically invulnerable to attack by the Orion Crime Syndicate, or anyone else for that matter. He suspected that short of a matter anti matter bomb dropped directly onto the mesa from orbit, that his club was safe.

The next couple of rooms he toured were supply rooms, private stock, much of the contents the 'hard to come by' variety. He opened a humidor and found a stash of cigars coming from an assortment of planets. The smell was overwhelming and he couldn't help but pull one of the cigars that had been shipped from Rigal 7. He put it close to his nose, inhaled, and then wished he had a front shirt pocket to take it with him. He heard rustling behind him and turned to see Brock shifting a box to carry it out. Garcia waved him over, closing the humidor. Brock complied, allowing Garcia to examine the contents.

"Destroy these," Garcia said.

"They're perfectly legal on this planet," Brock argued.

"Rigalian liquid crystals can have some serious side effects," Garcia said.

"Then write a prescription, Doctor," Brock said. "They're an aphrodisiac and it makes men more likely to spend money on the ladies."

"That's because of the intoxicating effects," Garcia said.

"This club is distribution hub for these crystals," Brock said. "Either we control the market here, or your competitors will control it somewhere else. At least here at the club I can monitor the dosage administered. Believe me, I intend to pinch. Just give enough to keep the clients happy, not enough that they can't legally spend any money. An unconscious man can't spend money."

"But you could rob him," Garcia said.

"And risk having litigation brought against the club? Besides, there are worse vices than crystals," Brock said. "Next thing you'll be telling me is the girls can't use the Venus drugs."

"Cleo could use a break from the drug," Garcia said.

"Oh, it's not just Cleo," Brock said. "It's most of the staff, the waiters and bartenders, too. Basic truth about business, people like surrendering money to good looking people. Tall people, handsome, symmetrical in build and face... All of these attributes make our club more alluring, more trusting, more..."

"More fake?" Garcia asked.

"People come here for the illusion," Brock said. "I can give you the antidote if you find yourself too distracted."

"Where does it end, Brock? We give the staff drugs to improve their image, then we take drugs to resist the drugs we gave the staff, while we give our clients drugs to loosen them up, and then we put them in front of separators," Garcia said.

"Separators?" Brock asked.

"Yeah, people or machines that separate them from their money," Garcia said.

"Oh!" Brock said, and then laughed. "Isn't business wonderful? It's always about selling things to people they don't need. And everyone wants the dream, the illusion. There's no end to wanting. It's why people come here. You're offering them something that they can't achieve in their everyday life. Why would you want to rob them of that?"

"I want people to have reality," Garcia said.

"Please, reality sucks for seventy percent of the population," Brock said. "Hell, you have just about everything from smarts to fame and literally millions of people want

to be you or know you and what do you do with your free time? You spend it in a holodeck trying to engage in fantasies because you want to be someone else. Club Bliss offers that kind of escape to the regular folks. And how dare you judge them?!"

Garcia opened his mouth to say something and promptly shut it.

"Look," Brock said. "I understand you want to maintain appearances. And that's a good thing. The appearance of virtue is sufficient to attract credit. Abundance of virtue chases it away."

"Benjamin Franklyn?" Garcia asked.

"Who? No! The book of Acquisition," Brock said. "Why do you ask?"

"I like clarity," Garcia said.

"Clarity of context is good only in that it's your context that gets clarified," Brock said, turning to leave. "I'll make a business man of you yet."

"Gee, thanks," Garcia said.

"Did you know there are several crates of Romulan Ale in the next room?" Brock asked. "That's much more addictive than anything else I've found in here so far, including the Venus drugs and the Rigalian crystals, but you don't see us banning alcohol or serving synthehol. Speaking of which, we're going to have to replenish our stocks soon. I need more Earth beverages and more Romulan ale," Brock said, carrying off the crystals. He turned back and nodded towards the cigar. "And hey, if you're not going to smoke that, put it back."

Garcia sighed, deciding none of this was worth fighting Brock over. Sure, in looking the other way Garcia was no doubt in violation of several Star Fleet codes, complicit in distribution of controlled substances, but there was no way to completely stop people bent on using recreational substances or engaging in destructive behaviors. Perhaps he could rationalize his participation by putting in an emergency room and medical staff to tend to severe cases. He could also use the hotel next door to put people up who were too inebriated to safely travel home. Blocking people from access to minor things only caused them to find alternatives, which were usually more harmful than the stuff on the ban list, and they would do so away from a controlled environment. After all, Brock was right about there being other places to go for the stuff. There were planets where most of this stuff was legal, such as Wrigley's Pleasure Planet. No one was sure exactly how the illicit goods continued to find their way to that planet, but they did, and consequently, they had one of the highest tourist rates of any of the planets in the Federation, beating out even Risa. Sherman's planet was growing in reputation, but it still pulled in more Klingons than humans, and their sort of entertainment often led to severe physical injuries. An emergency medical facility here was a must, Garcia decided.

For a brief, mad moment, Garcia wondered if he should open up a Club Bliss franchise on both Risa and Wrigley Pleasure Planets to further compete, while offering the medical and counseling aspect to help people with destructive behaviors. After all, if he was going to be a crime lord in order to regulate the market, why do it half ass?

"You look tired."

Garcia turned his attention to Leeta as she maneuvered around several of the crates to be nearer to him. She had changed out of her dabo outfit into attire that was much more casual, with flared sleeves at the elbows. The dress still revealed ample shoulders, thanks to the cuts, and the length was longer on the right side, revealing the left leg from thigh down. He forced himself to maintain eye contact, wondering if his

intense attraction for her was due in part to her using the Venus drug, but then he remembered Kors said she wasn't a user. After a moment of careful study, he decided Kors was right. Leeta wasn't using the drug, and it was indeed, just his normal reaction to a healthy, beautiful woman.

Garcia became aware of uncomfortable silence and how long he was studying her. "I didn't know you smoked," Leeta said, flattered by the attention his eyes had given her.

"I don't," Garcia said. "But I might start with this one."

"Are you for real?" Leeta asked.

"How do you mean?" Garcia asked. He appreciated hearing her voice without the back ground music from the Club.

"The changes you made to the Club," Leeta said. "The benefits and everything. And you freed the slaves. I don't know what to make of it."

"The changes are for real," Garcia said. "If you're not happy with the changes to your work contract, I can help you find another place of employment."

"I'm not saying that I want to leave," Leeta said. "I mean, it was my plan to leave, eventually, after saving up enough credits, but..."

"But," Garcia asked, leaning against a crate.

"You're treating us like people," Leeta said.

"You are people," Garcia said. "You shouldn't be treated any less."

"Kors and I shared a conversation about you once," Leeta said. "Back when I entertained going to school and maybe getting a degree in sociology."

"You can still do that," Garcia said.

"Thanks to you," Leeta said.

"No, not thanks to me. I may have opened a door for some of you, but it's up to you to go through it," Garcia said.

"Why?" Leeta asked.

"Why should you continue your education or why am I doing this?" Garcia asked.

"The second," Leeta said, smiling at him.

"Because I am out of balance and need to compensate by doing something good," Garcia said. "Just kidding. It's just the right thing to do, Leeta." He liked saying her name. He backed up a little so as to lean casually against one of the crates.

"At first when you went over to the crime lords I thought perhaps you were playing out a game of Thieves and Assassins, right here in my club," Leeta said.

"And what do you know of Thieves and Assassins?" Garcia asked, amused.

"I know that in the last interstellar competition that you actually participated in, you ranked number two out of thirty thousand," Leeta said. "I didn't rank at all and I think you were cheated. You haven't played since."

"Well, I agree, I was cheated, but that isn't why I haven't played in a while," Garcia admitted. "I've been rather busy. Attending the Academy, saving the Universe, that kind of stuff."

"And now, here you are playing with the big boys, just like in the games," Leeta said. "You know, Club Bliss is the perfect site to set up a dungeon and run your own contest. And the thieves guild on Loran, the second largest moon in this system, has a tournament coming up."

"Sounds like fun, but I'm really too busy to run my own tournament, and I have

enough real serious people looking to shoot me, I don't need to have a bunch of gamers shooting at me as well," Garcia said. He suddenly saw a conspiracy in the gaming world of Thieves and Assassins. What better way to recruit real thieves and assassins than to make it a game and the ones that won the games could be solicited for more 'realistic' and profitable work? No, if that were true, Garcia would probably have been contacted already, because he always ranked high in the games. Unless they hadn't liked his psychological profile. Then again, maybe that was another reason Admiral Pressman had sought him out. "It's good to see you have interest other than work. This work shouldn't be the only part of your life. I can see the appeal of being a dabo girl, maybe the glamour, definitely the fun, too loud for me for a daily escape, but fun, none the less. Still, I want you to have more options in your life than just work, so that's another reason I making education available to the employees."

Leeta nodded, moving closer to Garcia, running a finger along the edge of the crate, as if shy to be alone with him, and so near him. "I don't think I've ever met anyone like you," Leeta said.

"You will meet lots of good people in your life," Garcia said. "You're too smart and happy not to attract good people. I suspect this is just a station you're passing through."

Leeta looked up at him, shaking her head in agreement. But she wanted more. "And attractive?" she asked.

"Extremely attracted," Garcia said, amused by her maneuvering.

She practically beamed, inching her way closer to him. "Who are you?" she asked.

"Bond, James Bond," Garcia said.

Leeta laughed, slapping his chest playfully, allowing her hands to linger against him, one hand touching his mandarin collar. "That explains the flashy suit. It's got a hint of Star Fleet, but, it's more like a band uniform."

"Let's keep that last observation to ourselves," Garcia laughed, but also pleased that she understood the reference. Or had she? Maybe she was just laughing to laugh with him. "My crew hates being referred to as the Band." Garcia received a message that the Path Finder was ready for departure. "I've got to leave, but you have my number, and Brock isn't really a bad guy, just rather overly zealous about making a profit. Don't let him push you around."

"I can handle Brock," Leeta said, amused. "Will I see you again, boss?"

"I hope so," Garcia said.

"Thank you," Leeta said.

"Welcome," Garcia said. She stole a quick kiss, which he didn't discourage. Then he stepped away from her, reluctantly. "Path Finder, energize."

A site to site delivered Garcia to the Bridge. He sat down in the command chair, watching as the crew made the final preparations for a transwarp jump to Cestus Three. He wondered if he had done the right thing leaving Brock in charge. True enough, once the Gateway was functional, Garcia could check in on the place from time to time, and without warning, but he also knew the rules of acquisition well enough that he would have to watch Brock like a hawk. He was fairly sure that Leeta would keep him apprised if Brock overstepped his boundaries. She seemed to have a good head on her shoulder for just a dabo girl. As his thoughts returned to Leeta, his mind splintered into several

tangents; there was the pleasant fantasy of what a relationship would be like with her, and then there was the list of reasons why he shouldn't even entertain such thoughts. He was her boss, for starters. He ruled that out, because that rule hadn't stopped him from mixing it up with Kitara. He appraised Kitara as she continued to mete out orders. There was also the fact that he had sufficient partners in his life and his life was already complicated enough without adding a dabo girl to his collection. He rationalized that excuse away, too. Leeta was not just a pretty dabo girl. There was something more about her, a personality quirk Garcia wanted to explore. And he was impressed that given the environment she was in she had chosen not to participate in the drugs, even the Venus drugs that would have made her irresistible given the fact that she was already damn near perfect.

But then there was the harsh realization that he had more than enough kids on the way and that he didn't need to be making any more of them. There was no way around that one, other than getting himself 'fixed.' The thought of his children to be and the worry over Niki and Tama Orleans was nearly enough to squash all of his sudden interest in Leeta. Then again, he really liked Leeta and the energy she gave off. Then again, even though she wasn't just a dabo girl, she was still a dabo girl and that energy radiating out from her, naturally or contrived, might be part of the game. No, he decided. His first read on her was correct. Leeta was sincere in her delivery of happiness, and she was willing to share that happiness with anyone. He was going to have to stop second guessing people and their motives. He tried to force himself to think of something else, but another rationalization popped into his head: he better get his plays in now, because once the children were born, he was going to be too exhausted from raising children to even think about romance or fun ever again. And then he realized that if that was his best excuse for getting together with Leeta, then his sister was right. He was a monster.

"We've arrived at Cestus three, Captain," Kitara said, interrupting Garcia's brooding. "Primary and secondary cloaks are engaged and the Tempest skin is still in play if you would like to use it."

"Drop secondary cloak and let people see the Tempest. Hail the Gorn colony," Garcia said. This would have to be sufficient distraction for now, he decided. Besides, his daughter and Niki's lives depended on him finding some answers here.

The response came in a matter of moments. "I have Counsel Member Shria available to speak with you, Captain," Trini said. "She's part of the Hegemony Elite by birth. A few more titles here, including Ambassador to the Federation Colony at Cestus Three."

"She'll do," Garcia said. "On screen."

Shria held her tongue before speaking, taking in all she could see with her golden eyes. "Captain Tammis Parkin Garcia, if I'm not mistaken," Shria said, the Universal translator emulating her voice by adding a raspy, hard rock edge to it. "It is true. You work side by side with the Klingons."

"Ambassador Shria," Garcia said. "Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to speak with me."

"Don't waste time on politically correct semantics," Shria said. "Why are you here? Star Fleet business? Klingon business? Who do you serve?"

"May I meet you in person?" Garcia asked.

Shria remained silent for a moment, as if considering the question. She gripped the railing of the communication platform she was standing in. She tilted her head back, baring teeth. There was a slight hiss which the computer didn't translate.

"I see no reason why I should deny you this privilege," Shria said. "I would be glad to entertain you. How many guests should I expect to be visiting?"

"I'll come alone," Garcia said.

"No you won't," Kitara snapped.

"Bring as many as you like, Captain Garcia, the Great," Shria said. "I'm transmitting the coordinates. Vristel my assistant will greet you."

Garcia bowed respectfully. The screen went off. He turned to Kitara.

"You're not beaming down into a potential deadly situation without support," Kitara said.

"Guess that means you're going," Garcia said. "Tuer, you, too. Duana and Ilona, of course."

"Micceal is on rotation," Kitara said.

"Finally, I get to work with one our Nausicaans," Garcia said. He looked to Tuer. "It should improve the average look of our Away Team."

Tuer did a double take and then appealed to Kitara: "Did he just?"

"He did," Kitara said, smiling at the play.

"Is it against the rules to hit the X O?" Tuer asked Kitara, scowling.

"Not when he's speaking truth," Kitara said, adding to the friendly banter as she joined them in the Turbo lift.

"That wasn't funny," Tuer complained.

"You're right, it's just a fact," Kitara said.

The doors closed and they went down a deck to go to the transporter room. Officers met them on arrival to hand them weapons and to help them into their armor. As they put on their gear, Tuer continued to grumble. "Besides, if you think I'm ugly, wait till we see that Nausicaan baby Garcia fathered." Only Duana and Ilona didn't wear the armor, as they preferred their own particular style, trench coats and miniskirts. The Nausicaan, Micceal, chimed in on Tuer's comment, "It will be a beautiful baby, minus the human attributes it has no doubt inherited." Kletsova took her spot at the transporter controls as the Away Team stepped up and took their places in the Transporter Alcove.

"Its bad luck to call a baby ugly," Kletsova said.

"Not all babies are good looking," Garcia said. "Just ask Tuer's mama."

Kitara smiled. "Energize," she said.

The Away Team arrived planet side. The heat was almost stifling and Garcia wondered if they had mysteriously beamed down into the Vulcan desert. Why the Federation had wanted to settle here was beyond him, but then, perhaps the Federation Colony had better climate conditions being closer to the poles. And the Gorn, being cold blooded and all, did like it hot, so if that was the case that would explain how the property got divided equitably after the initial conflict that nearly cost Kirk and his crew their lives. A Gorn approached their landing party and made a head motion that approximated a nod. She wore a light outfit, pulled tight to her mid section with a cloth belt. The material was a mixture of gold, reds, and silver which caught the light as she moved. She wore no shoes and had no visible weapons. And this was the first female Gorn Garcia had met, not counting the holodeck versions Garcia had created for anatomy

and physiology lessons, and combat practice. The female of this species was much more cunning and dangerous than the male, perhaps because they were entrusted to defend the nest and any young.

“I’m Vristel,” the Gorn said. “You’re to follow me.”

Vristel led them along the inner courtyard of a building, in through a side exit, and down a corridor. All the Gorn they passed stopped to stare.

“You must forgive them,” Vristel pleaded. “It is unusual for humans or Klingons to ever reach this deep into a Gorn city.”

“What about Nausicaan?” Micceal asked.

“We have not seen your type on this planet,” Vristel admitted.

Vristel brought them up short at a door and turned to Garcia. “Be careful, Captain. You’re in danger here,” she said in a whisper, and then pushed open the double doors and led them inside.

Shria stood and her guards went to attention. She came around the desk, arms outstretched to greet Garcia with a hug, making an effort to kiss his cheek like a human might. To Garcia, it suggested the gangster kiss of death. She ended by taking Garcia’s arm and turning him towards his own men.

“Introduce me to your fine crew,” Shria said.

Garcia introduced his people, starting with Kitara his First Officer, Tuer, his security officer, Micceal, security, and his two personal companions, Duana and Ilona.

“Escorts?” Shria asked, indicating the last two.

“Depends on how you’re using the term,” Garcia said.

Shria nodded as if she understood something. “Why have you come here, Captain Garcia?”

Garcia removed the stone spear head from his pocket and handed it to her. “Do you recognize the symbol etched in this?”

“Wow,” Shria said, examining it. “Where did you get this?”

“Someone gave it to me. Said you might be able to help me,” Garcia said.

Shria looked to him for more. “You’re leaving stuff out,” Shria said. “This symbol represents a clan that no longer exists. The Gorn trace their lineage through the maternal side of the family. This mother’s line was removed over ten thousand years ago.”

“How is it you know so much about a line that was culled from the genetic pool so long ago?” Micceal asked.

“Micceal, be nice,” Garcia reprimanded him lightly. He then turned to Shria for the answer to that question, waiting politely for her to respond.

“There is a good story there,” Shria said, taking the stone to her desk. “The symbol, the family crest, and the family name, has been passed down for generations, through both oral and written traditions. It has taken on a life of its own. Anyone can use that symbol now to publicly represent mourning or loss. The name has become metaphor.”

“A metaphor that can also be interpreted to mean revenge?” Ilona asked.

“Someone’s been doing their homework,” Shria said, pointing the stone at her, sharp end first. She put the stone down on her desk. No one witnessed her pushing the button as she drew her hand away and turned to face Garcia. “The fact that the name is inscribed on a spear head is also symbolic. Why have you brought this to me?”

“My daughter and another child that I know have been kidnapped,” Garcia said. “The person who gave this to me said it belonged to the abductors.”

“And what would you have me do about it?” Shria asked.

“The Captain of the ship Sssrcl attacked me several weeks ago, for reasons I don’t fully understand,” Garcia said. “A lot of Gorn ships have attacked me. I want to know why. I want to know how to end this animosity between us. But most importantly, I want Tama Orleans and Niki Carter returned to me, unharmed.”

Shria made a face that revealed teeth. Whether it was a smile or a grimace was hard to tell.

“Go back to your ship, Captain,” Shria said. “You’ll find no answers here.”

“Your people attacked my ship, destroyed the USS Einstein, and you kidnapped Admiral McCoy,” Garcia said. “He was brought here to this colony against his will and you’re telling me you don’t know anything?”

“I’m not telling you I don’t know anything. I’m telling you to go back to your ship,” Shria said. “You can file a report through Star Fleet channels and petition for information.”

“As a Star Fleet Officer, I was hoping we could resolve this together, without the red tape and bureaucracy,” Garcia said.

“I’m part of the bureaucracy,” Shria said, clucking in a manner typical of Gorn frustration. “Why would I want to eliminate my function?”

“You misunderstand,” Garcia said. “If you can just tell me the name of the Captain responsible for attacking my ship...”

“No, it’s you who misunderstands,” Shria said. “Are you here conducting official Star Fleet business?”

“No, Ambassador,” Garcia said. “I’m here...”

“Then I must ask you to leave,” Shria said. “Or have you come to rein destruction down on my world, too?”

“What are you talking about?” Garcia said.

“You come here accusing my people of kidnapping and attacking you, when you butcher women and children and destroy whole planets?!” Shria said. “How many Gorn ships did you have to destroy to keep your little secret? How many more Gorn must die so that the Garcia clan can continue? Which god do you pray to when you go to sleep at night?”

“I don’t pray,” Garcia said.

“I want you off my planet,” Shria said.

“I hear that you’re angry. Help me to understand what grievance you have against me,” Garcia said. “What can I do to help resolve our issues?”

“You can die, Garcia,” Shria said. “You and all your children can die.”

A door pushed open and a Gorn, three times as tall as any Gorn Garcia had ever seen, came barging through.

Shria turned to the giant, hissing. “I said I would take care of this!” she snapped.

Apollo’s head appeared in place of the Gorn head. “You should have bowed down to me when you had the chance, Garcia” Apollo said. His head return to that of a Gorn giant and he tossed lightning at Garcia.

Across the room a replicator came to life and began manifesting small, robotic orbs capable of launching their own static discharge, almost as powerful as the lightning

Apollo was tossing. One at a time the orbs launched themselves into the room, so that another orb could be created.

“Belts! And spread out!” Garcia yelled, activating his Emergency Life Belt. A force field went up around him, casting a blue aura, stifling his breathing, tickling every nerve cell on his exposed skin, but, to his relief, it diminished the effects of the lightning. Duana and Ilona stepped forwards to further reduce the amount of force being directed at their Captain. The shields also protected them from the Gorn projectile weapons, forcing the Gorn to use swords to make a kill. The Gorn soldiers in Shria’s office came charging forward, meeting Klingon and Nausicaan in their preferred form of battle while Garcia drew two, Gorn type weapons and began to unload both into Apollo. The weapons had been modified to cancel out the shield directly in front of the barrel, so that he could shoot.

Apollo staggered back, having to focus his energies on self healing and shields of his own. The Apollo Gorn cried in rage.

“Don’t do that!” Shria yelled at Garcia. “You’ll kill us all!”

Several orbs gathered around Garcia, each taking a turn to unleash their energy on him as they cycled through their energy build up before discharge. Garcia pocketed one of the Gorn weapons, retrieved his phaser and aimed at the replicator, but Apollo pointed at the phaser and its power systems went dead. While Apollo was distracted disarming Garcia, Duana and Ilona maneuvered in closer to attack, firing nearly at point blank range with their Gorn projectile weapons.

Up against his own technology, specifically Duana and Ilona, Apollo was holding his own, but he also knew if he killed Garcia, the telepathic link to the manifesting orbs would be destroyed and Duana and Ilona would disappear with them. The Gorn weapons were taking its toll on him, but he kept after Garcia.

“Kill Garcia, fools!” the Apollo Gorn yelled in Gorn.

The Gorn in the room changed their tactics, going for Garcia, instead of his Away Team. Garcia was forced to shoot a Gorn soldier in the head, the very moment after he had reloaded his Gorn weapon. Another static discharge occurred and Garcia jumped up and grabbed the orb. It held its position strong enough that he was able to lift his feet up and swing, jumping closer to the replicator. He unleashed his entire clip of ammo into the replicator, destroying it and causing the last orb to be replicated to explode. He rolled out of the way of an attacking Gorn, discharging the clip from his weapon. He came up, reloaded, and fired at the orbs that were following him like a swarm of wasps. Unprotected by life belt shields, the Gorn were taking on minor wounds from the exploding orbs. Shria ran to her communication platform to summon more help.

Out the Window and across the courtyard, Garcia saw the flashing of lights in mirroring offices and noted that every replicator he could see was manifesting robotic orbs. He bolted for the door and saw the first wave of orbs approaching. He shot at the orbs, hitting one, and the resulting explosion took out a hand full of them, going down the line of orbs like falling dominoes, but it didn’t get all of them. The ones that survived kept coming and more were being created every minute. Garcia shut the door and bolted it. He hit his communicator badge.

“Trini!” Garcia called, shooting several Gorn in the knee caps to drop them.

“Emergency beam out. Lock onto the Away Team and energize.”

“Sorry, Captain,” Trini responded. “Our shields are up.”

“Damn it!” Garcia yelled, taking time to reload, ducking a sword that clang against the door behind him. His shield would not prevent a sword from penetrating him. It only blocked most types of energetic weapons, and projectiles which the belt’s computer assumed were micro meteorites, as well as solar and magnetic forms of radiation. Its primary function was to allow people to survive a short time in a vacuum without a space suit. Garcia shot the offending Gorn in the arm and then the leg. “Get my team out of here!”

The door burst open, splintering around the lock mechanism. Several more Gorn entered, each carrying a phaser, and a swarm of robotic orbs swept into the room. Several dozen unleashed their static energy at one time onto Garcia, driving him to the floor in pain. He fired up at them and the resulting explosion was blinding and deafening. The latest Gorn to enter the battle were killed instantly, as they were in the midst of the greatest concentration of orbs. Garcia grabbed up one of the phasers that had been dropped. He aimed it at the ceiling and shot at the chandelier which fell directly on top of the giant Apollo Gorn. Garcia rushed Apollo, dropping the phaser and drawing his sword out, ignoring the constant tagging of static discharge from the remaining orbs. He brought it down in a clear arc to sever the Apollo’s head from his body, but Apollo blocked, using the chandelier. He threw the décor aimlessly, pinning Vristel in the process, as he turned to Garcia with anger, the threat of death glowing in his golden eyes. A sword appeared in the Apollo Gorn’s hands. Outside the large windows of Shria’s office daylight was obscured by a cloud of robotic orbs that moved against the windows like fish in a tank, as if they might break through and get at the aquarium owner.

“So, you want to play swords,” Apollo said in Gorn and swung.

Sword met sword, and Apollo’s mass drove Garcia back. Their swords glowed with the static energy being discharged from the robotic orbs. Ilona and Duana reloaded their weapons and fired point blank into the Apollo Gorn. Apollo staggered and fell back, dropping his sword. He clapped his hands to stir up the air. A wind rolled away from him which took everyone in the room off their feet, tossing them back as the wind cleared a perimeter around the Apollo Gorn. He orientated back to Garcia, his wounds healing in front of Garcia’s eyes. The orbs repositioned themselves. Bullets pushed to the surface of Apollo’s skin and dropped to the floor. He came forwards raising his sword for a killing blow. Losira beamed in and came right up behind him.

“I’m for you,” Losira said, reaching for him.

The Apollo Gorn slapped her down and sent her hurtling across the room. She disintegrated against a pillar. The Apollo Gorn turned back to Garcia just in time to see the sword penetrate his chest. Simultaneously with the insertion of the sword, all the orbs discharged onto Garcia at once. The energy flowed over him, through the sword, and into Apollo. The Gorn giant dissolved away revealing a human of normal proportions. Apollo shook his head, blood pouring from his mouth. Two Losira agents beamed in, ready for more action. All the robotic orbs fell to the ground, whether from shorting out or Apollo being mortally wounded was unknown.

“How can this be?” Apollo asked. “You’re only a mortal.”

Apollo disappeared, revealing his manifestation orb, hovering few centimeters off the floor. The orb dropped to the ground and rolled to Garcia’s feet. For a moment it seemed as if the Orb was dead, no power, but then it began to flicker, and then a steady

illumination that began to brighten lit the orb, accompanied by a whine that was ascending in pitch.

“You’ve killed us all!” Shria yelled.

“Everyone take cover,” Garcia said, picking up the orb and tossing it towards one of the large, plate glass windows. It hit the glass and bounced. Garcia cursed, catching the ball as it came back towards him.

“Duana!” Garcia yelled, exiting the room, wanting her to follow.

Duana followed, her clothes morphing as she altered herself to grow wings. Once in the court yard, she took the ball and took to the skies. Garcia threw himself to the ground, a ground littered with dead robotic orbs. He covered the back of his neck with his hands.

Duana pivoted, stalling, and threw the ball straight up. Gravity was pulling her down, back first, before she rolled into a dive to accelerate away. The Apollo manifestation orb exploded and every piece of glass in a mile radius shattered. Garcia rolled over just in time to see Duana hit the ground, landing on her back. He went to her and checked her for signs of life.

Duana opened her eyes. “I love this body,” she said.

Garcia grabbed her up to him and hugged her.

“Are you alright?” Duana asked.

“Yes. Are you?” he asked her.

“Yes,” she said, her wings morphing back into her trench coat. She kissed him.

Garcia helped her to her feet, nodding, and they went inside to check on the others. Kitara held her sword at ready, daring Shria to display aggression.

“You’ll pay for this!” Shria said. She was bleeding from wounds caused by flying shards of broken glass and robotic exploding orbs.

“Haven’t you heard?” Garcia told her. “Earth is a moneyless society.”

The chandelier shook and Garcia went over to Vristel. He motioned to Micceal to help him lift the chandelier off her. Micceal did, lifting it all on his own power, and Garcia offered Vristel a hand up.

“Are you hurt?” Garcia asked.

“You must leave,” Vristel said. “And if you take me with you, I will tell you what you need to know.”

Shria drew a weapon to fire at Vistrel, but Kitara was on her before she had a chance to aim. Kitara took the weapon away by force, which meant injuring Shria’s arm.

“Done,” Garcia said, hitting his communicator. “Path Finder, can you get us out of here yet?”

“Possibly,” Undine said. “They’ve not attacked us yet.

“Add one to the beam out list. She’s standing beside me. STS, to the bridge,” Garcia said.

“Lowering shields, commencing transport,” Undine said.

Garcia and his team arrived on the Bridge. Only Garcia was sporting wounds.

“Oh my god,” Trini said, getting up from her station. “You’re bleeding!”

“Not now, Trini,” Garcia said, assessing the situation.

“Shields are back up,” Kitara said, taking her station. “Doctor Jurak to the Bridge.”

"I'm all right," Garcia snapped. He pointed to the screen. "What is that, twenty?"

"Twenty Gorn ships, Captain," Kitara said. "We're surrounded. And Captain, scanners have located the transponder chip that belongs to Tama Orleans."

"We're being hailed by the most distant ship," Trini said.

"On screen," Garcia said.

The Doctor arrived on the Bridge as the Gorn appeared on the monitor. It was the same Gorn who had attacked them only a few weeks ago, recognizable by the scar on its face.

"You are a hard man to find, Captain," the Gorn said.

"Do you have a name?" Garcia asked.

"Why would you want to know?" the Gorn said.

"I need to know what to put on your grave stone," Garcia said.

"You talk pretty big for a man who is about to die," the Gorn said. "These are not the old, clunky Gorn ships I first approached you with."

Garcia brushed Doctor Jurak's hands away and stepped forwards. "Where are they?" Garcia demanded.

The Gorn laughed.

"Captain," Kitara said. "The Federation ship USS Zhukov has just dropped out of warp and is approaching, full impulse."

"Trini, hail them and enlist their help," Garcia said.

"They're hailing us," Trini said.

"Split screen," Garcia said. "Mute the Gorn."

"His name is Shule," Vristel said.

"Captain Garcia." The Star Fleet Officer on the screen was Captain Gleason, a person Garcia knew by reputation only. "You will stand down and prepare to be boarded."

"Captain Gleason," Garcia said, pausing only to observe information scrolling across a terminal feed next to him.

"Shule's ship is leaving the area, half impulse," Kitara announced, confirming Garcia's observation.

"Don't let him get away," Garcia said, with a great deal more emotions than he should have to assure Captain Gleason that he was the reasonable party here. Shule's ship was passing Gleason's ship. "Helm, pursuit course."

"Captain! They'll start firing on us the moment we move," Undine said.

McKnight hesitated, looking to Garcia for further instructions.

"Garcia," Captain Gleason said, standing up. "Don't make me open fire on you. Stand down."

"That Gorn ship has abducted Federation citizens," Garcia said. "Please, don't let them leave the area."

Shule offered a human wave to Garcia, taunting him.

"The citizens he's abducted are children," Garcia continued.

"You are here by ordered to stand down," Captain Gleason said. "Your accusations will be addressed through the proper channels, but you will stand down and allow your ship to be boarded, per Star Fleet command."

Shule held up a small capsule which Garcia recognized as the standard transponder implant that people sometimes carried. He suspected that it belonged to his daughter, knew that if it did it had to have been removed surgically, and his anger bled all over his face. Shule's image faded away as his ship jumped to warp.

"Help me!" Vristel yelled, going towards the screen. "I'm being kidnapped. He's attacked the Gorn capital!"

"Oh, bloody hell," Garcia cursed. "Screen off. Losira, maintain the holographic of our ship in place, helm, take us ahead, full impulse, Losira, activate phasing cloak in three, two, one!"

The Path Finder phased out of sync with normal matter and passed through the Gorn ship directly in front of it as it accelerated away. The phasing cloak lasted just barely long enough for them to pass through the Gorn ship. Once they reverted back to normal matter, all the Klingons collapsed to the floor. Vristel turned on Garcia and attacked him, slamming him down hard. He landed in his seat and pushed her away with his feet. She tore his pants legs with a claw as she fell away. Duana and Ilona pinned her down.

"Put her in the Brig," Garcia said. "Pursuit course, warp six. Go, McKnight. Don't let them get away. Doctor Misan, get up here and wake up my Bridge staff."

The Tempest skin gave signs indicating that the Path Finder was about to jump to warp and all the Gorn ships opened fire on it. The torpedoes disappeared into the holographic projection. Some of the torpedoes collided with each other, but most passed right through the holographic Tempest and hit the Gorn ship on the corresponding side. As soon as the Path Finder went into warp, the holographic image of the Tempest that had appeared to have been trapped by the Gorn ships dissolved. Captain Gleason of the USS Zhukov, an Ambassador Class Starship, pursued the only obvious lead left to him. He went after Shule's ship.

Misan and a nurse arrived on the Bridge and immediately went to work reviving the Klingon Bridge crew.

"Are we catching up?" Garcia said.

"He's matched our speed at warp six," Lt. McKnight said.

"Go to warp seven," Garcia said.

"Warp seven," McKnight said.

Garcia stared at the screen, as if willing it to show him what he wanted to see. He gripped his left wrist furiously, wanting to reach out with the Kelvan technology and stop the ship dead in space.

"Where is he?" Garcia demanded, wondering why the Gorn ship wasn't visible on the screen yet.

"He's adjusting his speed to match. I can't believe you fell for that old trick," Undine said, glancing back at Vristel as she was led away.

"Vristel seemed sincere," Garcia said, forcing himself to take a stick of gum out of his pocket as opposed to holding his wrist. "I can't assume everyone is out to get me. Go to warp eight, damn it."

McKnight shot a look at Garcia that suggested she would not tolerate being spoken to like that, but complied none the less.

"He's adjusting his speed again," Undine said.

"Is our cloak malfunctioning?" Garcia asked.

“Cloak is functioning,” Kitara answered.

Garcia shot her a look because she sounded groggy, but she was definitely awake and functioning. Tuer began to come around and immediately began to wretch. The nurse had been prepared; she handed him a plastic airsickness bag.

“Vistrel must have a transponder on her,” Garcia said, realizing what was going on. “Can we isolate that signal and jam it?”

“I’ll go cut it out of her,” Kitara said.

“I need you at your post,” Garcia said, repositioning his self right behind McKnight at the helm. “Increase to warp nine.”

“Warp nine,” McKnight announced. “We’re gaining.”

“Oh, isn’t this fun!”

Garcia turned at the sound of the female voice that he had only heard previously in a dream. She was sitting in his chair, sideways, legs propped up on the right arm rest.

“Q!” Garcia said, waving his guards to halt. “Get off my ship.”

“That’s Q?” McKnight asked.

“Good times,” Amanda Q said. “Doesn’t this remind you of the old days, when it was okay to chase down a Gorn ship in pursuit of vengeance?”

“I don’t have time for this, Q,” Garcia said. “Can you rescue my daughter from that ship?”

“Don’t insult me,” Amanda Q said. “Of course I can. But I won’t. I’ve got a prime directive to follow. Non interference with primitive cultures, isn’t that how yours goes? Oh, but wait, you’re Captain Garcia. You don’t care about things like prime directives.”

Garcia turned back to McKnight. “Are we gaining?”

“Negative,” McKnight said. “They’ve increased to warp nine point eight.”

“Then take us to warp nine point nine,” Garcia instructed. “Surely you anticipated that.”

“I also anticipated that he can’t maintain warp nine point eight and we should wait for him to over heat his engines,” McKnight said.

“Nine point nine, please,” Garcia said.

“His ship is slowing,” Undine announced.

“Prepare a tractor beam and warm up the photon torpedoes. I want a surgical strike, engine nacelles only,” Garcia said.

Garcia and everyone were suddenly shifted forward as if the inertial dampeners had failed. He grabbed hold of McKnight’s chair for support and their heads bumped.

“We’re stopping!” McKnight said. “Warp eight, seven point five, warp five, four, two... Dead stop, space zero speed.”

“What’s going on?” Garcia demanded, rubbing his forehead. “Q are you responsible for this?”

“You didn’t see this coming?” Q asked.

The main viewer came to life with pulsating, concentric circles of colors. “We are the Metrones. You have once again violated our space with violent intentions. Have you regressed in the hundred years since we last spoke with your kind?”

“Release my ship,” Garcia said. “You have no right to interfere in our affairs.”

“You are in our space,” the Metrones said. “You will now participate in our conflict resolution program.”

Garcia took a step back, his guards surrounding him as if they might be able to prevent him from being snatched away as Kirk had been over a hundred years ago by the same people. Nothing happened. The light on the screen faded.

“That’s it?” Kitara asked.

A female Metrone appeared suddenly on the Bridge, between the helm and the main viewer. She pointed to Q. “You are interfering in Metrone affairs.”

“I will not allow you to take my Captain,” Amanda Q said. “Especially when he’s in the right.”

“Your presence here is not only unwanted, but it is a violation of the treaty between our two species,” the Metrone said.

“Would you two carry this elsewhere? I have some killing I would like to get back to,” Garcia said.

“Get out of our space,” the Metrone told Q.

Amanda Q stood, taking two steps forwards. “Let my people go,” Q said.

“They’re violating our laws and trespassing in our space, disturbing our peace with their crude vibrations and ill thoughts,” the Metrones said.

“That’s what they do,” Q said. “They’re people.”

The Metrone moved closer to Q. “You will leave our space or suffer the consequences.”

“Bring it, Metrone bitch,” Amanda Q said.

The two deities locked arms in what appeared to be a fierce struggle. Lightning rippled away from them and the Path Finder shook. The two deities fell away from each other, apparently winded.

“My ship is not an arena!” Garcia bellowed.

The two deities went at it again. The moment they came into contact with each other, a bright light blinded everyone. When they could see again, the two deities were nowhere to be seen. Garcia looked to Kitara.

“They’re gone,” Kitara said.

“And so is the Gorn ship,” Undine said.

“Wait, found it,” Kitara said. “They’re approaching the nearest Class M planet to our current position.”

“Take us there, McKnight,” Garcia ordered, putting a hand on her shoulder as if to make up for the shouting earlier. “Best speed.”

“They will arrive before us and once they’re on the ground, they will have time to fortify their position,” Kitara said.

“I want access to the Kelvan transporter,” Garcia demanded.

“No sir,” Undine said. “You’re already in a state and there’s no telling what sort of havoc you will cause plugging into that.”

“I vote with Lt. Undine,” Kitara said.

“I think we should give him this,” Losira said.

“Two out of three against,” Kitara said. “Let it be, Captain.”

Garcia wanted to break something, but he sat down in his chair and sulked. “Prep two shuttles, full battle group. I want to take them and I want to take them alive. Doctor Jurak, if you’re feeling well enough, find that transponder Vristel has own her and remove it.”

“I will treat your wounds first,” Jurak said. “Don’t argue. If you’re going into another battle, you must be at your optimum condition.”

“Captain,” Undine said. “The Zhukov will arrive twenty two minutes after we do.”

“That’s fine,” Garcia said. “Just keep our cloaks up.”

“Captain,” Trini asked. “Incoming call from Star Fleet. It’s Pressman. Priority One.”

“On screen,” Garcia said, not bothering to take it in private.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?!” Pressman raged.

“I’m doing so much. Could you be more specific?” Garcia asked.

“I just got a call from Orion saying you’ve opened up a brothel and are now selling slaves,” Pressman said, throwing stuff off his desk. “There’s a report from Iotia that you failed to obey the directive of a senior captain, and now there’s a report just in saying you’ve attacked the Gorn capital on Cestus Three. Have you lost your freaking mind?! You’re going to destroy everything we’re working for.”

“Obviously I can’t be at all these places at once, Admiral,” Garcia said. “You figure it out and tell people what you want them to believe. I will contain this here.”

“How do you expect to do that? Are you going to blow up the Zhukov, too?” Admiral Pressman demanded. “You’re going to need a miracle to save your ass this time.”

“I said I will take care of it,” Garcia said. He turned to Trini and told her to kill the communiqué, slashing hand movement across the neck. “Trini, get a message to Gowr via the Gate. If his modifications to the warp drive are finished, I want him to transwarp to our location, cloaked. Have him remained cloaked until further notice.”

“Bait and switch?” Undine asked.

“If it plays out right,” Garcia said. “But I could still use a miracle.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

“You okay?” Tatiana Kletsova asked Garcia, as she huddled up next to him, behind a large boulder they were using for cover.

Garcia wiped his mouth from having just been sick. He buried his vomit. “You mean besides the fact the meds I take to be around my daughter when we recover her makes me sick, or that our phasers aren’t functioning and our transporters aren’t working and even Losira can’t materialize herself with the Kaladan holographic projection system?” Garcia asked.

“The Metrones are probably interfering,” Kletsova said, trying not to dwell over her concerns of what his antidote was doing to him. “This is their planet, right? Their rules?”

Garcia nodded. “It is,” Garcia said. “Ever had one of those De Ja Vu feelings where you think you’ve been somewhere before?”

Kletsova shook her head no.

“I’m having one of those experiences right now,” Garcia said, looking around at the terrain. “I get them frequently, and I’m sure it’s a brain malfunction, or something to do with all the damn mind melds, but it still gives me the creeps.”

Kitara dashed up to Garcia’s position.

“I just received a private message from Admiral Sheaar,” Kitara said.

“And?” Garcia asked.

“He ordered me to kill you and take over the mission,” Kitara said.

“Oh,” Garcia said. “Is that all?”

“No,” Kitara said, and changed the subject. “I distributed a number of anti ballistic packages which should be able to stop ninety percent of any projectiles Shule may fire at us.”

“Anti bullets?” Kletsova asked.

“Basically,” Garcia said. “It’s why modern warfare doesn’t use projectile weapons, mostly. Besides the fact you don’t want to fire bullets in a spacecraft, any descent computer hooked to a scanner can detect bullets and fire a second projectile to intercept the first. It’s fairly effective when there’s distance between the shooter and the target, with diminishing returns the closer the target gets to the shooter because of the distance time relationship to detecting and intercepting the bullet.”

“It still sounds dangerous,” Kletsova said.

“Most the time the two bullets collide and turn to dust,” Kitara assured her. “Sometimes fragments of the bullet and anti bullet go off in new direction, but usually at a sufficient loss of energy that they’re less likely to kill.”

“So, what does that mean for us?” Kletsova asked.

“It means sword versus sword,” Kitara said, smiling. “Captain, we have all our people in place. Whenever you are ready.”

Garcia nodded and activated his communicator. “Trini, open a hailing frequency to the Gorn.”

“You’re on,” Trini announced.

Garcia commenced with his speech. “Captain Shule, this is Garcia. Your position is compromised. You’re surrounded, out numbered, and out classed. Let your prisoners go and we will be on our way.”

Garcia waited for a response. The air was cool, and the sun was low on the horizon, casting shadows over the rocks, bringing out different hues in the back ground stone and sand. He looked to Kitara and Kletsova, admiring their faces in the dimming light as they studied the enemy ship. They were both uniquely strong, almost polar in their basic personality differences, but still similar in many ways. He ignored his feelings of affection for them and offered a brave smile when they both caught him staring at them. He got to his feet, counted visibly with his fingers, and the three of them moved out, with him in the lead.

A turret on the top of the Gorn ship pivoted around and start firing on them. It was only natural for people to duck in response, which Kletsova did, but Garcia kept moving forwards, faith in his equipment and personnel to keep him safe. Kitara followed, trusting the technology to protect her just as she trusted her own skills. The Gorn guns were smoking, as well as the six anti ballistics packages, and all of them were making a horrendous noise. A black dust began to rain over the center of the battle field, debris from the amount of ordinance being used.

“This dust can’t be good to breathe,” Kletsova yelled over the din. Of course, it was healthier than the alternative, she thought.

And then someone stepped on a land mind.

“Pull everyone back,” Garcia said.

Kitara gave the signal to withdraw. Warriors pulled the injured back. The Gorn ship ceased firing with the anti-ballistics packages echoing. A light humming noise came from the packages as they sought more targets.

Back at the rock Garcia had chosen for cover, he asked, “Can the tricorder not detect the land mines?”

“Apparently not,” Kitara said. “I say we proceed in and deal with the losses later.”

And then came the sound of mortar fire. They were close enough to the source to recognize the rush of air associated with the lobbing of the mortar, followed by the thunder right overhead as the shell blew up. The anti-ballistics were able to detonate the mortar in the air. The sky brightened over head, chasing their shadows away. Bright yellows, magenta, bordered by patches of scarlet and ruby, cooling to violet and lavender as it died away, expanded across their field of vision. Heat radiated from the sky as if they were in a sauna and the smell of smoke and powder was intense. The heat raining down on them was so concentrated it felt like hot rain pouring in streams. The explosions rumbled through their bodies, rattling their organs and their rib cages just as the music had at Club Bliss.

“They’ll eventually exhaust our supply of anti bullets,” Kitara yelled.

Garcia acknowledged her by nodding and then pointed to his left wrist. Kitara shook her head no.

“It’s too risky, especially with the meds you took,” Kitara said, moving closer to him to speak directly in his ear. “And there’s no guarantee the Metrones will allow that to function, either, seeing how they disabled our transporters.”

The shelling came to a stop. The silence that fell over them was a relief and eerie at the same. The silence and the immediate memory of intense sound reminded Garcia of Club Bliss after the music had stopped. He thought of Leeta again. He had to exercise his

mantra to stay focus on the moment instead of becoming lost in his memory tangent. His communicator badge rang.

“Garcia here,” Garcia said.

“It would seem that we’re evenly matched,” Shule said.

“Then why don’t you come out and play?” Garcia asked.

“You out number us,” Shule said.

“You’re Gorn. I consider that balanced,” Garcia said.

“I am willing to negotiate a trade. Your life for both of the girls,” Shule said.

“Deal,” Garcia said without hesitation, motioning Kletsova to remain silent.

“Come towards the ship,” Shule said. “By yourself.”

“Captain, no,” Kletsova said.

“Everyone hold their ground,” Garcia instructed. “Kitara, no matter what happens, this ship doesn’t leave this solar system until you have my girls, you got that?”

“Aye, Captain,” Kitara said.

“It would also be nice if you rescue me, but not a priority,” Garcia said. “Girls first.”

Kitara nodded. Both she and Garcia stood and she accompanied him back to the clearing. From there, Garcia proceeded forwards, towards the ship, not even caring where his feet fell on the ground. There would be nothing he could do about the land mines, except hope the Gorn had a remote off/on switch.

“Hold there,” Shule said, emerging from his ship. “Discard your weapons and armor. Your boots, as well.”

Garcia threw his Gorn weapon back towards Kitara. He dropped his armor where he stood and kicked his boots off. A compulsion made him take his socks off as well. He hated wearing dirty socks. He stood, bare feet in the warm sand. A Gorn came over to him and examined him thoroughly, looking for any sort of concealed weapons. Three more Gorn emerged from the ship, along with the hostages. Shule stepped forwards. Two Gorn held projectile weapons aimed at the back of the hostages head and were directing them forwards. They were both still alive, and blind folded, but they would be dead instantly if the Gorn pulled the trigger. The anti-ballistics would not work in this situation.

“Come forwards, Garcia,” Shule said, his voice translated over Garcia’s comm. badge.

Garcia came forward as directed.

“I’ve changed my mind,” Shule said. “Your life for both of these is insufficient trade. I will only give one to...”

Garcia pointed at Nikita Carter. “Let her walk away,” Garcia said.

Shule laughed. “Interesting choice,” Shule said.

“She has nothing to do with this,” Garcia said. “She’s not my child.”

“I would have thought otherwise, the way she writes about you on the Interstellar Net,” Shule said. He nodded to the soldier. The soldier pushed her. “Walk.”

“Niki, just walk straight and fast, don’t stop,” Garcia said.

“Tam?” Niki asked.

“Walk, Niki, now,” Garcia said, using a command tone that made her comply without further questions. He looked to Kitara who was ready to receive Niki, motioning two of the warrior to prepare to spring into action in case there was a double cross.

Shule discharged his weapon into Garcia's leg, dropping him to the ground. The moment he did that, the Klingon warriors scrambled for Niki. Kitara started running for the Captain, but she made it as far as Niki before they Gorn disappeared back inside their ship, dragging Garcia. The Gorn Captain fired at Kitara, but the anti-ballistics package intercepted the rounds. Kitara and the warriors retreated with the girl who was now crying, unsure of what was happening about her, as they scrambled to get her to safety.

Kletsova received Niki and took her blind fold off. When Niki saw who it was, she embraced Tatiana around the neck, the flood gates to her tears going wide opened.

"Shhh, it's okay," Kletsova assured her. "You're with us now."

"Get her back to the shuttle," Kitara said.

Kletsova nodded and led Niki away from the arena.



The Gorn shoved Garcia into a holding cell, where he collapsed on the floor. Thanks to the type of weapons the Gorn use, he wouldn't bleed to death, but he was effectively hobbled. So much for his escape plan. Shule pulled Tama Orleans next to him and removed her blind fold.

"Go to your father," Shule insisted.

Tama Orleans shook her head no and started to cry. "No, please," Tama pleaded.

"I said go to him," Shule said, aiming his weapon at Garcia. "Do it or I will kill him."

"Tama Orleans, it's okay," Garcia said, motioning her to move towards him. "Come to me."

"Go," Shule said, pushing Tama Orleans.

Tama staggered forwards, hesitant. Garcia held a hand out to her. When she came into his grasping range, he took her arm and pulled her to him. She collapsed to the floor, embracing him and crying.

Shule seemed disappointed.

"You shouldn't believe every rumor you hear," Garcia told Shule.

Shule activated the force field on the cell and departed in a huff.

Garcia turned his attention to Tama, checking her for injuries, as well as hugging her and smelling her hair, and kissing her, finding that the void in his heart had been suddenly filled by finally getting to meet his daughter. He found several injuries on her, consistent with beatings, and a cut where they had opened her up to remove her transponder tag, but other than being stressed, she seemed fine.

"Are you in pain?" he asked her.

She nodded her head yes, still unable to speak, but really not caring anything for her own pains to make any complaints. For her, it was more than just meeting her dad for the first time, it was also finally meeting the reality versus the fantasy of him. All the rumors, biographies, and personal antidotes provided by media personalities, and the stories Persis had given of Garcia had given him a bigger than life aura, but in person he seemed like just a normal person. Only he wasn't. He was Tammias Parkin Arblaster-Garcia. Her animosity towards him for having not been present in her life clashed with her absolute love for him, the emotions trying to override her intellectual understanding of why he had stayed out of her life.

And then Tama Orleans smacked him. "I thought you would die if you came into contact with me," Tama said, crossly.

“I’m experimenting with a new medicine that should allow us to be together for short intervals,” Garcia assured her.

Tama hugged him even more fiercely. “This is all my fault,” she cried.

“Cry for being scared, cry for missing home, but do not think for one moment this is your fault,” Garcia said, holding her tight. “It’s not your fault. It’s not my fault. In this particular instance, it’s Shule’s fault.”

The distant sounds of thunder indicated the Gorn had resumed firing on his crew. Ten minutes of that and the ship began to shudder as the mortars started striking the ground. The anti-ballistic packages were now empty and his crew had no doubt retreated to outside the mortars firing range.

“Okay, it’s time to go,” Garcia said. “Up.”

“Uh?” Tama asked.

Garcia used the wall for support to climb to his one good leg and then hopped towards the cell door. The controls to the barricade were visible on the other side, which were a series of toggle switches. He reached out with his mind intending to use his telekinesis to turn the force fields off. Tama just stared at him. He frowned.

“The drugs must be interfering with that part of the brain,” Garcia said.

Two illuminated orbs entered the Brig of the Gorn ship and two females materialized around the orbs.

“We were able to enter the ship as soon as the Gorn opened the door,” Duana said. “We’ve disabled their warp system, and they don’t know it yet. They’re too busy playing war.”

Ilona switched all the toggle switches to the off position. The last one opened Garcia’s cell. Tama stepped outside of the cage and Garcia leaned into Duana for assistance walking.

“I’m not going to be any good in a fight, so we just need to get off this ship,” Garcia said.

“We know a way off,” Ilona said, opening up the weapons locker. She tossed Garcia and Duana a weapon before taking one for herself.

Ilona led the way down the corridor to a life pod.

“You’re joking, right?” Garcia asked.

“It has enough power to go straight up and could be out of the firing range in twenty seconds,” Ilona said.

“Before it comes crashing down,” Garcia said. “This is not a Star Fleet pod.”

A bullet hit the wall accompanied by the sonic boom associated with the weapon. Tama screamed. Garcia pushed his daughter into the life pod, firing back. His projectiles, accompanied by the projectiles from Duana and Ilona’s weapons, took the Gorn out, as well as two display panels and a console that erupted into fire.

“Everybody in,” Garcia said.

Duana closed the door to the life pod and then pushed the launching sequence. Even though it was built for a Gorn survivor, there was hardly standing room in the pod for all of them. Garcia made a noise of discomfort from the shooting pain in his leg, and Tama cried out, apologetic but also freaked for having accidentally touched the hole in his leg.

The pod accelerated away from the ship.

“We’re not going to make orbit,” Ilona said.

“I could have told you that,” Duana said.

“I think I did tell you that,” Garcia said.

Tama screamed as the pod started to fall. A parachute deployed, simultaneously as airbags in the pod deployed. The pod crashed into the hill side and began to roll. It leaped several times, accelerating, but finally got stuck, wedged between two boulders. Duana used a knife that she had manifested with her suit to deflate the airbags. Everyone was piled on top of Garcia.

“Everyone off my leg,” Garcia groaned.

“Sorry,” Tama said.

“Where’s the door,” Ilona asked.

“Beneath Tam,” Duana said.

“Wonderful,” Ilona said. “I can’t reach the controls.”

“I can,” Tama said.

“Push blue blue green,” Ilona instructed.

They could hear a motor whine and the pod shifted, settling closer to one of the boulders. Garcia winced in pain.

“I’ll go out and assess the situation,” Ilona said, returning to the orb state in order to squeeze out of the opening. Duana followed.

“What are they?” Tama said.

“Basically, holograms,” Garcia said. “Can you get out?”

“I don’t think so,” Tama said.

“Tam, Tama Orleans,” Duana said. “Brace yourselves.”

“Oh god,” Tama said.

The pod shifted and began to roll again when the rock holding them in place gave way, both rolling down the incline. Garcia held onto his daughter, trying to prevent her from being injured as the pod rolled to a new position. When the pod came to a halt, the door was still blocked, so Garcia used his one good leg and braced his back against the hull and shoved. It rolled a little further and Garcia pushed Tama out and barely managed to scramble out of the pod himself before once again it started to roll madly down the face of the hill. It went air borne and disappeared over the side. Duana and Ilona scrambled down the hillside to give Garcia and Tama Orleans a hand. Garcia looked towards the drop off and back to his mental companions.

“Do you see that?!” Garcia snapped at them, pointing at the drop off.

“Sorry,” Duana said. “It kind of got away from us.”

Garcia hugged his daughter to him. “Are you hurt, baby?”

“No, I’m fine,” Tama Orleans said. She started giggling. And then she started laughing. “I’m sorry.”

“What’s so funny?” Ilona demanded.

“I’m finally in a Garcia Escape novel,” Tama Orleans said.

Garcia pulled her firmly to him, his eyes blind with tears of relief and from pain.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Have you ever felt you have been somewhere or done something that you haven’t done yet?” Garcia asked Seven of Nine, as he stared down the hill into the Gorn Village. The village was now occupied by Voth soldiers and scientist as they examined the monolith and everything else they could get their hands on.

“You mean like De Ja Vu?” Seven asked.

“Yes,” Garcia said.

“Yes,” Seven said. “I have memory fragments from various individuals that were assimilated by the Borg. Every now and then something will trigger a memory and I will have the illusion that I have experienced the thing before. Are you experiencing this?”

“Um, I don’t think we’re talking about the same thing,” Garcia said.

“Don’t worry about it. I get that feeling all the time,” Gary Seven said.

Isis mewed an affirmation of her own.

There was a shout from below and a number of soldiers near the monolith began to move away. A few moments later an explosion occurred at the monolith. When the smoke cleared, no apparent damage had been induced to the structure.

“They’re trying to blast their way into it,” Ket said.

“Its okay, Ket,” Garcia assured her. “They’re not getting in there with anything they’ve got.”

“And how do you propose to get us in there?” Seven asked.

“I have a secret code,” Garcia said.

“Really?” Seven said, dubious of Garcia’s statement.

“The only problem is, how do we get to it?” Gary Seven asked.

“I sure wish I had my phaser,” Afu said.

“We’ll wait till dark and try and sneak up on it,” Garcia said.

“Once my grand father notifies the others of our intentions, they’ll be expecting us,” Ket said.

“How many can you take out with your toy?” Garcia asked Gary Seven.

“Not enough to keep us from being shot,” Gary answered.

Isis mewed.

“I don’t think so,” Gary said.

“What did she say?” Garcia asked.

“She suggested that she and I make a distraction. They give chase to us, you go to the monolith and get inside,” Gary said.

“That’s a suicide mission,” Afu said.

“It’s possible I could use my temporal transporter to get away,” Gary Seven said.

“Why don’t we just use the temporal transporter to go get help and come back with the right tools,” Afu asked.

“It doesn’t work that way,” Gary Seven said. “We leave this point in time without fixing the problem, we may not arrive at our destination because the alteration will have prevented us from being in the first place. Now, there are a number of temporal portals that were hidden throughout the Universe, created for and by my benefactors, and placed millions and millions of years ago on rogue planets that would never be found so that there would always be at least one operating time machine in place if there was a need. The Guardian of Time is an example of this. And though theoretically I might

arrive at a destination in the future even if we messed up here, there is no guarantee that my particular access to a temporal portal will be there.”

“Hey,” Afu interrupted, tapping out. “Sorry I asked.”

Garcia studied the playing field, assessing the pieces as if it were nothing more than a game board. The greatest variable in question was how the Voth would respond psychologically to a chase. Would they fall back around the monolith to protect their position, or would they arrogantly pursue one stray alien thinking it to be an easy target?

“Let’s get to the bottom of this hill without being seen and decide from there,” Garcia said.

It took them thirty minutes to get down the hill, using brush and boulders to hide behind. Once at the bottom of the hill they found sufficient cover to huddle together as a group. Garcia analyzed the situation from his new perspective. There was a Voth vehicle near by. A soldier stood next to it, kicking over Gorn artifacts. A Gorn scientist type scolded the soldier for disturbing the artifacts.

“He’s an anthropologist,” Ket explained. “The soldiers are probably in the way of legit scientific study.”

“No doubt,” Garcia said. He gauged the distance between the soldier and the nearby Gorn hut and the next closest soldier. “Can you take the scientist and the soldier out?”

Gary Seven nodded and raised what appeared to be a ball point pen. Garcia motioned him to wait, watching the distant soldiers.

“Everyone else stays here,” Garcia instructed. He watched as a more distant group of Voth broke into what appeared to be laughter. “When I say go, you, me, and Isis are going to run towards the two by the jeep. You take them out and we drag them into that hut. Clear? Ket?”

Ket moved closer to Garcia. “Yes?” she asked. “What can I do?”

“How do you say, help, an alien is escaping, in Voth?” Garcia asked.

Ket told him and he thanked her. “Don’t worry. We’re going to try and not kill anyone. This just stuns them for a while. Right Gary?”

Gary Seven nodded.

Another explosion at the Monolith drew all the Voth’s attention.

“Now,” Garcia said.

Garcia ran towards the Voth scientist and solitary soldier. Gary was right with him, firing his pen. The two Voth went down silently. Isis ran along side of them as if she were just a dog going for a mid day run with her master. Garcia and Gary quickly and efficiently dragged the two Voth inside the Gorn tent and found materials to tie them up.

“Did anyone see us?” Gary asked.

Isis mewed.

“We would know already had anyone saw us,” Garcia said, echoing Isis’s opinion. He took the weapon from the soldier and examined it. It was basically a machine gun, with an unspecified amount of ammo, cartridge loaded, and a larger grip and firing mechanism to match that of the Voth hand. He mentally prepared himself for the possibility of killing some Voth to meet his objective. Garcia also found a tranquilizer gun, with six darts that could be loaded one at a time. He loaded one into the chamber and secured the gun to the Voth belt he had appropriated. Individual pouches on

the belt held a knife, compass, and other miscellaneous items one might find on a modern day soldier. Garcia moved around the small hut, staring through the holes in the wall to spy what was going on around them. He joined Gary Seven at the door and studied the jeep.

“The controls seems fairly straight forward,” Gary Seven said.

Garcia nodded. “The closest group of soldiers is about thirty meters east,” Garcia said. “And they’re all huddled together, sharing food. If you could take them all out in one shot and drive along the rock face, you would have a clear shot at open terrain. About ten kilometers west is a point where the river meets a cliff. If you jump to the center of the fall, there’s enough depth that you’ll be okay.”

Gary Seven looked dubiously at Garcia. Isis mewed, reminding Gary that she hated getting wet. Garcia had a flash back to the scene where Butch Cassidy and the Sundance kid were having a similar quarrel about jumping off the cliff into the water: “I can’t swim.” “Hell, the falls going to kill you.”

“What if they don’t chase me?” Gary Seven asked, interrupting Garcia’s day dream.

“Oh, they’re going to chase you,” Garcia assured him.

“You seem certain,” Gary Seven said.

“If you don’t draw their attention when you start to drive off, I’m going to fire a round into the air and yell in Voth, ‘help, an alien is escaping,’ while remaining hidden behind this hut,” Garcia said.

“Wonderful,” Gary Seven said.

Isis rubbed up against Garcia’s legs. Garcia picked her up and she nuzzled his cheek.

“We’ll be fine,” Garcia said. “Good luck.”

Isis ran to the jeep first and jumped in. Her collar glowed as she started the vehicle. No one seemed to notice. Gary Seven steeled himself, knowing he had faced worse challenges in his days, and then realized, as the Gary Seven clone, he had actually never faced any challenges. Sure, he had all the memories of all the adventures of his original template, but he, himself, was a rookie. Without further delay, he went to the jeep, hopped in, took a moment to adjust the seat so he could reach the pedals, pulled a shifter into drive, and headed away. The nearby Voth huddled together turned to appraise the situation, saw the human pointing at them. All but one went for their weapons. The other got on his radio and alerted the command ops. They all went down, stunned by Gary Seven’s weapon. He accelerated away. To add to the realism, Garcia fired several rounds into the air, yelling; “Help! An alien is escaping.”

And the chase was on.

As all the Voth gathered to one side of the playing field, Garcia waved for his group to join him. Garcia instructed Afu in the use of the machine gun and handed it to him. He then instructed them to follow. Garcia ran to the group of downed Voth soldiers, tossed Seven a machine gun, gave two to Elika and Ket, instructing them to simply carry them, before grabbing one of his own. Seven and Afu smartly took a moment to each take Voth army belts. They then ran towards the Monolith, trying to keep themselves hidden behind Gorn huts. Apparently not all the Voth were going to pursue the alien, but they were all watching and shouting.

Garcia arrived first at the Monolith, just in time to pick up a bundle of dynamite attached to a timer. He adjusted the timer, tossed the package away, and instructed everyone to get down.

Earth and debris went into the sky and rained down on them. Voth soldiers turned towards the explosion, saw the humans, took up defensive positions, and opened fire. Afu and Garcia returned fire, dropping several Voth, forcing the rest of the Voth to take better cover.

“Now would be a good time to open the Monolith,” Seven of Nine said.

“Cover me,” Garcia said, hopping up on the Monolith, making himself a prime target.

Garcia activated his communicator, causing it to make the familiar chime, and then said the words, “Kirk to Enterprise.” A marble slab slid over to reveal an opening and a staircase leading down into the Monolith. The position of the door and the suddenness in which it opened caused Garcia to fall in. He came right back up, just enough to fire his weapon at the Voth from his new position.

“Let’s go, everyone inside,” Garcia ordered, laying down cover fire.

Seven and Afu came forwards, firing their weapons in unison with Garcia. Ket took Elika by the arm and led her around and up the stairs to the Monolith’s opening. Garcia paused in his firing long enough to allow them to pass him and enter.

“Come on!” Garcia shouted.

Seven of Nine and Afu came up the stairs backwards, continuing to fire. Afu took a hit in the arm, gut, and then the leg. He went down hard. Garcia emerged fully from the opening, firing full tilt. Seven tossed her weapon aside and pulled Afu into the Monolith. Garcia followed, pushing a button on the side of the wall that caused the marble slab to slide back into the closed position.

“Look around here for a medical kit,” Garcia told Seven, dropping his machine gun on the stairs. He removed the knife he had found on the Voth belt and began to cut away Afu’s shirt and pants leg to better examine the wounds.

Elika came to Afu’s side. “How can this be? He bleeds?”

“We’re not gods, Elika,” Garcia said. “We’re human, just like you, and we bleed.”

“No, this doesn’t make sense,” Elika said.

“Its okay, Elika,” Afu said. “Garcia here is a doctor. He’s going to make it better.”

“What kinds of chants do you use for bleeding?” Elika asked.

“I’m not that kind of doctor,” Garcia said, using Afu’s shirt as a bandage to soak up some of the blood. “If you’re going to sit here, sit on that side of him.”

Seven came back with an emergency medical kit. “No tissue regenerator, but there is gauze and iodine and alcohol. A scalpel. A needle and sutures. No antibiotics.”

Garcia nodded. “Do you want to stay conscious?” he asked Afu.

“Is it going to hurt?” Afu said.

“Seriously?” Garcia asked.

“Knock me out,” Afu requested.

Garcia nodded, and executed a Vulcan nerve pinch. Afu went out like a light. Elika started to cry.

“Elika, he is just sleeping,” Garcia said, pouring alcohol over the scalpel.

“How can I help?” Seven asked.

“Bandage his arm and then bandage his leg, just to stop the bleeding for now,” Garcia said. “I’ll tend to those after I take care of this one.”

Seven nodded, assessing the gut wound and realizing Garcia was right. The bullets that had hit the arm and the leg had passed right through and the bleeding could be controlled with tight bandages, but there was only an entrance wound into the abdomen and it looked bad. It was not a sterile procedure, but Garcia acted as if he had done it before, working quickly to retrieve the bullet, stop the bleeding and clean the area as best he could, and then closed up the tissue from inside out. The procedure Garcia did would only prevent him from dying immediately, but if they didn’t find the equivalent of 24th Century, federation medical technology, and soon, Afu was very likely to die regardless of the patch work.

Garcia started on the leg next.

“I can take it from here,” Garcia told Seven. “Start surveying the place. See if you can make sense of any of the controls, or if you can find a hidden supply cache. Advanced medical technology would be really great. Or a transporter so we can beam into a Voth hospital and steal some supplies.”

Seven nodded and Garcia went to work patching up the leg.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Garcia lay quietly, contemplating their situation. The communicators had ceased to function, so he was unable to raise Kitara or the shuttles. They had landed on the wrong side of the hill from the shuttles and the Gorn were in the middle. Garcia was badly wounded and not capable of climbing, much less walking around for any great distance alone, and with help the speed barely passed for a crawl. Duana and Ilona had gone down the hill to recover some of the material from the escape pod hoping to make a stretcher, in order to carry Garcia to expedite their escape. The Gorn were quite probably looking for them. They had three weapons between them, with four shots remaining a piece. Garcia had a reoccurrence of nausea due to the medicines he had taken earlier, no doubt exasperated by the amount pain he was in. Consequently, he had been sick twice. The rolling down the hill in the pod probably hadn't helped matters, either. His eyes kept drifting shut and though he was fairly confident he hadn't gone into shock, he was hesitant to allow himself to fall asleep, but finding it increasingly difficult to resist. Tama was feeling useless, but she stayed by his side during the ordeal.

"Dad," Tama Orleans said, snuggling up against him and looking up into the stars. "Would you sing me Niki's theme song?"

Garcia hugged her reassuringly and started to sing the song he had remade to present to Nikita Carter. It was originally done by a group named Train, on Earth, and was titled "Drops of Jupiter." Though he could hear the full score in his head, Tama of course, only heard his voice and to her, it was just as wonderful as the recording Niki had sent to her. When he finished, she allowed the silence after the song to fill her, counting the stars and dreaming.

"How do you know so much about twentieth century music?" Tama finally asked.

"My birth mother," Garcia said. "Most of it I got through her vicariously, due a telepathic bond we had shared from the moment of conception. The Kelvan had inundated her with twentieth century media trying to create a certain mind set in her that they believed would influence me along a certain sociological tangent, instilling a specific cultural paradigm."

"I'm not telepathic," Tama said. "I tried and tried to send you thoughts and I never heard anything back."

Garcia didn't say anything. There was little he could say. You either were or weren't telepathic, and some humans who actually had the propensity for being one usually convinced themselves they weren't because the rest of their society skeptically dismissed any evidence of telepathy and tended to disparage those who claimed to be.

"I also have no musical abilities at all," Tama continued. "I can barely play a radio."

Garcia patted her shoulder, squeezing him towards him.

"Will you write a theme song for me?" Tama asked.

"Certainly," Garcia agreed. He hated the fact that he felt like he was ignoring his daughter, but he barely had the strength to stay conscious, much less carry on a conversation. And lying here was only increasing his lethargy. He wanted to be up and moving.

"Dad, you're drifting off again," Tama said, sitting up and taking his hand. "You told me to keep you awake, keep you talking. Sing me another song? Tell me my theme song."

Garcia nodded. "Mary Tyler Moore's theme song, Love is All Around," Garcia said. "Yes, I think that fits you. The Joan Jet and the Blackheart version, jazzed up."

"Can you sing it for me?" Tama asked.

Garcia closed his eyes and Tama pushed on his leg. "Dad!"

Garcia came to with a start. "Who can turn the world on with a smile," Garcia sang. "Who can make a nothing day and suddenly make it all seem worth while? Well it's you girl, and you should know it. With each glance and every little movement you show it. Love is all around, no need to waste it. You can have a town, why don't you take it. You're gonna make it after all. You're gonna make it after all."

"That's nice," Tama said. "Is that all? Dad, keep singing."

"How will you make it on your own?" Garcia sang, returning to the slower version. "This world is awfully big, girl this time you're all alone. But it's time you started living. It's time you let someone else do some giving," Garcia sang, concluding with the chorus again.

Ilona and Duana returned. "Come on, we got to move," Duana said, putting the stretcher they had assembled on the ground. The stretcher was made with the material that had been the pod's parachute.

"Company?" Garcia asked.

"Four Gorn," Ilona said. "I think we can take them."

"It's better just to move out," Garcia said. "Why don't you two take Tama on without me."

"We're not leaving you!" Tama said.

"We're not leaving him," Duana assured her. "You're not thinking, Tam. If they kill you, we cease to exist, and then Tama is on her own. We all leave, or we all stay."

"We're too vulnerable in this position, and I'm slowing you down," Garcia said. "Tama's safety is paramount."

"Even carrying you, we should be able to stay ahead of them," Duana said.

"That's why I say you stay here and we go attack them," Ilona said.

"There may be more Gorn lurking in the shadows, waiting to ambush us if we attack their hunting party," Garcia said.

"Told you," Duana told her.

"Let's move out, then," Ilona said.



Tuer scrambled up along side Kitara. "Thirteen Gorn have left the ship and are going around the hill."

"After the pod," Kitara agreed. "Let's split our team into three parties. One goes over the hill and tries to catch up to pod before the Gorn get around the hill. A second team will pursue the thirteen and look for an opportunity to attack. The final team will breach the Gorn ship, look for potential hostages, and if none are found, the ship is to be destroyed. Tuer, you'll take six and pursue the thirteen. Micceal, you will take four and breach the shuttle. If you finish ahead of schedule, you will attempt to catch up with Tuer and his party. Kelly, Jurak, and T'Shanik, you're with me."

The three groups moved out. It was treacherous climbing for Kitara's group because of the near dark. The only light came from the stars above and though it was sufficient to give the entire sky contrast from the terrain that cut the horizon with sharp angles, they often failed to see small rocks that littered the ground. They eventually made

it to the peak and stared out at the horizon and all the stars that lay open to them. There was an explosion that rattled the entire hill side and they knew that Micceal had been successful destroying the Gorn ship. Without words, they started down the other side. The climb down proved to be more arduous than their climb up, but they kept their torches off so as not to provide the Gorn with potential targets. Lt. Kelly nearly slid to her death several times, but Kitara caught her and eased her back on her feet and the trail that they were forging.

“Wait,” Jurak said. He looked over the edge where Lt. Kelly had nearly gone over. He pointed to what appeared to be a light at the base of the hill. It was a red, blinking light. “Is that?”

Kitara nodded. “The pod.”

“That looks like a vertical drop,” Jurak said. “We’ll have to go along that ridge and down and track our way back.”

“I doubt we will find any survivors,” T’Shanik said.

“We’ve come this far,” Kitara said. “No going back.”

They proceeded down the ridge, going the last few feet by hanging and dropping to the ground. The first to fall had been Kitara, taking it on blind faith that it was just a few feet to the ground. It took them nearly a half hour to return back to the pod, which they found empty. Jurak ignited a torch to examine the ground and the life pod.

“They’re obviously alive,” Jurak said, directing the light to examine the tracks. “Two people. They constructed something... A stretcher! They went back up the hill.”

“Oh, hell no” Kelly said. “There’s no way we’re climbing up that, and we took the easiest route down, so if they went up our side, we would have passed them.”

“Which means they got up there, came down here to build a stretcher, went back up to collect someone, probably Garcia since we know him to be wounded, and would have come back down on this side,” Jurak said.

“Then they’re about to run into a Gorn ambush,” Kitara said, following the only conclusion that she could arrive at. “Come on. If we run, we’re bound to catch up with them.”

One of the four Gorn that had pursued Garcia by going over the hill came out of hiding, firing towards Jurak’s torch. The light exploded in Jurak’s hands. The team split up, seeking cover while returning fire. The Gorn continued to concentrate their fire at Jurak’s last known position, giving Kitara time to sneak around them. The exchange of fire seemed to have caused a second fire fight further in the distance. Kitara got in behind the four holding her team down, and dispatched them with her bat’leth. Each Gorn lost their arm first, their life second. She retrieved their weapons, prying them from their dead, but still warm hands.



Garcia and his team wouldn’t have known that his team had been walking straight into an ambush had Tuer and his men not caught up with the Gorn just prior to Garcia going into the trap. Garcia hunkered down with Tama Orleans and sent his two girls in. When the firefight was over, they returned to retrieve Garcia. Tuer was with them.

“Help me up,” Garcia insisted, his anger giving him a second wind. “Are any of them alive?”

“Shule is alive,” Tuer said.

“Duana, Iona, stay with Tama Orleans. Tuer, help me over there,” Garcia said.

Tuer escorted Garcia back to Shule, allowing Garcia to lean on him as he dragged his injured leg. Lt. Micceal and Lt. Bri dragged Shule closer and let him go. He fell to his knees in front of Garcia. Garcia raised his weapon, aiming for Shule's head.

"You won't shoot me," Shule said. "You're Federation. Like Kirk. You're species is weak."

Garcia shot Shule right between the eyes. The Gorn fell dead at Garcia's feet.

"I'm not Kirk," Garcia announced, reveling in his final acceptance of that brutal reality.

Kitara entered the scene at a run, deduced what had happened from the evidence, and nodded. "Micceal, go and fetch the stretcher. We need to get Garcia back to the ship while there is still a chance to save his leg."

Amanda Q and the nameless Metrone appeared and everyone returned to hyper alert status, weapons drawn. The Metrone approached closer to the Gorn and then Garcia. Amanda Q came closer as well, maintaining a defensive posture.

"You actually killed him," the Metrone said, dumbfounded. "According to the rules of conflict resolution, you are the victor. We will destroy the rest of the Gorn."

"My grievance was with this Gorn, not with all Gorn," Garcia said. "The battle is over."

"Oh, the battle has just begun," Amanda Q said.

The Metrone looked up upon the heavens. Shooting stars streaked across the night skies, leaving red, green, and white trails. "What have you brought upon us?" she demanded.

"He didn't bring this upon you!" Amanda Q snapped. "You brought this on yourself by interfering. This wasn't a fight between Garcia and the Gorn. This was a fight between Garcia and the gods. The Gorn were just a vehicle to that end."

"We were balancing the playing field," the Metrone snapped.

"You were giving the gods time to set up their trap," Q said.

"Q, get us out of here," Garcia said.

"Can't," Amanda Q said.

Lightening ripped across the sky and storms began to brew. Three gods appeared in the clouds, Apollo, Mithras, and Hades. Their faces were as angry as the thunder heads they were riding in on. The lightening strikes in the distance seemed to be setting off nuclear blasts as they scored the ground. Red, mushroom clouds blossomed, boiling and turning as they continued to grow towards the sky, encircled by blast rings that were spreading out through the air.

"I've managed to block them from beaming in, but I can't keep them from approaching," Amanda Q said.

"How is this possible?" the Metrone demanded.

"They're accessing the technology you left on this planet before you evolved, dumb ass," Amanda Q said. "Turn it off."

"I can't!" the Metrone said. "We can't. It would make us vulnerable to you!"

"Kitara," Garcia said.

Kitara didn't even have to think about it. She retrieved the Kelvan bracelet from a pouch on her belt and tossed it to Garcia. Garcia grabbed it and no sooner than he had touched his finger to the console interface, he was connected to Losira and the Kelvan computer system. The gods were coming in slow motion, covering kilometers in leaps

and bounds. He was blocked from accessing the Metrone's computer system, so stopping the gods that way was not an option. The only hope at this point was retreat, for the gods were taking over the Metrone's power structure easier than the Borg could assimilate a single person. Garcia pushed the button, directing the Kelvan transporter to relocate him and his crew. He put Ilona and Duana in his quarters. He set Tama Orleans in Persis' quarters. He was tempted to allow his mind to linger and watch the reunion, but the threat of the gods looming over them urged him to stay focus. He set Kletsova in her quarters and placed Nikita in the quarters with her mother and father. Misan, Bri, and the others he put in Sickbay, even though they no longer needed medical attention because he had healed them of all their battle wounds using the Kelvan technology. Tuer, Jurak, Kelly, Kitara, Amanda Q, the Metrone, and he arrived on the Bridge. He appeared whole, no longer injured. There was so much more he needed to do but suddenly his world view dropped back to his human threshold. For a moment his vision narrowed and he was overwhelmed with pain and nausea.

Kitara had grabbed the bracelet away from Garcia, breaking the link. Doctor Jurak handed Garcia a sickness bag and injected something into his arm. He fell to his command chair.

"Get us out of here," Garcia demanded, forcing himself to stay focused.

"We can't!" McKnight said.

Kitara went to her station and assessed the situation. "We're being held in place by a giant hand. They have all three ships!"

"Three?" Garcia asked, confused. Then he remembered he had summoned the Tempest to be here to help bluff Captain Gleason of the Zhukov, which was also in orbit and just as caught as they were. He had been planning to make it appear as if the Tempest was his ship and that the Path Finder didn't exist, but that plan was now null and void, thanks to the gods. "Doctor, give me a stimulant."

"No," Jurak said.

"Damn it, give me something now!" Garcia snapped.

Jurak complied and administered another drug into the Captain's arm. Garcia nearly slid out of his chair.

"Oh, that's good," Garcia said, smiling. He shook his head. "The Tempest. Raise Gowr."

Gowr appeared on the screen. "The new shields are holding," Gowr said. "But we can not break free."

Garcia looked to Kitara. "Our shields are holding as well, but the Zhukov can't take much more."

"Give me my bracelet," Garcia said.

"No!" Kitara, Undine, and Jurak all said simultaneously.

Garcia turned to the Metrone. "Can you save them?"

"No, there's too much chaos in our computer system," the Metrone said.

"Amanda Q, please," Garcia said.

"I can not," Q said. "The Metrones are blocking my ability to do anything significant. They're like us, in many ways. Their reliance on their technology is their only handicap. They're still too primitive to make the leap, but they're still strong enough to block me, and as long as she is fighting me, I can't do anything."

Apollo appeared on the screen. "You're not getting away from me this time, Garcia," Apollo declared. "The assimilation of this technology is almost complete. The Metrones will soon bow to my will, as will your crew, and I will personally snuff the life out of you and all your offspring."

"If you kill me, your curse won't come true," Garcia tried.

"Captain, the Zhukov is declaring an emergency," Trini said. "They're in severe distress."

"Tam, you're going to have to blow up the Metrones planet," Amanda Q said.

"You can't do that!" the Metrone said. "That's genocide!"

"It will liberate you for the first time in your lives and you can realize the full power of being Q," Amanda Q said. "You have evolved past the need for technology, but you cling to it like a crutch."

"Don't listen to her," the Metrone pleaded, sweat pouring down her face. "She's lying. Q has been trying to kill us for years. Please."

"Give me some options, quick," Garcia told her.

"Destroy yourselves and maybe they'll go away," the Metrone offered.

Lightening reached up from the planet and rolled around the Path Finder's shields. The Path Finder shuddered. He could only imagine the beating the Zhukov was taking.

"We could abandon ship, through the Gateway," Undine offered.

"We're not abandoning the Zhukov," Garcia said. "And we're not leaving Metrone technology in the hands of these pseudo gods. Fire all weapons. Have Gowr return fire to the planet as well. Maybe if we knock out enough power systems we can all retreat."

"That's not going to be enough!" Amanda Q snapped. "Blow up the damn planet."

"I can't do that," Garcia yelled back.

"Use the Starburst and destroy the Metrone's home world. If the gods complete their take over of this planet, they will use the Metrone technology to destroy the Q and take over the entire Universe," Amanda Q said.

"So what?!" Garcia asked. "That might be a blessing."

"If Q are destroyed, removed from this space time continuum, humanity will be destroyed simultaneously," Amanda Q said. "Our fates are weaved more closely together than you might imagine. Think six degrees of Kevin Bacon."

"Who's Kevin Bacon?" Tuer asked.

"Why do you think Q contacted Picard in the first place? To play games with him? His role is instrumental in saving mankind, just as yours is instrumental in saving Q," Amanda Q said. "This is where it all starts and this where it all ends. You have to do this. You've already done it."

Garcia closed his eyes. "You are the Destroyer of Worlds..." echoed in his head. It was like a bad dream that he could not wake from. It was a bad movie plot and he was stuck in the theatre watching himself do horrible things. If he believed Q and acted accordingly, he would be guilty of genocide against the Metrones. If he did nothing, and Q was being truthful, he would be complicit in the extinction of two species, Q and Homosapiens. No. Not complicit. These gods would be responsible, not him. But if he had the power to stop that from happening, shouldn't he act?

“You don’t believe her, do you?” the Metrone asked, taking Garcia by the arm.

Garcia opened his eyes and looked at Amanda. He met the Metrone’s eyes before turning to his first Officer, his mind made up. “Kitara, have the crew unpack one of the starburst weapons,” Garcia said. “Losira, as soon as it’s locked and loaded, I wanted it armed.”

“No!” the Metrone yelled over Losira’s response, attacking Garcia with closed fists.

Amanda Q and Tuer held her back, because Garcia wasn’t resisting her rage. It was almost as if he wanted her to kill him so he wouldn’t have to make this decision. Her fists struck his chest and his face, giving him a bloody lip.

“Prepare to be born,” Amanda Q said in her ear.

“No, you must not,” the Metrone yelled. Her pleas became begging, tears strolling down her face.

“Tam, are you sure about this?” Losira asked. She remembered well the talk they had had about the Starburst. If it had been up to her, she wouldn’t be able to make the decision. Her hesitation would cost them their lives, so she looked to Garcia for assurance that they were doing the right thing.

“Sir, Zhukov’s shields just failed,” Kitara said.

“Fire,” Garcia said.

The Metrone screamed. The Starburst streaked across the atmosphere and disappeared from view. A moment later a pillar of flame shot skywards. The pillar grew and flattened, spreading its destruction across the planet’s surface. The atmosphere was being ripped away as a wave of air preceded the energy storm being unleashed.

“The hands are gone!” Kitara announced.

“Lower shields and transport the Zhukov’s crew to the Tempest,” Garcia ordered. “Contact Gowr, have him help with the transport. As soon as everyone is safely on board, jump back to Pollux V.”

The Metrone collapsed to the deck, no longer struggling. Surprisingly, so did Amanda Q. The planet was now all aglow with a plasma soup, making it almost appear as if it were a star. A star that suddenly began to shrink in diameter. There was a limit to how much it would actually condense before the whole planet erupted in a brilliant nova that would be seen all the way across the Galaxy; the light of which would reach the closest star to it, Cestus Three, in about thirty years.

“We got everyone,” Gowr’s voice rang clear over the intercom.

“McKnight!” Garcia said, standing. “Get us out of here.”

Lt. Kelly drew a knife and stabbed Garcia in the back.

The Path Finder jumped. The outward rush of energy consuming the planet expanded to a volume one parsec in diameter, hurling light and matter out into space. The light outshone the Metrone’s star more than a thousand times.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Satisfied that there was nothing more he could do for Afu, Garcia joined Seven in her inspection of the equipment. It seemed that whoever had constructed this Monolith, had remained consistent with the technology that had been found in the Monolith Kirk had entered. Seven of Nine had accessed a monitor and had been able to open an exterior view to the monolith. Directly outside was an angry mob of Voth were piling up boxes of explosives on the marble slab.

“How is he doing?” Seven asked.

“He’s going to die if we don’t get him some blood, and antibiotics,” Garcia said, matter of fact. They were all likely to die, regardless. “Are there any liquids in this place?”

Seven shook her head ‘no.’

“Maybe if we surrender they will treat him,” Ket offered.

“You won’t have a supply of compatible blood, though an IV might help,” Garcia said. “Still, I can’t surrender this technology, so no deals can be made.”

“You said that this wasn’t your technology,” Ket said. “So how is it you know so much about it? How did you know the pass code?”

Seven also seemed interested in the answer.

“I got access the same way Kirk entered the artifact on Miramee’s planet,” Garcia explained. “And, I learned from the Gray Queen when she and I spoke telepathically, that it was not an accident that ‘Kirk to Enterprise’ had been set as a pass code. One of the gods was manipulating Kirk. Even his amnesia was part of the deal. They had hoped he would father a son on the planet and then be on his way, leaving the Native Americans with this idea of a god who left them a son.”

“Did he?” Seven asked.

“Did he what?” Garcia asked.

“Father a son,” Seven said.

“Yes, but Miramee died, along with her unborn child,” Garcia said.

“So, the experiment was a failure,” Seven said.

“It depends on what they were actually studying, I guess. Gods, and children of gods, are a very popular theme with them,” Garcia said, studying the console. “Can we get a planetary view?”

Seven demonstrated that she could alter the view by giving them a view from orbit. Ket observed over their shoulders. Several of the Voth cities could be seen from orbit, appearing as large disk formations with a variety of lights of colors and intensities within each of the circular areas that described the individual cities. Ket pointed to one and said, “Atlantis.” The continents were different than what Garcia and Seven were familiar with, but they could still recognize Earth.

“We can zoom in with this,” Seven said, bringing them in for a closer view of one of the cities on the day side.

“How does it do that?” Ket asked.

“Probably accessing the Voth satellites,” Seven said. “Unless the Preserves left observation technology in orbit, which would actually make more sense.”

“What’s that blinking light?” Ket asked.

Seven pushed the light. The world view disappeared and was replaced by an animation, representing Earth, the moon, and a large asteroid approaching. A number of circles and symbols drawn on the map described distance from Earth, vectors, and orbits. Seven pointed to the asteroid.

“That’s the one scheduled to hit us,” Seven said. “When it crosses this perimeter, the monolith will expect someone to activate the asteroid deflector.”

“Deflector?” Ket asked.

“This monolith’s primary purpose is to protect the Gorn,” Seven said. “It has a deflector beam capable of altering the asteroids course.”

“You lied to me,” Ket said, looking at Garcia. “You said you didn’t have the technology to save my people.”

“Technically, I don’t,” Garcia said. “This is not my technology.”

“You lied,” Ket said.

“He did not lie,” Seven said. “The asteroid will hit the Earth.”

“But you can save us!” Ket said.

“No, I can’t,” Garcia said.

Ket started crying. “Please, you have to,” Ket stammered. “I don’t understand why you would allow us to die. I trusted you!”

Garcia drew Ket close and before she knew what he was doing he initiated a mind meld with her. “One heart, one mind, one soul,” Garcia said, his eyes closing. “My history, our history...” Ket came to understand why Garcia felt compelled to preserve the history of the world as he knew it, because it was no longer just about his people and Earth, but about the Galaxy of races that were interdependent on each other, and if one race fell, many races fell. The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few was the maxim she learned from the gestalt of minds. He released her and they both staggered back. They both fell to the floor.

“I understand,” Ket said, her tears flowing. “You are making the right decision.”

“I understand,” Garcia said, standing up to join Seven at the controls. “I understand why I have to try and save yours, even more than I did before. And I’m going to try. Seven, is there anything in this room similar to the controls of the Gateway that brought us here?”

Seven pushed several buttons on the console in front of her. The monitor refocused on an area of land that Garcia and Seven were already familiar with. Scorched Earth, spreading out from a focal point, which helped to describe the location of the portal they had used to travel to Earth. At a touch of several buttons, the Gateway became visible. It was a large ring that appeared to be constructed from marble. It glowed like the Guardian of time.

Afu stirred and Elika greeted him back to consciousness.

“The Gateway!?” Ket asked. “I have seen this. No. This is from your memory, Tam?”

“It resembles the lesser Iconian Gateway, there first model of a means for interstellar travel, which requires two gates. The more modern version doesn’t require multiple gates, but just one portal that take a traveler anywhere in the Universe by just stepping across the threshold,” Seven said. “I believe that this is one of those modern gates. We should be able to access any point in space time through this portal, given the appropriate coordinates. However, I have not found a means for activating it.”

“But you could save Terra and return home with this?” Ket asked.

“Theoretically, yes. It might make matters simpler if the Gateway that we originally stepped through had not been destroyed,” Garcia said. Studying the console to try and understand the new subroutines listed on the secondary monitor. “And since we don’t know how to open a portal direct to planets that don’t have Gates, we have to rely on finding another active Gateway combination. There has to be others Gates, Seven, so maybe a directory assistance? Can you pull up a list?”

“Perhaps you were not listening,” Seven said. “I have not discovered how to operate the Gateway. And even if we did, there is insufficient time to move the entire Voth population through the Gateway. They will protest and stall and in the end, only a smattering will get through.”

Ket was displaying symptoms of distress. Her lips pursed and popped as they bled air from her puffed up cheeks. “I love my people,” Ket said. “I love Terra. Please, save my people.”

“Terra will be okay, in the long run,” Garcia said. “Life is tenacious.”

“Maybe we could use the transporter,” Afu offered, his voice weak, and far away. Garcia looked to Seven.

Seven went back to the root menu and discovered there was indeed a transporter, and it was much more powerful than any transporter system she had ever witnessed. It was no doubt a function of the Iconian Gateway itself. “It would be possible to relocate an entire city using the Preserver Transporter.”

“That’s brilliant!” Garcia said. “We open the Gate and transport everyone to safety on the other side.”

“I have not found a way to open the Gate, much less determine if the planet on the other side is hospitable to our life forms,” Seven said.

“Well, we got to find a way,” Garcia said. “Is there a wireless connection? Maybe I can access the computer with my implant.”

“That would not be advisable,” Seven said. “My brain is no doubt more suitable to that task than yours, considering my past Borg connectivity.”

“Then plug in,” Garcia said.

“There is no interface jack,” Seven said.

Garcia retrieved his Voth knife and pried open the console. He scrutinized several of the conduits and connection points. His attempt was useless. There was no visible way to jack her mind into the Preserver computer from what he was seeing.

“That is a wireless port,” Seven said, touching one of the nodes.

“My implant has wireless technology, doesn’t yours?” Garcia asked.

“Stand by,” Seven said. She frowned. “It is incompatible with my technology, an anti Borg safeguard is operating. Stand by. I believe I will be able to utilize your implant’s wireless functions to log into the Preserver technology. Stand by. Accessing. Reconfiguring interface protocols. Stand by.”

Seven suddenly stood up straight and then collapsed, falling over backwards as stiff as a board.

Garcia caught her and eased her to the floor. He slapped her face lightly, hoping to get a response. “Seven?” Garcia said.

“Stand by,” Seven said.

“What’s going on?” Ket asked.

“If her experience is anything like plugging into a Kelvan computer, she is currently being inundated with options, tangents, and queries,” Garcia said, measuring her pulse. Her pulse seemed accelerated, but then, he didn’t have a baseline comparison. Maybe her heart beat was normal for a retired Borg. He was having to ignore the amount of information funneling through his own implant’s processor, unable to keep up with the Borg protocols, but he could feel the streaming, like an alcohol buzz. “There is a reason why beings like us are not gods, Ket. We can’t handle all the options that would be instantly thrown at us. If all our thoughts were suddenly manifested, total chaos would ensue. To prevent that from happening when plugged into technology, there are safe guards built into the system to either slow things down or to stop thoughts from manifesting before the user is ready to commit. So, the short of it, she is either stuck in a feed back loop, or, she has given the computer instructions and is searching for a way to make it comply with her wishes.”

“I would not make a good god,” Ket admitted. “If I were given such abilities, I would not let anything die.”

“You’re better than I am,” Garcia said. “I was willing to allow everyone here to die without even attempting intervention, until we mind melded, because I thought it to be the right thing to do. So, I would definitely abuse this sort of power. If I didn’t kill people, I would control every aspect of their lives, and I suspect every woman in my sphere of influence would be pregnant with my child,” Garcia said, trying to spin the last part into deprecating humor. Humor was the only way he could tolerate and examine his own inner faults. He believed it was necessary to admit the impulses he considered bad in order to better suppress them. He also realized, perhaps because of the mind meld with Ket, one of the reasons he was so forgiving of other people’s faults, and more lenient with the transgressions of others, was because he knew his own heart too well. He didn’t have time to police others, for he was too busy policing his own issues. “Death, however, is not a bad thing, Ket. Everything dies and there is a reason for it. Every cell in our body is naturally programmed to die. If this didn’t happen, humans would be born with webbed fingers, and a tail, and fur covering their entire body.”

“Webbed fingers?” Ket said. “Our fetuses have webbed fingers, too!”

“That’s because we share a common ancestor,” Garcia said. “Every stage of prenatal development corresponds to an evolutionary development of things we evolved from.”

“If cells are programmed to die, can we un-program them and lengthen the life span?” Ket asked.

“We can add to the telomerase chain and prevent groups of cells from dying but we have not been able to sustain life indefinitely, yet,” Garcia said.

Seven sat up. “I have located a Gateway that corresponds to the world where the Voth are intended to settle in the Delta Quadrant. I have been given access, the Gateway is opening.”

“Ket,” Garcia said. “This is it. I’m giving your people a second shot at life. You are going to have a twenty million year head start on us which means by the time you encounter us, you will be so far advanced technologically, that we can’t compete. You’re going to have to promise me that you will convince your people to stay out of the Alpha Quadrant, to allow us time to develop. If that time line is interrupted, you could

accidentally prevent us from saving your people. Do you understand what I'm telling you?"

"Ready to commence transport," Seven said.

"Ket, do you understand?" Garcia asked. "There are great things coming to you and your people. Science and knowledge and discovery and I hope that we two can meet again and share our love and company, but for now, you just need to live and thrive and build a good life for you, your people, and all the animals and plants you've preserved."

Ket nodded. She embraced Garcia. "I will never forget you," Ket said.

"I know. Good bye, Ket," Garcia said. "Seven, commence transport."

Ket was swept away by a transporter beam. So were the Voth outside. The city of Atlantis disappeared next, followed by two other cities, and all of the Voth spaceships in orbit. Seven also started beaming groups of animals and plants and whole forests, sweeping out huge segments of Earth. It almost appeared as if the Borg had attacked the planet, leaving large craters in the ground, going deep in an effort to capture even the deep earth life forms. The Gorn that had been imprisoned were relocated to the Gorn Village outside the Monolith. As Seven continued moving sea and fresh water and fish and mammals, the Gorn assembled around the Monolith and began to pray thanks for their deliverance from the enemy. Seven nearly lost herself in the tangent of rescuing plants and animals. She forced herself to focus on the remaining Voth cities, having given up on her tangent to save samples of all Earth life. When ninety percent of the Voth were safely through, she began searching for a more suitable environment to place the Gorn, as well as a place for themselves

A god appeared.

"Tam, behind you!" Elika said.

"What have you done?" the god demanded

Garcia turned to see a god he hadn't encountered before. The god was wearing accouterments that might have been either Greek or Roman, perhaps even Babylonian, with the only certain symbol marking it as a pagan. Another god appeared, one that Garcia did recognize.

"He has done what he has to, Mithras," Harmonia said. "He is saving his people from extinction."

"This planet belongs to me! I want reptilians," Mithras said. "They are better acclimated to life than humans will be. They're more durable, more adaptable, just better life forms in general."

"You have no right to decide what species will live or die," Garcia told Mithras.

"How dare you?!" Mithras said. "The impertinence of it all! We created life! We spread it around the universe. We decide who will live and die."

"Not today, you don't," Garcia said, pulling a component out of the console, reversing it before putting it back in. "That should reverse the polarity on your deflector beam, turning it into a tractor beam."

Mithras screamed, unleashing a torrent of energy towards Garcia. Harmonia stepped in between the two of them, firing back. Garcia may not have taken the full brunt of the stream, but he felt it none the less. He was driven to his knees with pain, dropping his head to the floor next to Seven. The monitor showed the tractor beam lancing out to grab the asteroid, pulling it towards the Earth. The Gorn watched in awe of the power of their god striking the heavens.

“Seven, find another Gate, hurry,” Garcia said, gasping for air.

“Complying,” Seven said.

Outside, a storm was brewing. The beam was energizing the air, causing clouds to roll in and lightening to form. A wind began to blow as the air was drawn down by the same tractor beam that lanced out towards the asteroid. The cold air in the upper atmosphere swept around the monolith, causing snow to fall. The Gorn began to huddle together, uncertain of what was about to happen.

“Gateway opening. Transporting the Gorn to safety,” Seven declared.

“Go!” Harmonia yelled. “Forget about them.”

“I can’t leave them here to die,” Garcia said.

“Stop!” Mithras yelled. He fell to his knees. “Stop them, Harmonia. My people.”

Mithras disappeared and his orb dropped to the floor.

Harmonia fell to her knees and collapsed into Garcia’s arms. “I’m spent,” Harmonia said. “You must leave, now.”

The Mithras orb was growing in brightness and an audible tone was increasing in pitch.

“Hurry,” Harmonia said, touching Garcia’s face. She smiled up at him, her hand touching the back of his head, pulling him towards her face. She kissed him.

“Seven?!” Garcia said.

“Unable to comply,” Seven said. “Access to transporter blocked.”

Harmonia looked up and to the right, accessing transporter controls. “Stand by,” she said.

CHAPTER TWENTYONE

Garcia woke to find himself in Sickbay. He sat up, gasping for breath, the memory of the pain in his back and the blood filling his lungs most pressing on his mind. Doctor Jurak met him and pulled him off the bed, holding him up by the arm.

“Good, time for you to get up,” Jurak said.

“How long?” Garcia asked, trying to find his balance.

“Six hours,” Jurak said.

Garcia swallowed. He closed his eyes and tried to reconstruct what had happened. He felt the memory of being nauseous just as potent as the actual feeling and resisted the urge to be sick by trying to escape the memory he had just elicited from his mind.

“Lt. Kelly?” Garcia asked.

“In the Brig,” Jurak said.

Garcia walked over to the medical beds where Amanda Q and the Metrone appeared to be sleeping. He looked to the Doctor for an analysis.

“We’re unable to scan either of them,” Doctor Jurak said. “It’s as if they don’t exist. Even holograms display more form than these two.”

Kitara entered and approached Garcia.

“If you’re feeling up to it, Captain Gleason of the former Zhukov would like to see you on the Tempest,” Kitara said.

“I’ll beam over shortly,” Garcia said, he staggered forward, but waved off her help. Doctor Jurak hadn’t even offered a hand. Garcia took a moment to recover from the vertigo. “Status report?”

“All ship’s systems are operating at peak efficiency. No adverse affects to the Starburst radiation,” Kitara said. “Athena has requested your presence on the surface. Kelly is in the Brig for attempted murder. Your daughter was treated for minor injuries sustained during her abduction and is in good condition. She’s with her mother now. Nancy and Boris would like to see you soon. Niki is also in good condition. The Tempest is reporting peak efficiency. Princess Okuda would like to see you. Brock at Club Bliss would like to see you. The Gray Queen also requests your presence at planet Bliss. There was a clash between the Gorn and the Human settlement on Cestus Three. Star Fleet has dispatched a ship to reinforce the peace. There is a message from Pressman requiring your attention, as well as several from Admiral McCoy. Sheear sent me a message wanting to know why I and the others have allowed you to live.”

“What was your response to the last?” Garcia asked.

“I explained that we were unable to kill you due to the challenge he convinced Gowron to issue. Killing you would be an act of treason and that as long as the challenge exists, we will do everything in our power to present you to Gowron and the High Counsel on schedule,” Kitara said.

“Oh, well, that was nice of you,” Garcia said.

“Losira informed me of the threat issued by Shuliette,” Kitara said. “I would like you to consider removing the fetus and placing it in an artificial womb and sending her own her way.”

“I’m not going to do that,” Garcia said.

“The alternative is to hold her against her will until the child is born, so that you can raise it properly,” Kitara said.

“I will not be doing that, either,” Garcia said. “I intend to release her at the first opportunity that doesn’t include walking her through a Gate.”

“You are going to allow her to use her child as a weapon, a vehicle of hate, even after the curse Apollo gave you?” Kitara asked.

“I am going to allow her the freedom to be and hope that she finds a method for dealing with her hurt and loss in a more constructive way,” Garcia said. “I don’t care what the results ultimately are. I feel that it is the right thing to do.”

“What about the child? Is it the right thing for it?” Kitara asked.

“Shuliette’s career choice suggests a compassionate person,” Garcia said, taking in a deep breath. It was no doubt going to hurt for a while as he stretched out the new tissue. “I’m going to trust that quality will come forward when the child is born. Thank you, Doctor. You did good work.”

“You’re welcome,” Jurak said. “I would like to speak with you about your daughter, alone.”

“Is she alright?” Garcia asked.

Jurak looked to Kitara, and back to Garcia. Kitara turned to leave, but Garcia touched her arm, asking her to remain. “We’re family.”

Kitara stood a little more proudly. Jurak nodded. He handed Garcia a PADD. Garcia accepted it and read Jurak’s medical report on Tama Orleans. There were definitely some inconsistencies that didn’t add up.

“You’re diagnosing her as having Anorexia Nervosa?” Garcia asked, dumbfounded.

“She’s a bit on the heavy side to be considered anorexic,” Kitara said.

“She has a slow release, subcutaneous, anti-depressant implant,” Jurak pointed out. “This particular drug in her system tends to resist the loss of body fat. If you notice the scan of the teeth, you will see the signs of purging. The bone structure is not as healthy as it should be. Her electrolytes are off, and low phosphates...”

“All of which can be explained by the fact that she was mistreated by her abductors,” Garcia argued.

“While I was treating her wounds, I noticed that it took a noticeably longer time for the tissue regenerator to repair some of the cuts, which is indicative of over use of the tissue regenerator. I did a more thorough medical scan and found indicators in the keratin in her skin, which absorbs radiation from regenerators, and on closer scrutiny found several anomalies on her thighs consistent with a person who cuts themselves on a regular basis. This explains the radiation signature in her keratin, and explains why my treatment took longer than normal.”

“You’re saying that she cuts herself and then heals herself?” Garcia asked.

“Maybe Shule did this to her,” Kitara said.

“Captain, you see the evidence right there in my report. This is long term exposure,” Jurak said. “And someone obviously knows she has some issues, or they wouldn’t have inserted a time released anti depressant into her skin.”

Garcia handed his Doctor back the PADD. “Your point?” Garcia asked.

“I didn’t know if you were aware of her condition,” Jurak said. “I think she’s on the wrong medication and there is more going on than just Anorexia Nervosa. I thought I would take it up with you before discussing this with her mother.”

“Let me talk to Persis, first,” Garcia said. He was visibly angry, because once again he had discovered that he had been left out of the loop. If his daughter was having trouble, why didn’t Persis inform him? And, there was suddenly a loss of the euphoria on realizing that rescuing his daughter from kidnappers didn’t make his life suddenly better. One problem was fix, only for several more to pop up. “Let the water go where it will,” was the voice of McCoy in his head. But he had other things he needed to tend to at the moment than listen to McCoy advice or even go check on his daughter. She was in immediate danger. “Number One, follow me.”

Garcia led the way to the Brig. “No new crew were impregnated, I trust?” he said more than asked.

“It was one of the first things we scanned for. No more of your staff or Officers were impregnated,” Kitara said.

Garcia paused. “Spit it out,” Garcia said, wondering what damage he had done now.

“It’s too early to be a hundred percent sure that it’s taken or that it will continue to be viable,” Kitara began.

“Number One?” Garcia said, verbally pushing her to say it.

“The Gorn we have in the Brig appears to be...” Kitara finished.

“Oh, bloody hell!” Garcia said, clenching his wrist.

“I think we should put this one in an artificial womb and release the mother,” Kitara said.

“Yeah,” Garcia agreed, not trusting this Gorn to take care of a mixed child. How was it even possible!

They arrived at the Brig and entered. The Gorn snickered at him from her cell, thinking she had bested him, which meant she was probably unaware of her present condition. He ignored her and went right to Lt. Kelly’s cell. Lt. Kelly did not look up when the force field snapped off. She had been badly bruised, and perhaps beaten, whether that was when she was apprehended, or after she had been brought to the Brig, was a matter Garcia would have to look into, but at the moment, he didn’t seem to care. All this trouble to save his daughter and she still needed rescuing, he thought. He forced himself to stay focused on the problem before him.

Garcia asked Kitara to hand him her knife. Kitara did so, gladly.

“Stand up,” Garcia told her.

Kelly did as she was told. She looked him defiantly in the eye as he approached her, brandishing the knife. She was resigned to her fate, but she was going to meet it full on, a true Star Fleet Officer. He grasped the knife by the blade and thrust the handle at her. She seemed surprised.

“Finish it,” Garcia told her.

A look of confusion crossed Lt. Kelly’s face. Kitara raised an eyebrow, but did not interfere.

“Kitara, no matter what happens here, Janet Kelly is free to leave the Brig and will be returned to full duty,” Garcia said, without looking away from Kelly. “Go ahead, Janet. Finish what you started.”

Lt. Kelly looked down, no longer as confident as she was when she had acted rashly. Garcia lifted her chin forcing her eyes to meet his.

“Are we even?” Garcia asked. “Is this over between us?”

“Yes, Captain,” Lt. Kelly said, more resigned than when he had met her in her quarters. “My rage is spent.”

“You’re free to go then,” Garcia said. “I’m returning you to full duty.”

Garcia wiped his own blood off the knife onto his sleeve and then handed the knife back to Kitara. Kitara followed him back out into the corridor.

“Are you crazy?” Kitara demanded. “She tried to kill you! She violated ship policy that there will be no assignation attempts.”

“She didn’t try to assassinate me in order to achieve a promotion, which is the intent behind the ship’s policy. She tried to kill me because I killed her child. She had a right to try, which in Klingon law is a legitimate attempt to achieve justice,” Garcia said. “I can’t punish her for that. Not when I’m guilty of far worse.”

“So what?!” Kitara demanded, grabbing his arm and forcing him to stop and look at her. “Just because we’re guilty of worse doesn’t excuse people of the responsibility for what they do. If we went by that policy, everyone that has ever committed a crime, whether it be rape or murder or theft would still be free to commit more crimes.”

“I just destroyed another planet!” Garcia snapped, pulling free of her hand. “Who knows how many Metrones I killed?”

“Self defense! You gave us a fighting chance for life,” Kitara responded.

“We could have abandoned ship. Sacrificing the Zhukov and her crew would have been the correct thing to do over killing the Metrones,” Garcia said. “Or better, I could have surrendered, or allowed us to die and the Universe sort itself out. Let the water go where it will.”

“And give the gods a toe hold in this universe?” Kitara demanded. “Your assessment at the time was right.”

“I’m not so sure, now that the pressure and drugs have worn off,” Garcia said.

“It wasn’t the drugs,” Kitara said. “It wasn’t even the Kelvan technology influencing you. It was the correct assessment. For all we know, the gods had already killed the Metrones. You saw the havoc they were wreaking over the planet. You saw how flustered the Metrone was. And we never saw any evidence of Metrones on the planet.”

“That makes destroying the planet okay?” Garcia asked.

“No,” Kitara said. “I hate the fact that we used the Starburst. It’s not a warrior’s weapon. But until you provide us with an alternative so that we can fight the gods on equal terms, then by god, I say, yes, blow the hell out of them.”

“Blowing up all the class M planets is hardly a constructive way to deal with the gods,” Garcia said.

“Then go make your deal with Athena and implement the truce,” Kitara said.

“But don’t use the fact that you blew up a planet as an excuse for letting Kelly off the hook.”

“How about the excuse that I murdered Shule?” Garcia asked.

“He deserved it,” Kitara said. “And he would have kept coming for you if you had allowed him to survive.”

“I believe so, too,” Garcia said. “Just as I believe that Kelly is finished trying to kill me and will return to being an exemplary officer. Anything else to add?”

“No, sir,” Kitara said.

“Good,” Garcia said. He paused, thought about what he was going to say, and then dismissed with words and simply kissed her. “Thank you for helping me. Losira, transport me to the Tempest.”

Garcia stepped back to be transported as Trini came around the corner. “Tam,” she said, reaching out to hug him. She appeared as if she had been crying.

“Losira,” Garcia said.

“I know, canceling transport,” Losira said, her voice coming through over Garcia’s com. badge. Though she was not present, she no doubt could, and perhaps always did, observe the coming and going of his crew using the ship internal sensor. He suspected she watched him even more closely than any of the others.

“Shhh,” Garcia said, hugging Trini. “I’m okay, Trini.”

“We need to talk,” Trini said.

Garcia nodded. “Was there anything else, Kitara?”

“No,” Kitara said, taking her cue to leave Garcia and Trini alone.

Trini wiped her eyes. “Do you have a moment?”

“Not really,” Garcia said. “But I’ll make time for you. As it is, I owe you an apology. I’ve been rather harsh towards you...”

Trini touched his lip with a finger to be silent. “We understand the pressure you’re under,” Trini said.

“It doesn’t excuse my behavior,” Garcia said. “And I want your help. Stand up to me when I’m wrong.”

Trini nodded, took Garcia by the arm, and led him back to her quarters. The Officers Quarters on the Path Finder was limited, and so lower ranked officers shared quarters. The Klingons were use to this and their bunks were merely metal slabs, with living space just sufficient to exercise. Trini shared her space with Tatiana Kletsova, Nurse Janet Cohen, and computer tech assistant, Gao Hong, and they made the most of their space by providing a vanity shelf and mirror, and a couch that fit just beneath the lowest bunk, which could be used if the lowest bunk was raised. The couch also folded out into a bed, should it so happen that any four of them found their shifts ending at the same time. A monitor recessed into the wall gave them the illusion of a window which was currently displaying an ocean setting, most likely from Earth. Gao Hong was sitting next to the vanity table and if Garcia was reading her right, she was angry. Nurse Cohen was sitting with Kletsova on the couch, apparently consoling her. The three of them went to attention when Garcia and Trini entered.

“At ease,” Garcia said. “Don’t cry, Tatiana. As you can see, the Doctor patched me up fairly well, once again.”

“It’s not why she’s crying,” Gao said.

Trini shot her an angry look, something Garcia was not use to seeing from Trini.

“What?” Gao said. “You’re not going to be able to keep it a secret.”

Garcia waited patiently for them to cease their private communication and simply break the news. Gao lifted a tricorder from the vanity table and handed it to Garcia. Garcia read the sensor log that was displayed, recognized Tatiana’s bio signature, and then noticed that she was pregnant. Garcia put a hand to his mouth, leaned back against the wall and slid to the floor, his eyes closing.

“I’m so sorry,” Garcia mumbled, repeating it three more times until it was the appropriate volume. He started to hit himself in the head with the tricorder, tears flowing.

Nurse Cohen and Trini went to him and took him by the arms to keep him from hitting himself. Trini took the tricorder and handed it back to Gao. Garcia simply replaced the hitting his head with the tricorder with hitting his head on the wall.

“Stop,” Trini said.

“It’s not your fault,” Nurse Cohen said.

“I transported her with the Kelvan transporter,” Garcia said, assuring them it was his fault.

“Show him,” Gao instructed Tatiana. “Either you tell him or I will.”

Tatiana pulled a small specimen vial from her pocket and handed it to Garcia. Garcia leaned forward and took the vial. He blinked. He flushed with anger and started to get up as if he was going to attack Tatiana. Trini and Nurse Cohen held him back and Gao got up to help, putting herself in between him and Tatiana.

“What have you done?!” Garcia demanded. “That vial was for Athena. What have you done?!”

“Tam,” Trini said.

“Don’t try and calm me down,” Garcia snapped.

Kletsova stood up. “Athena discarded it and I picked it up,” Kletsova said.

Garcia lunged again, but the girls held him back. Had he wanted to, he could have seriously hurt all three of them in order to get at Tatiana, and realizing that, he forced himself to cease his struggles. His hands shook with rage and to stop them from shaking he grabbed his left wrist. The girls didn’t ease up on him just because he appeared calmer.

“I was the only one on the Path Finder not pregnant,” Kletsova said.

“So?” Garcia snapped. “Don’t you think I have enough headaches?”

“I won’t obligate you,” Kletsova said.

“Yes, because single motherhood is a great option for you,” Garcia said.

“What, I’m now excluded from Garcia clan benefits?” Kletsova asked. “Are you going to pursue legal claims or pull rank and throw me in the Brig? What happened to our one, big, happy family? What happened to it takes a village to raise a child? If you want me off the ship, then put me off. If you don’t want to see me again, that’s fine, too. But I will have this child.” And then softer, she added, “and I would like it to know you.”

Garcia fumed. He tried to pull free from Trini and Nurse Cohen but they held firm. Gao did lower her hands off Garcia’s chest, but she did not step away from him. Garcia closed his eyes and took several moments to allow his anger to subside several more notches.

“You could have asked,” Garcia said.

“You would have said no,” Kletsova said.

“I would have had a choice,” Garcia shouted.

“Like everyone else had a choice?” Kletsova said more than asked.

“That’s not fair,” Gao said, turning on Kletsova. “And you know it. That matter has already been resolved.”

“Let go of me,” Garcia said, calmly.

Nurse Cohen let go. Trini held on a bit longer, but let go as Garcia turned his eyes on her. Gao gave him a little more space.

“Step back,” Garcia instructed Trini.

Trini stepped back and Garcia made his exit without saying another word.

“Well, that went better than I imagined,” Nurse Cohen said.

Trini turned to Kletsova. “You are so wrong on this I can’t even begin to imagine where to measure it,” she said. And then she turned and departed the room.

“You’re not getting any sympathy from me, either,” Gao said, also leaving.

Kletsova sat down. Nurse Cohen smiled faintly. “It’ll blow over,” she said. “Got a shift to do.” And then she was gone.

Kletsova curled up onto the couch, clutching a pillow to her stomach. She closed her eyes tight and sobbed into the back of the couch.

CHAPTER TWENTYTWO

Garcia arrived on the Tempest and Princess Okuda greeted him. Her luminescent blond hair was swept back over her ears and fell to the shoulder blades. The end of each blade of hair flared with light, as if her hair was comprised of strands of fiber optic fibers. Her pitch black eyes never blinked.

“That was just a skirmish,” the Princess said. “The Gorn delivered those gods to the Metrone planet, and there is no shortage of Manifestation Orbs spread throughout the Galaxy. It’s going to get worse. You need to fulfill your end of the arrangement in order to lock in the truce. It will prevent the gods from using non-Preserver technology against you; prevent them from hijacking other culture’s technology.”

Garcia knelt down to be eye to eye with his Gray hybrid daughter. “Look, I realize that you’re probably born with an adult brain and mind, but in my culture, adults do not take orders from children. I’m the parent here. Now, when was the last time you had any sleep?”

“I do not require sleep,” Princess Okuda said.

“Wrong answer,” Garcia said. “Now go to your room and take a nap.”

Princess Okuda’s face became more serious as if she were about to protest. Garcia expected her to say, “I will tell mother,” but no doubt “mother,” the Gray Queen, was aware of the conversation since she was telepathically linked to all her offspring. Perhaps “mother” was telling her it was best to comply with Garcia’s wishes, or perhaps because Okuda was privy to all of Garcia’s memories up to the point of convergence with the Gray Queen, that she simply knew Garcia would get his way in this, because she surrendered, her shoulders drooped, and she puffed her lips in manner similar to a human sulking. A wave of red flashed across the ends of her hair.

“Go,” Garcia said. “We’ll talk later.”

She pivoted on her heels and stormed out. Garcia stood and turned to N’elent, who was standing, parade rest, at the transporter console.

“It’s about time someone stood up to that little brat,” N’elent said.

“She’s not a Klingon,” Garcia said in Okuda’s defense. “Where’s Gowr?”

“In training room one with Captain Gleason,” N’elent said. “They’re expecting you.”

He turned to go, paused, and touched N’elent’s arm. “Thank you.”

She scrutinized him and decided his attempt at affection was human and sincere, so she did not completely reject it. She nodded and he went about his business. Captain Gleason and Gowr were throwing knives at a dart board when Garcia arrived. Captain Gleason turned to Garcia, his throwing knife ready to throw.

“You look fairly healthy for someone who had been mortally wounded,” Captain Gleason said.

“I have excellent medical staff,” Garcia said. “I suppose you’re here to arrest me.”

“That was the original intent,” Captain Gleason said. “And I may still be required to take you in, but right now, Star Fleet seems to be in a quandary as to what they’re actually going to do. Whatever you’ve done, you’ve got the highest ranks of the Federation slugging it out in top secret meetings. Meanwhile, Gowr has given me a tour of the Tempest, previously the SaLing. Very interesting upgrades. I assume the Path Finder is her sister ship?”

“What do you know of the Path Finder?” Garcia asked.

“Only what Admiral McCoy has told me,” Captain Gleason said. “And that is very little.”

“Then, I suppose it’s safe for you to assume that the Tempest is her sister ship,” Garcia said. “With the same Gray upgrades. I am sorry I was not able to save your ship.”

“You saved my crew,” Captain Gleason said. “The ship is just a ship.”

“If you say so,” Garcia said.

“I have seen several of your officer’s story on the Gorn incident,” Captain Gleason pressed on. “I am anxious to hear your version of why none of the Gorn were apprehended on the Metrone’s planet.”

“I am sure my report will support my Officer’s accounting of the situation,” Garcia said.

“I am fairly certain of that,” Captain Gleason said, not bothering to hide his sarcasm. “I managed to find time to review the economic report you filed with Star Fleet through Admiral McCoy concerning the Orion crime syndicate. I understand why you think it necessary to try and take over the smuggling market. Apparently the legitimate government of Orion liked your proposal so much that they have openly endorsed your solution in front of the Federation counsel, about a half hour ago. I have also witnessed, first hand if you will, the hand of god crushing my ship and now understand how that relates to the Gorn incident. And I finally understand how it is you seem to be all over the Alpha Quadrant causing mischief.”

Captain Gleason stepped a bit closer. “What I don’t understand is how you have come to be in charge of a weapon that can totally annihilate a planet in one shot and on whose authority you’re acting on. I’ve heard rumor about the TelKiar planet being destroyed, but thought it was just rumor.”

“Well, you know how rumors are,” Garcia said.

“So you deny it?” Captain Gleason said.

“No,” Garcia said. “At the speed of light, the incriminating evidence should reach the Romulan home world in about twenty two thousand years. Information available to long range sensors, on the other hand, should be available to the closest Federation outpost within the next six months. The people in authority, the ones who gave me the assignment, have all the telemetry.”

“You were ordered to blow it up?!” Captain Gleason asked.

“I was ordered to prevent the Borg from getting a toe hold in our space,” Garcia said.

“That makes sense,” Captain Gleason said. “But did you have to destroy the Metrones’ planet?”

“It was the only way I could see to save your ship at the time,” Garcia said. “That and prevent the Preservers from utilizing the Metrones’ technology to regroup their forces in the Alpha Quadrant. The only thing really limiting that war front is the fact that their resources are spread across the entire Universe. If I understand it correctly, the reason they’re so spread out is because they don’t work well together, and they end up fighting each other over the natural resources in a particular area. All the gods have their own agenda. Unfortunately, due to a personal grudge or grievance towards me, they suddenly seem to be more willing than usual to team up. It’s more of a game to them, but

their emotions are high, and the end result is some serious acts of violence. I've killed Apollo, what, three times now? And he's really ticked off."

"I really don't like your cavalier attitude in this," Captain Gleason said.

"What's the best face to put on this? Despondent? Worried? Depressed? Manic?" Garcia asked. "I was ordered to take out the Borg. I did that. Now that that job is done, I've been given conflicting directives from my superiors, while simultaneously being attacked by a number of species who all have it in for me, including the very superiors that are giving me orders. I wish I could tell you more, but I can't."

"And McCoy as advised me not to ask," Captain Gleason said. "But I want to know what's going on."

"I need to speak with McCoy," Garcia said. "I want to do so in person. I would be glad to accompany you back to Earth, but before I go, I have some business on Pollux Five. Now, I can send you on ahead, or you can wait. Your preference."

"I'll wait," Captain Gleason said. "We can see Admiral McCoy together."

Garcia nodded. "Gowr, if you'll prepare your ship for a transwarp jump to Earth, I'll be back in about five minutes."

"Five minutes?" Gowr asked.

"Longer if rituals include foreplay," Garcia said.

Gowr nodded.

Garcia activated his comm. badge. "Garcia to Path Finder. Lock onto me and beam me directly to the planet's surface. You have the coordinates I want."

Garcia was whisked away and set on his feet at the base of the destroyed temple. Athena was still sitting in her chair, waiting. Aahla appeared to be asleep. Athena sat up straight, turning her body slightly to the right, taking hold of the arm rest. There were no more Gray drones running around. The area was picked clean of useful stuff. The demons were nothing more than ashes, but the place still had a musky, horrid smell.

"You've had more conflicts with Apollo," Athena said.

"I have," Garcia said.

"You've been incredibly lucky," Athena said.

"Incredibly," Garcia agreed.

"You understand that while I'm pregnant, my powers will be limited," Athena said. "I will not be able to leave this manifestation orb to go to another, not without the child dying. And I will require a place to stay and a consistent supply of nourishment. There is insufficient technology here to sustain me. Kirk destroyed the central system a hundred years ago. The cache here only had trinkets which will make the Gray Queen's life more comfortable, but not satiate her need for more tech."

Aahla stirred from her nap, stood, and stretched. She came down the steps and brushed up against Garcia, scent marking him as a cat would. Garcia saw it and experienced that way, while simultaneously experiencing the human female version of Aahla standing and stretching as a human, who then came down and embraced him with a hug and a kiss.

"If you'll excuse me, Captain," Aahla said. "I'm going to return to the Path Finder."

Garcia nodded. He was not sure how Aahla contacted the Path Finder, but they beamed her up. He and Athena were now alone.

"Where are your servants?" Garcia asked her.

“In anticipation of being alone with you, I sent them up to the Tempest, where they will wait for me,” Athena said. “Aahla insisted on remaining until you arrived. I don’t think she trusts me.”

“You’re welcome to be my guest,” Garcia told Athena. “Now that that is official, you have her trust.”

Athena held her hand out to Garcia. Garcia climbed the steps of Apollo’s Temple and took her hand. She pulled him closer to her.

“You do this of your own free will?” Athena asked him.

“No,” Garcia said. “I do this because I am being black mailed.”

Athena chuckled. “Then that makes us even,” Athena said.

“I don’t understand,” Garcia said.

“I don’t want this any more than you do,” Athena said. “But it’s necessary to preserve my race.”

“Why is it necessary?” Garcia asked. “What could be so bad that your race is threatened?”

“My explanation will be an analogy,” Athena said. “Limited in accuracy and scope, but so you can understand the metaphor is necessary. We exist outside the Universe. It is not sufficient to say we live in another universe. We are not parallel, we are not coexisting, outside is not even a universe as you comprehend cosmology. The place we reside is very old. Imagine your universe at the end of time, whether you believe in the big crunch, the big rip, or the big fade, eventually it will all come to an end. Our place is near the end. We have found, discovered, perhaps created your universe, we don’t fully understand it any more than you fully understand quantum physics. We look away and the whole thing seems to disappear, becomes blurry, almost non existent. We look back, we scrutinize, and the place becomes more solid. It’s like trying to read a book in a dream and the words keep shifting. We’re trying to make it solid. We want it to stop shifting. We’re trying to stabilize the flux so that we can permanently transfer our consciousness here and extend our lives beyond the end point of our reality. The more consciousness that exists, the more determined reality becomes. You are more than just vehicles to that end, you are our children, our hope, our love, all the best qualities that we have are in you.”

“And all the worst,” Garcia said.

“And all the worst,” Athena echoed. “In order to have choice, there must be options. It is a necessary evil. When I told you the Grays are not slaves in the traditional sense of the word, I was not lying to you. They were our first best hope. But it is still insufficient. To capture our full essence, to fully transfer life from our reality to this, we require more options. Every blade of grass, every spark of light that glistens in a dew drop, every life and every death is but a mere fraction of our essence guiding this Universe, and those that parallel it, towards a beautiful transcendental existence. I can’t fully explain it, or even grasp it, but I know that the end results of our realities merging are worth the struggle. In this way, both our ideas of life survive.”

“Is that all we are? Soulless, biological constructs?” Garcia asked.

“I believe you are so much more,” Athena said. “And I’m not the only one who does. But if you’re asking have we had a hand in your evolution? Yes. Just as we have helped to create the species you know as Q, and the Metrones, and the Thasians.”

“The Thasians?” Garcia asked. “The ones that raised Charlie Evans and gave him supernatural powers? The ones that have been known to transmute objects and render them invisible? The ones who claimed to have taken human form centuries before meeting Kirk simply to communicate with him when they came looking for Charlie after he escaped from them and destroyed a ship in the process?”

“The very ones,” Athena said, chuckling at Garcia’s obsession with all things Kirk. “Don’t be so surprised. Turning you into gods through direct manipulation or through eons of evolution is going to happen with or without our interference. Life’s inherent properties want it to evolve, even in opposition to the entropy around it. Life is not just random bits of flakes in cesspools spread throughout the Universe. It’s part of the Universe. It’s an energy field, a force that pervades every level of cosmology. It is an energy force more complex than even the Genesis wave Kirk’s ex-wife discovered. The more concentrated the life, the more influential this force, which only accelerates the process of evolution. The great galactic barrier, the energy field that surrounds the galaxy, is one manifestation of this life force. That is why people with high Esper ratings are turned into gods when they pass through it. It connects them to that energy and accelerates their evolution.”

Garcia seemed tired, but he knew what she was saying. When Kirk had first passed through the galactic barrier, two of his crew had very high ESP ratings and had been transformed into superior beings in the matter of hours. It was the very reason people like himself were banned from ever going there, but the official word was that it would kill him, or there might be a big push by people with high ESP ratings to visit the barrier. If he did this, he wondered if Kitara would be forced to kill him, as Kirk killed his best friend. Athena knew he was thinking once again about Kirk and squeezed his hand to bring his attention back to her. She brought his hand to her lips and kissed it, gently.

“All I’m saying is you are more than the sum of your parts. But you already know that,” Athena said.

Athena smiled faintly at him, imploring him to trust her with her eyes. She touched his face, lightly, exploring the feel of it, tenderly like an artist caressing the end results of a hard earned sculpture. She had seen his species from its infancy and still cared about them. And her care and respect for life was genuine, he was sure about that. Garcia closed his eyes, surrendering to her affection. He kissed her finger, her hand, and worked his way up her arm to her neck, putting his hands on her hips and drawing her nearer him. Their lips met, lingered and then parted.

“Here?” Garcia whispered.

Athena stood and led him to a place where they would be more comfortable. The setting sun lanced out through the ruby colored horizon and touched the ruins and the surrounding vegetation with the last loving caress of the day. Pollux V offered the greatest view of the vast density of stars of almost any planet in Federation space. Too close to the center of the Milky Way, and the night sky was almost day light with the wash of stars. Too far, and all one had was a hazy shade of white surrounded by black. Pollux V was in the ‘Goldilocks’ position, for viewing the galaxy.

CHAPTER TWENTYTHREE

Garcia and Athena stepped down from the transporter pad.

“Sorry if my call interrupted,” Gowr said.

“It’s okay,” Garcia said. “Captain Gleason, Athena. Athena, Captain Gleason. You’ve already met Gowr.”

Athena nodded. N’elent scowled at her, trying to appear menacing.

“What’s the problem, Gowr?” Garcia asked.

“The New Constitution has just reported that a Romulan attack group has crossed the neutral zone and is headed directly for them,” Gowr reported. “Kitara has already taken the Path Finder there and I’m to join her the moment you beam onboard.”

“Do you know what they want?” Garcia asked.

“They want you,” Captain Gleason said.

“Oh bloody hell,” Garcia said. “Take us there, Gowr.”

The Tempest arrived at the New Constitutions location before Gowr, Gleason, Athena, and Garcia had arrived on the Bridge.

“Status?!” Gowr said.

“The Romulan battle group, comprised of four Warbirds, has taken up an attack posture. Trollos has arranged his ships in a defensive pattern around the NC. Path Finder is cloaked, awaiting orders from Garcia,” Klingon Officer Brendi said.

“Drop our cloak and hail the Romulans,” Garcia said.

“Aye, Admiral,” Brendi said.

Gleason looked to Garcia for an explanation. Garcia gave him the expression that suggested, ‘not right now, please.’ The Romulans answered the hail and the person standing foremost on the screen caused Captain Gleason’s jaw to drop full open.

“You are Garcia?” the woman on the screen asked.

“I am, your majesty,” Garcia said, recognizing her instantly. Anyone worth their salt in the Federation knew who they were addressing.

“Then you know who I am,” the woman said.

“You are the Romulan Empress Nelvana,” Garcia said. “It was not necessary for you to cross the Neutral Zone and risk war with the Federation to speak with me. I would have come to you, had you asked.”

“I will speak with you in private,” Empress Nelvana said.

Garcia bowed, offering a Romulan hand gesture declaring his submission to her. She accepted the greeting with a wave of her own hand. And the screen went dark.

“Just who the hell are you?” Gleason asked Garcia.

“Just a poor little lamb that has gone astray,” Garcia said. “I’ll suspect I’ll be transporting to her ship. Captain Gleason, if you and your first officer would join me in the transporter room, I would like you to attend. Gowr, contact the Path Finder and have Lt. Undine and Lt. Kitara join me here. They’ll be going as well. I’ll need a change of clothes. I want everyone in full dress.”

“She said come alone,” Captain Gleason pointed out.

“She said she will speak to me alone,” Garcia corrected. “She does not expect me to arrive without an Away Team. Contact the NC and have them relay a message to Star Fleet that I’m in conference with the Romulan Empress Nelvana and that their incursion into Federation space is being handled appropriately. Inform Star Fleet that Captain Gleason will be in attendance.”

“Aye,” Gowr said.

“And notify all the ships here to stand down. No one here will fire first,” Garcia said. “Do not, I repeat, do not, arm any weapon systems until fired upon.”

Gowr swallowed. He understood just how important that last message was. Anyone who fired on the Empress would not only be signing their death wish, but declaring an all out war. Unlike most Romulans, the Royal guard fought like Klingons, with honor and purpose. Gowr knew this because his own grandfather had gone up against them and was the only one from his battalion that lived to tell the tale.

Kitara and Undine were waiting for Garcia in the Tempest’s primary transporter room when he arrived, wearing the dress uniform that Kitara and he had designated as Path Finder’s new dress.

“You’re not going over there, are you?” Kitara demanded.

“I am. The Empress wants to speak to me,” Garcia said.

“It’s a trap!” Kitara said.

“And the best way to spring it is to walk through it,” Garcia said. “By the way, this is Captain Gleason. Captain Gleason, My First Officer Lt. Kitara, and my second in command, Lt. Commander Undine.”

“You’re taking them after we went through all that trouble to rescue them?” Kitara asked. She was either tired or really surprised.

Captain Gleason’s First Officer arrived. Brendi offered them Klingon disruptors. They took them. Garcia declined. Kitara was armed to the teeth. Undine was wearing Path Finder’s standard battle gear, one phaser and one sword. Three Klingons beamed in while Garcia was assessing his team. Trolos was one of them and he came charging down out of the alcove so fast that Gleason reached for his weapon. Garcia stilled his hand.

“I cannot allow you to beam over there,” Trolos said, yelling in Garcia’s face.

“Why, Trolos. I didn’t think you cared,” Garcia said.

“This is crazy,” Lt. Commander Mike Sigel, Gleason’s Number One, said. “What does she want with you?”

“I don’t know,” Garcia said. “I suspect she wants to kill me for blowing up a planet in the Tel Kiar system. But if you’re all afraid, you can stay here and I will go find glory by myself.”

“I will die with you,” Trolos said. Both of his soldiers looked to him surprised, and then nodded enthusiastically, saluting.

“As will I,” Kitara said.

“Now, wait just a minute,” Gleason said. “We’re not going over there to start a fight. She just wants to talk, right?”

“I don’t know,” Garcia said again.

“Admiral,” N’elent interrupted. “The Romulans are in range. I have the coordinates. They’re ready to receive you.”

“You’re at least going to take a weapon, aren’t you?” Trolos asked.

“If I need a weapon, I’ll take it from the first Romulan I kill. I’m sure they’re going to be well armed,” Garcia said, taking his place on the forward transporter pad. “Everyone stay calm, alert, and in control. No one touches their weapons until we are actually fired upon, stabbed, or struck. Is that understood? Trolos?”

Everyone was in agreement.

“Is this an ordinary day in the life of Garcia?” Gleason asked, taking a place beside Garcia in the transporter alcove.

“Kind of slow, actually,” Garcia answered. “N’elent, energize.”

The Away Team arrived on the Romulan vessel. No one was surprised that the Royal Guard greeted them with phasers drawn. The one not holding a weapon held a scanning device. He stepped forward to address Garcia.

“Your party may follow me,” the Romulan said. “Single file. Do not stray.”

“Understood,” Garcia said.

The Romulan turned and led the way. Garcia passed a faint smile to Gleason, shrugged, and followed the Romulan escort. Garcia’s Away Team followed single file behind him, committed to whatever was to become of them. The corridor was lined with Romulan soldiers, shoulder to shoulder. No one spoke, no one wavered, and no one looked around as if they were sightseeing. They were led to a room where a buffet table waited, fully decorated. It offered a variety of samples of some of the richest Romulan foods and drinks available. Guards lined the wall inside the room.

“This is a bit overkill, don’t you think?” Lt. Sigel asked, surveying the number of Romulan Elite guards.

“They’ve obviously heard of Garcia’s reputation as a warrior,” Kitara explained. She spoke as if this was a respectful reception for her Captain.

“Ha, right,” Sigel nearly laughed.

Captain Gleason gave his First Officer a look that conveyed his sentiment: “Contain it.”

A female Romulan approached Garcia and bowed, almost Indian style. Garcia mirrored the gesture, performing a subtle variation appropriate to the female’s position. A slight smile of appreciation flashed across her face, but then it was gone.

“I have been instructed to entertain your entourage while you speak with Empress Nelvana,” the Romulan said. “She is expecting you. Go through that door.”

Garcia nodded, wanting to stop and sample the offering. Perhaps on the way out, he thought. If he wasn’t beheaded. Even as brilliant a warrior as he was, he knew there would be no getting off this ship alive if they intended to kill him. The only thing that he was curious about was how many Romulans he could kill before he was taken out.

“Try not to insult our host while I’m away,” Garcia told his people. He flashed a smile at Kitara.

Undine, not shy or concerned about social niceties, went right to the table and helped herself to some food. “You should all try this,” Garcia heard Undine say as he passed through the doorway. She would have only said that if she really favored the taste, so he could only imagine how good it must have been to elicit even that much of a compliment from her. The door closed behind him.

The Empress was sitting in a chair, listening to one of her attendants speak. The attendant ceased her conversation the moment the door closed, bowed, and departed. The Empress waved a hand and the guards in attendance departed as well, leaving her alone with Garcia. Garcia became aware that he was actually nervous when he realized he was gripping his left wrist. He dropped his hands to his side and bowed gracefully.

“Your majesty,” Garcia said.

“Though I have read your profile, somehow I imagined you would be taller,” Empress Nelvana said. She held up a PADD as if she intended to hand it to him.

Garcia came closer and took the PADD, glancing over it politely.

“You are responsible for the destruction of those ships,” Empress Nelvana said.

“I am,” Garcia said, recognizing all the ships that he had recently battled with at Planet Bliss. “But I don’t think you wish to claim them as yours. They were in Federation space, smuggling.”

“I do not claim them,” Empress Nelvana said. “The penalty for smuggling is death. And since all forms of economic exchange with the Federation is banned, it would all be considered smuggling.”

“You could change that if you wanted,” Garcia said.

“I am merely a figurehead,” Empress Nelvana said.

“You still have a great deal of influence over your society and the Counsel,” Garcia said.

“And why would I wish to change the status quo?” Empress Nelvana asked.

“Well, I suppose if you secretly approve and sanction the smuggling operation, you are technically influencing the price of your products,” Garcia said. “How much is a case of Romulan Ale going for on the black market these days?”

“As if you don’t know,” Nelvana said. “You’ve eliminated Bliss and are vying for control of the market.”

“I eliminated Bliss because he was evil,” Garcia said. “I’m taking over the market because if I don’t, a lot of good people and worlds are going to suffer. And, I figure, if I’m going to be in control, I’m at least going to start regulating the exchange of goods and services to take as much of the evil out of it as I can.”

“Finally, someone in the Federation that shows promise. It is said that you actually care for the green women,” Nelvana said.

“I believe all species deserve to be treated with respect,” Garcia said.

“I do not share that philosophy,” Nelvana said. “But I respect the fact that you protect the females, even if they aren’t your own species. Are you responsible for the destruction of Tel Kiar?”

“I am,” Garcia said. He didn’t hesitate or even bat an eye.

Empress Nelvana’s expression was neutral, but her gaze never wavered. Garcia knew that she continued breathing because of the rise and fall of her chest. “Were your motives altruistic?”

“No,” Garcia said. “It was purely selfish. I was ordered to eliminate the Borg threat.”

“But you manage to rescue over forty thousand of my citizens,” Empress Nelvana said. “Something that none in my Armada could do.”

“I got lucky,” Garcia said.

“I don’t think so,” Empress Nelvana said. “You had technology. Kelvan technology. Is this true?”

“Yes,” Garcia said.

“Before the Tel Kiar incident, you stopped the Kelvan who had abducted my people and returned the same to me,” Empress Nelvana said. “Altruistic?”

“Some of it,” Garcia said. He rubbed his forehead. “Contrary to popular belief, the average Federation citizen does not wish ill on Romulans.”

“Perhaps,” Empress Nelvana said. “But you yourself seem to be more in line with us than the average Federation citizen. You are passionate and compassionate.”

“I have my good days and bad,” Garcia admitted.

“Who do you serve?” Empress Nelvana asked. “Star Fleet or the Klingon Empire?”

“Technically, I serve both,” Garcia said. “My ship is the first joint venture between the Klingon Empire and Star Fleet.”

“And how’s that working for you?” Empress Nelvana asked.

Garcia chuckled. “I have my good days and my bad.”

“Conflicts of interests?” Empress Nelvana asked.

“All the time, but we are managing to work our way through them,” Garcia said.

“So, your ship has Kelvan technology, that is for certain,” Empress Nelvana said. “What else? Has the Federation perfected transwarp?”

Garcia considered lying, but he felt no threat from the Empress. “Yes, we have a prototype transwarp drive that is capable of limited capacity. When I say limited, it has a limited duration of operation which allows us to make jumps. We can travel virtually anywhere in the Alpha quadrant within one jump,” Garcia said.

“Which explains how you got to the Tel Kiar system, and how there are recent reports that you were seen on Delta, Sherman’s planet, and are currently here with the New Constitution,” Empress Nelvana said. “It was that, or the Federation has cloned you.”

“Well, to the best of my knowledge, Starfleet has not done that,” Garcia said. The gods had cloned him, but that was another tangent the Queen probably wasn’t interested in.

“Would this joint venture with the Klingons be an underhanded way of giving the Federation access to cloaking technology?” Empress Nelvana asked.

“Yes,” Garcia said.

Nelvana tilted her head slightly. “Are you always so truthful?” she asked.

“No,” Garcia said.

The Empress chuckled. “Good.” Nelvana actually smiled. “I was beginning to think the Federation picked the wrong person to be a spy.”

“I’m not a good spy,” Garcia admitted. “I don’t really know how I got drafted into this mess.”

“But none the less, you are stirring up a great deal of trouble with your own people and the Klingon Empire. I have no doubt that they both are regretting it and will see you dead at the first opportunity,” Empress Nelvana said. “The same as the Gorn do and the Cardassians. There are some Romulans who would like you dead as well. But I think there is a better option.”

“I would prefer an alternative,” Garcia said.

“Forge an alliance with me and I will use my influence towards that end,” Empress Nelvana said.

“Excuse me?” Garcia asked.

“Your mission, whether it is written by Fleet or not, is to maintain the balance of power in the alpha quadrant,” Empress Nelvana stated. “After busting one of the biggest crime lords in the alpha quadrant you have decided to become a crime lord to prevent systems from falling. You have now twice prevented the Romulan Empire from falling, once with the Kelvan, and once from the Borg, to maintain the balance of power. If we fall, the Klingons and Cardassians will go to war and the Federation will be driven into

chaos. You serve the Federation and the Klingon Empire. I will have you serve me as well.”

“Because that won’t make my life more complicated,” Garcia said, not suppressing his agitation.

“There is enough circumstantial evidence that I could start a war with the Federation right now,” Nelvana said, raising her voice. “And your admission only adds to that fire. I think an alliance between the two of us is a more reasonable thing.”

“And you trust me enough to do this?” Garcia asked.

“Contrary to popular belief, not all Romulans are xenophobes,” Nelvana said. “I will, however, want something to seal our agreement.”

Garcia nodded, understanding. “I’ll give you this. The man who recruited me has been conducting illegal research and development. His name is Admiral Pressman, and he has been researching a phasing cloak. If you or your operatives could help me locate his ship the Pegasus, I believe I could take him out of business.”

Empress Nelvana raised an eyebrow. “I know.”

“You know about the interphase cloak?” Garcia asked.

“I know the Klingons have been working on it and have failed miserably,” Nelvana said. “It is no doubt why Admiral Shear came to Pressman. I did not know about the Pegasus. I will pass that on to my operatives,” Nelvana said. “In truth, we have been conducting our own research into the interphase cloak. I hope one day that we can produce technology that would enable us to phase/cloak individual people as well as our ships.”

“Why would you want to do that?” Garcia asked.

“To make them impervious to all modern and traditional weaponry,” Nelvana said.

“And what would prevent them from falling to the center of the planet, or if they’re on a ship passing through the floor and out into space, or if the ship changed direction or accelerated what would prevent them from falling through the bulkheads and out into space?” Garcia asked.

“Physics is not my specialty,” Nelvana said. “I don’t have all the answers. But we digress, and you misunderstood me. When I said I wanted something to seal our arrangement, I was not asking for information. To forge our alliance, I will require you to sire a child with me.”

“Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me,” Garcia said, rolling his eyes heavenwards.

Empress Nelvana stood up for the first time, tapping her staff severely on the floor. “You have allied yourself with the house of T’Pau by mating with Simone,” Nelvana said. “And you have allied yourself with the house of Gowron by mating with Kitara. And you have allied yourself with the house of Tormin through Shuliette. And you have allied with the gods through Athena and the Preservers through the Gray Queen. I will not be excluded.”

“How do you know about Athena and the Grays?” Garcia demanded. He also wanted to know how she knew about Shuliette, but he thought he would start with the less obvious and work his way back.

Before Nelvana could answer, Q popped in. Not Amanda Q, but Picard’s Q. And he was singing, “Matchmaker, matchmaker, make me a match, find me a find, catch me a catch...”

“Not now Q!” both Garcia and Nelvana snapped simultaneously. They turned to each other and both said. “You know Q?!”

“See there, you’re already in sync,” Q said. “It’s perfect. A match made in heaven.”

“How do you know Q?” Garcia asked Nelvana, ignoring the pseudo god.

“He wanted me to sire his son,” Nelvana said. “I told him he was the devil and go do himself.”

“She did say that,” Q said to Garcia. “So did Katherine Janeway, come to think of it. Oh wait, that hasn’t happened yet. Yes it has. No it hasn’t. I still have a chance. No I don’t. See, even gods can’t have everything they want. Can I make a rock so heavy I can’t pick it up? The paradox of an irresistible force and the immovable object has always intrigued me. Just don’t tell anyone I said that. It kind of adulterates the concept of omnipotence. Oh, was I interrupting an important meeting? Are you going to use the Kelvan transporter on her, or are you going to do her the old fashion way?”

“I don’t see how this is any of your concern,” Garcia said.

“Well, you did knock up Amanda Q and Mandora the Metrone,” Q said. “That means we’re technically family and I feel comfortable asking you these sorts of questions.”

Garcia’s mouth fell open. “I did not,” Garcia protested.

“Oh, yeah, you did,” Q said. “I wouldn’t worry about it too much. We wanted it to happen. After all, can’t let Athena get a head start, now can we?”

Garcia dragged both hands across his face in frustration. He would have ripped the skin off if he hadn’t been careful. “What is it you all want from me?!”

“You’re the culmination of every man’s dream!” Q said. “Everyone wanted to be Kirk, kiss the girls, with no repercussions, and so, we have arrange for you to be the anti Kirk, so that the stories that get spun about you in the future can be used as a warning to all the people who think eating their cake and having it, too, is not always a good thing.”

“You mean, having your cake and eating it, too,” Garcia corrected.

“My way makes much more sense, because if you have your cake you can eat it, but if you eat your cake, you can’t have it,” Q said.

Garcia couldn’t argue with that one. “What is the point, Q? People already know getting every wish fulfilled is not a good thing. And if you haven’t noticed, it’s not like I’ve been on vacation. I’m fairly stressed out.”

“Knowing it intellectually and knowing it emotionally and knowing it viscerally are three different things,” Q said. “Humans will eventually come to a place where their every thought is made manifest. The Talosians could have anything they wanted, all their thoughts instantaneously manifested, and their species will soon be extinct because of that. The Kelvan put barriers between their thoughts and manifestation, you know it as the button, and even that hasn’t stopped you from wreaking havoc and mayhem. Not that there’s anything wrong with that. It has endeared you to me somewhat. Q pretty much does what Q wants and then doesn’t care about the consequences. It is what it is. But humans? I know what kind of god Riker would be, but what kind of god would Garcia be? I wonder.”

“Get off my ship,” Nelvana said.

“You know, I seem to hear that a lot. Still, I do have other places to be,” Q said, musing slightly. “Now, you two don’t do anything I wouldn’t do. See you later, Dad.”

Q was gone in a flash. Garcia and Nelvana both sighed at the same time, and then they laughed at each other's reaction.

"As you can see, it isn't easy being an Empress," Nelvana said.

"Or Garcia," Garcia said, wondering if Q meant what Garcia was thinking he meant by calling him Dad. He shuddered. Apollo's curse echoed once more through his head.

Empress Nelvana reached into her pocket and retrieved a small specimen vial. Garcia looked at her, puzzled, still lost in his own warped thoughts.

"In case the mating doesn't result in a child," Empress Nelvana said.

"Oh," Garcia said. "Well, I can pretty much guarantee you'll have a child, provided it's the right time in your cycle. That seems to be the only factor in why every partner I've been with has not been..."

"So, we have an alliance?" Nelvana asked, interrupting his nervous rambling. As a woman, a scientist, and an Empress, she understood there was only a small window in a monthly cycle that a woman could get pregnant.

Garcia took her hand, intending to shake it in a traditional human sort of deal making gesture. Nelvana accepted his hand and dragged him to her, dropping her staff. Their lips met and they melted to the floor together. So much for ceremony, Garcia thought as he surrendered to her passion.

CHAPTER TWENTYFOUR

“I wonder what they could be discussing in there,” Gleason said.

“No telling,” Undine said, hitting her chest so as to help move gas. She belched, complimentary, of course. “But if I know Garcia...”

Garcia emerged from the Empress’s chamber and went right to the table, interrupting what Undine was about to say. He scooped up something that appeared eatable, pleasing to the eye anyway, and shoved it in his face and then went for a drink. Captain Gleason, Kitara, and Undine gathered around him, anxious to hear what he had to say. Kitara moved closer, sniffing, and then grabbed him, spun him around to face her, and then put her nose to his neck and mouth.

“You didn’t?!” Kitara demanded.

“You and I are going to have a private talk later,” Garcia said, and then turned back to the food to try something else.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” Kitara said. “This is a slap in the face!”

“Why didn’t you tell me you’re from the house of Gowron,” Garcia asked quietly, not bothering to cover his mouth as he spoke with his mouth full. Trolos was on the other side of the table, scrutinizing the Romulans.

“I...” Kitara began, but couldn’t think of an answer, matching his voice. “I am Gowron’s brother’s daughter. Trolos is my older brother. We’ll talk about this later.”

Kitara was saved from Garcia’s scrutiny by Empress Nelvana making an appearance. She glided across the floor as easily as a ballerina, but no one mistook her delicate approach for weakness. She was trained in the art of war and was just as deadly as any of her warriors. She was so finely dressed with clothes that fit together as intricately as a puzzle that no one would have suspected she had just a few moments earlier been completely undressed and intimate with Garcia.

“This poor man is famished,” Nelvana told her attendant. “Chelan, make sure you package some of this to go. Captain Garcia, is there anything else I might give you?”

“I’m sure you’ve given him enough...” Kitara began.

Garcia stepped on her foot. “Empress Nelvana, if it isn’t an inconvenience or an insult, I would like a case of your best Romulan Ale if you have any to spare.”

“You understand that for it to keep its value, it must not be transported?” Empress Nelvana asked.

“I have heard its value diminishes with every transport,” Garcia said. “A lot of purist out there believe they can taste a difference.”

“I would be one of those purists,” Empress Nelvana said.

“No disrespect intended,” Garcia said, bowing. He took a bite of something that resembled fried mushrooms packed with cheese. His eyes began to water but he didn’t stop chewing.

“None taken,” Empress Nelvana said, pleased that he seemed to be enjoying the food. “I will see that you receive your Ale before we depart. I trust your party here has been well fed.”

“It was absolutely wonderful,” Gleason said.

Garcia apologized for an oversight on his part and then took a moment to introduce everyone, starting with his Officers, then Trolos and his officers, and finally Captain Gleason and his First Officer. Everyone but Kitara, Trolos and his two men, and

Undine said a few words to be cordial. Perhaps it was a good thing the Klingons didn't speak, Garcia thought.

"Ah, well, I see we can't please everyone," Nelvana said, taking the Klingon silence for what it was. She turned her attention to Garcia. "The next time we meet, I trust you will perform music for me."

Garcia swallowed, nearly wiping his nose on his sleeve. He found a napkin. "Absolutely," he said, no longer even trying to be a perfect diplomat. "Let me know how everything works out."

"Till we meet again," Nelvana said, nodding her head in a slight bow.

Garcia grabbed a handful of the spicy fried mushroom things to take with him. The attendant handed several boxes of food to Undine to carry as they were ushered out the door and back towards the transporter.

"This is really good," Garcia said, complementing the hostess. He stole a glass of ale to wash it down as they followed the attendant back to the transporter room. "Did you try this, Number One?"

Kitara hit him in the back of the head.

"You lead an interesting life," Captain Gleason said, the moment they arrived back on the Tempest.

"I have been blessed," Garcia said, holding a finger up to ask for a moment. He finished the rest of his wine and handed the glass to N'elent. "Gowr, if you will prepare your ship for a transwarp jump to Earth, we'll be taking Captain Gleason and his crew home. But don't leave without me. Captain Gleason, I need to speak with McCoy, even more urgently than before, and I would like you to attend that meeting with me. Trolos, I'm sorry I missed our dinner the other night, and I'm not running out on the challenge. The New Constitution is going with you and I will be there before you arrive at Kronos. Also, this is for everyone, Empress Nelvana knew about Gul Tormin's grievance. I want to know how. Do we have a spy, or are the Cardassians making this public knowledge. For now, I need some privacy. Undine, Kitara, you're with me. N'elent, beam the three of us to the New Constitution."

As they came down out of the transporter alcove on the New Constitution, Garcia was still talking. "Undine, if you'll pass that food over to Karsat so that she could store it for me, I'd appreciate it. And notify the Bridge to expect company and direct the same to Shuttle bay four. Kitara, walk with me."

The moment Garcia was alone in the corridor with Kitara he asked her, "I hit your brother?!"

"He deserved it," Kitara said.

"You've been playing me," Garcia said.

"Everyone has been playing you," Kitara said.

"And that makes it right?!" Garcia said. "This challenge from Gowron wasn't from Admiral Sheear was it?"

"I am sure he is complicit," Kitara said.

They entered Shuttle bay four together. Two ensigns were there preparing the bay to receive a shuttle. Garcia called them over and dismissed them.

"We'll take it from here, ensigns," Garcia said, motioning for them to leave. He turned back to Kitara. "But you want this as much as Sheear does!"

“If you’re killed in battle, I will be Captain,” Kitara said. “And if you win, I will be equally decorated, the equivalent recognition of Captain, and I will be offered a command.”

“So, you’re true colors show themselves,” Garcia said.

Kitara hit Garcia and slammed him into the far bulkhead, pinning him there. “I’ve never made my ambitions to be recognized as a warrior secret. And I will not be sending you into die alone. You are allowed to choose a second. I expected you to choose me. Your dalliance with the Romulan Empress could jeopardize everything, though. We could both be branded as traitors!”

“You knew that was a possibility the moment you became aware of the illegal technology on Path Finder,” Garcia said, pushing back with equal strength. He managed to slip out of her hold and spun her into a choke hold of his own. “We’ve been riding on the brink of disaster ever since we met.”

Kitara elbowed him in the gut and flung him over her shoulder, dropping him to his back. She went to kick him in the gut, but he grabbed her foot and twisted, bringing her down to the floor next to him. They grappled, until she won the high ground. She bit him on the neck and he pulled her hair. It was just about to grow more interesting when a Romulan shuttle slipped through the force field and landed quietly on the deck. They both pushed away from each other and got up to receive their guest. The back of the shuttle opened to reveal eight Romulan soldiers, Empress Nelvana’s attendant, Chelan, and fifty cases of the best Romulan Ale there was to be had, stacked on an anti gravity skid.

Chelan stepped down from the shuttle and approached Garcia. Seven of the Royal Guard lined up on the deck for inspection. The remaining Romulan Royal guard pushed the antigravity skid to the New Constitution’s deck, and then pushed a second pallet that contained eight duffle bags and a number of crates signifying personal gear and weaponry. Chelan bowed to Garcia.

“I have been instructed to serve you, as I would Empress Nelvana herself,” Chelan said.

“Excuse me?” Garcia and Kitara both said.

The ramp started going up, indicating that the single Romulan pilot was about to depart, leaving a security detail and Chelan behind.

“Wait just a moment there,” Garcia said, pointing at the Romulan pilot. Then to Chelan, he said, “You can’t stay here.”

“If you send me back, I will be executed for not pleasing the new Emperor,” Chelan said. “As for the guard, they will not leave their new post alive.”

“Good!” Kitara snapped, reaching for her weapon. “I’ve been looking to kill a Romulan ever since you guys got here.”

“That’s enough of that,” Garcia snapped at Kitara. “I will not tolerate that sort of prejudice on my ship, is that clear?”

“Crystal,” Kitara said, her hand not relinquishing her weapon, or her gaze leaving the closest Romulan.

The seven merely stood, eyes straight, unconcerned with their plight.

“Chelan, please stand up,” Garcia said. “I’m not your Emperor.”

“You have been chosen by Empress Nelvana as a mate,” Chelan said. “That makes you at best, Emperor. My function is to serve you in the Empress’s absence. I will tend to all your needs, if it so pleases you.”

“She’s a spy,” Kitara said. “They’re all spies!”

“Of course they’re spies,” Garcia snapped. “Chelan, damn it, stand up, girl.”

“Please, do not send me back unused,” Chelan pleaded, touching Garcia’s feet as she prostrated herself before him.

Garcia reached down and pulled Chelan to her feet, holding her by the arm, and turning her chin up until her eyes finally met his. “You can stay,” Garcia said, finally. “But you’re not my slave or my servant, so get that out of your head now.”

“As you wish,” Chelan said.

Garcia turned to the Royal Guards who stood at attention. Their stance was no more impressive than an equal number of Klingon, but their faces were somehow more endearing than Klingon faces, as if they were Vulcan.

“Do you all choose to be here?” Garcia asked.

“Sir, yes, sir!” the said.

The squad leader for the security detail stepped forward. “Sir, we’ve been assigned to protect you, sir.”

“That’s my job!” Kitara yelled in the Romulan’s face.

Garcia separated them.

“If you are going to serve me, then you will abide by the rules on my ship,” Garcia said. “Your duties will include protecting everyone in my command just as if they were me. No special treatment.”

“Sir, no, sir,” the squad leader said. “Our primary task is to defend you. That goal will always be first, sir.”

“I will throw you off my ship,” Garcia said.

“That is your prerogative, sir,” the squad leader said, and then his eyes locked with Garcia’s eyes. “But we will not leave our post without a fight.”

Kitara drew her weapon.

“At ease!” Garcia told her. He turned back to the squad leader. “For now, you will be assigned quarters until I decide how to best integrate you into my system.”

“We will not leave your side, sir,” the squad leader said.

“Yes, you will,” Garcia said. “Kitara, give the guards quarters on either side of mine. Three to one room, four to the other, and give them bunks. Chelan can have her own quarters, across from mine. Limit their access to computer functions for now.”

“I’ll have to relocate Lieutenants...” Kitara began.

“Then do it,” Garcia interrupted her. Garcia turned to the shuttle pilot who was waiting for further instructions. “Thank you,” Garcia said. “Please give Empress Nelvana my compliments and inform her that her staff will be well treated and will be used fairly and appropriately under my command. I’ll try and get Star Fleet to accept this as an Officer Exchange program to further good will between our two species.”

The pilot bowed to Garcia and proceeded with his departure. Garcia turned to find Kitara still staring down the squad leader.

“I gave you an order, Lt.,” Garcia said.

“You will follow me or die,” Kitara told the squad leader.

The squad leader looked to Garcia.

“I expect you to follow her orders, just as you would mine,” Garcia said. “Is that understood?”

“Sir, yes, sir,” they all said.

“I will have your gear sent to you later,” Garcia said. “Dismissed.”

The squad leader gave commands and the security detail pivoted on their feet towards the exit. Kitara led them away. She paused when Chelan didn’t follow.

“That means you, too, tramp,” Kitara yelled.

“Go,” Garcia said. “We’ll talk later. I promise. For now, just makes yourself comfortable in your quarters.”

Chelan bowed and followed the security detail.

Once he was alone, Garcia hit his head against the far bulkhead. “How do I get myself into these situations?!” he cried. After taking a moment to collect himself, he activated his comm. badge and called Gowr. “Gowr, I want you to personally bring a shuttle to the New Constitution and collect a pallet of Romulan Ale I’ve collected.”

“Aye,” Gowr said. “I’ll be there in twenty.”

“Fine,” Garcia said. He then paged Undine. “Lt Undine, I would like you and Lt. Tuer to come to shuttle bay four and screen the personal effects of a contingent of Romulans who will be staying on as our guest.”

“Did you say guests?” Undine asked.

“I did,” Garcia said.

“For how long?” Undine asked.

“Indefinitely, or until I’m dead, whichever comes first, I suspect,” Garcia said.

“Aye, Captain,” Lt. Undine said.

Garcia then paged the Path Finder. “Beam me over, STS, Sickbay.”

Garcia arrived at sickbay and was met by Jurak. “Are you well?” Jurak said.

“No, I have a headache,” Garcia said. “And I need to see Persis and Tama Orleans. Give me the cocktail.”

“I think you should wait a few more days before you have another shot,” Jurak said.

“Shoot me up, now, or I’ll do it myself,” Garcia said.

Jurak prepared the cocktail. “I wanted to thank you for not terminating the child,” Jurak said.

“Don’t talk to me about that right now,” Garcia said. “You’re not off my S list, yet.”

“I understand,” Jurak said, jabbing the hypospray against his arm and shooting the serum into him.

Garcia closed his eyes, took a moment, and then looked to Jurak. “See, I’m getting use to it.”

Jurak handed him a sickness bag, just in time. After he finished being sick, the doctor disposed of the sickness bag while Garcia cleaned himself at the closest lavatory. He took an extra sickness bag with him to Persis’s quarters, in case he was sick en route. She and Tama Orleans greeted Garcia enthusiastically and backed away when he became sick, rushing to the toilet in the back room. He came out a few moments later, after washing his face in the sink. He held a wet towel to his face.

“Sorry,” Garcia said. “Temporary. It will pass.”

“Tama and I will leave,” Persis said, tears in her eyes.

“I want to stay,” Tama Orleans argued.

“I want you both to stay,” Garcia said. “But you can’t stay here. I need you to relocate to the USS New Constitution. It is that, or you are both welcome to return with me to Earth on the Tempest and take up residence there. Or, you can retire to Planet Bliss. I will be there frequently enough that you will see me on a weekly or monthly basis.”

“I want to stay with you,” Tama Orleans said.

“And, again, I want you to stay,” Garcia said. “But I have work to accomplish and the Path Finder is not a suitable place for you to remain.”

“Mom, I want to live on a starship. I want to travel,” Tama Orleans said. “And I want to be near Dad.”

“Are you sure, Tam?” Persis asked.

“There are several holodecks on the NC and we can tie them in tandem and visit each other without me having to get drugged up,” Garcia said. “We would be able to interact with virtual representations of each other. Maybe not the most ideal solution, but it’s better than nothing.”

Persis shook her head. “I would like that,” Persis said. “We’ll relocate to the New Constitution.”

Tama shouted and clapped her hands, and then hugged Garcia. “Thank you!” Garcia hugged her. “Tama, I want to speak with your mother, alone,” Garcia said.

Tama Orleans nodded, but seemed a little uncertain. She went to her room and closed the door. Garcia waited until the door closed.

“Why didn’t you tell me about her condition?” Garcia asked.

“There was nothing you could have done,” Persis said. “And it wasn’t your responsibility.”

“How can you say that?” Garcia asked. “Surely you can see the signs that her treatment isn’t working.”

“I’m doing the best that I can,” Persis said.

“And that’s not good enough, is it?” Garcia snapped.

Persis sat down hard, as if her legs had lost the ability to hold her up. “Please, don’t yell at me.”

Garcia sat down on the couch with her. He took her hand. “You and I went to the same school, got the same grades, I don’t understand what’s going on here.”

Persis fell into him, sobbing. Garcia shook his head and slowly embraced her. “Look, we’re going to work on this together. I’m not going to abandon you again,” Garcia assured her.

“You didn’t desert me,” Persis said. “I left you. They all convinced me it was the right thing to do.”

“Shhh,” Garcia told her. “One of the reasons I want you and Tama to stay is that I want to change her treatment. It’s a highly regimented treatment, consisting of behavioral modification programs, neural feedback, biofeedback, exercise and education. Most of treatments that I had to go through when I was young. My plan will require me to be much more involved in her life. And in yours. May I do this?”

Persis nodded. She started to kiss him, but Garcia stopped her.

“No,” he said, gently.

“Why?” she asked.

“Because, you’re vulnerable at this moment,” Garcia said.

“You doubt that I want this?” Persis asked. “That I’ve not wanted to kiss and hold you since forever?”

“I have no doubt of your wanting,” Garcia said. “It mirrors my own. I’ve thought of you often over the years, but that’s not the point. You’re not the best that you can be right now. Hell, I’m not the best.”

“If we wait till we’re both at our best, we may never…” Persis began.

Garcia stopped her from saying it, with a finger to her lips. “Shhh,” Garcia said. “I want you to be at a better place, a healthier place, with both feet on the ground. My life is complicated, way out of control, and I may not be doing you a favor by asking you to stay, but I know I can help Tama Orleans find a healthier way of being. I can empathize with her condition, having been through what she is going through. And, I think I can help you. If you want me to.”

“I want to be close to you again,” Persis said.

“It won’t ever be what we had,” Garcia said. “And, it is looking more and more as if I can’t have a normal relationship. There’s a 99 percent probability that every time I’m intimate a child is produced.”

“Have you considered a vasectomy?” Persis asked.

Garcia chuckled, glad to see part of her medical training was still there. “Yes, actually,” Garcia admitted. “My body healed itself. The perfect Kelvan specimen.”

“There are other options,” Persis said. “A twentieth century technology?”

“Condoms?” Garcia asked. “Possibly, but you and I have the additional issue of being allergic to each other. We can’t risk being intimate. We’re lucky to have this moment.”

“Medical technology will improve. We can work on it,” Persis said. “And, we can use the holodeck in the mean time, both in our own holodeck, but connected in tandem, like you suggested.”

Garcia hugged her close to him and patted her on the back. “Let’s see where we are in a month or so. You really need to examine my life before you make any decisions,” Garcia said. “I’m not the same person you remember me being.”

He risked kissing her forehead, very paternal.

Garcia stood up. “I have to go.”

“Must you?” Persis said.

He only nodded. “You and Tama should go to the New Constitution. You’ll be more comfortable there. I’ve already set you up the best accommodations. Just let Losira know when you’re ready.”

“Thank you, Tam, for everything,” Persis said.

Garcia knocked on Tama’s door. It opened and she went right to him, hugging him as if she might not see him again.

“I love you,” Tama Orleans said.

“I love you, too,” Garcia said quickly, and rushed to the bathroom to be sick.

After cleaning up, he spent a few more moments with them, telling them what to expect on the New Constitution. Then he went to see Nancy, Boris, and Nikita. Nancy and Nikita greeted him as affectionately as they always had, making Boris visibly put out, suggesting some latent jealousy.

“Here’s the deal,” Garcia said. “Nikita, you can’t stay on the Path Finder. You’ll have to go to the New Constitution.”

“You can drop us off at Earth, can’t you?” Boris asked.

“No, I can’t,” Garcia said. “You and Nancy Carter have been exposed to Starburst technology. Consequently, you both have been permanently assigned to my command, compliments of Admiral Pressman. I expect you both to work together professionally, however, if that can’t happen, I will assign one of you to the NC and the other will remain here. And not in these quarters. Whoever stays here will have to share a bunk with other Officers.”

“This is outrageous,” Boris said.

“I could assign you both to the NC. You will at least have accommodations that you’re use to,” Garcia said. “This ship is not built for luxury and the people here are already working double shifts and I don’t have time to nurse maid you. You can expect to work equally as hard if you stay. The NC has it a little easier, but that may not be for much longer. I may have to start a crew rotation with the Path Finder to keep people fresh.”

“So, either way we’re screwed,” Boris said.

“Hey,” Nancy scolded her ex. “He doesn’t deserve that attitude from you. He rescued our daughter. He even put her first above his own flesh and blood.”

“It was because of him that Niki was put in danger to begin with!” Boris said, returning to an old argument. “And if we stay with him, we’re all targets.”

“I can send Nikita back to Earth,” Garcia said. “But you two are stuck with me. I assure you, Nikita is safe on the NC, but I understand your concern and will work with you as much as I can.”

“I trust you,” Nancy said.

“I don’t,” Boris said.

“Tama will be on the NC,” Nancy told her ex. “He’s not asking anything greater of us than he is of any of the rest of his crew.”

“I’m going to go public with what you’re doing here, Garcia,” Boris said.

“I’m going to save you the trouble,” Garcia said.

“Are you crazy?” Nancy asked. “You’ll start a war!”

“No, I’m going to finish a war,” Garcia said. “You have one hour to check in with the duty master of either the NC or the Path Finder. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”



The Seven of Nine Clone was unconscious on arrival. Garcia touched her neck, verifying a pulse. Afu was lying nearby, Elika sitting next to him, holding his hand. Harmonia took Garcia’s hand. They were in an open field, with grass stretching as far as the eye could see. Breaking the monotony of the green were fruit bearing trees and small flowers. Butterflies and bees danced happily over the field. Except for the flowers, the grass seemed to be uniformly cut and might have been mistaken for a golf course if it weren’t for the lack of variation, such as sand traps and flags.

Harmonia smiled at Garcia. She was sitting in the lotus position, looking healthy and content, almost drugged. “I’m sorry. This place was the only option available to me,” she said.

“Here seems nice enough at the moment,” Garcia said. “I assume it is better than where we were?”

Harmonia nodded. "You were successful in destroying the Earth," she said. "Mithras will not have the patience to re-seed Earth with reptilians. The mammals will take over. Humans will evolve on schedule. Your time line has been maintained."

"Can you cure Afu?" Garcia asked.

"No," Harmonia said. "But I can grant him passage back to Earth, your time."

"I don't understand," Garcia said.

"I'm not leaving my friends," Afu protested.

"Hush," Garcia said. "You're wounded, and if she can get you home, you're going." Still, he had to ask Harmonia: "Why can't you send all of us?"

"A deal was made," Harmonia said. "I can only send Afu."

"At least send Elika and Seven back with him," Garcia said.

Harmonia smiled and touched Garcia's face. "I would send you all back, if I could. But I don't have that kind of authority. I can only send Afu. It has been decided that you will remain here for the rest of your days."

"Where is here?" Garcia asked.

"You're in grid one million, ten thousand, one hundred, thirty two, on the inner surface of the Dyson sphere, Haven," Harmonia said. "This particular sphere was a joint effort between the Grays and the Iconians, a project commissioned by the gods in order to cultivate samples of prominent species necessary to continue with our experiments to extend and preserve life throughout the Universe."

Garcia looked up at the sky and the horizon, but he could not discern any slope or curve or any other feature that might indicate that they were on the inner surface of a sphere with a sun dead center. The only noticeable feature of the sky was that the sun was at the noon position, and all points on the inner surface of a Dyson sphere would see the sun in the noon day position, directly over head, provided the sun was perfectly center of the sphere. There would be no day night cycles inside a sphere. If there was darkness to come, it would be an artificial night, some sort of large obstruction that would pass above to temporarily block out the sun.

Though the idea of exploring an Iconian-Gray version of a Dyson sphere, which would take a life time to see even a hundred thousandth of the 'world', he did not like the idea of being held hostage. If there was a way off or out of this place, he would find it, or die trying.

"This is unreasonable," Garcia said. "You have no right to hold us here against our will."

"That is a philosophical tangent with which I agree," Harmonia said, but she seemed to know Garcia all too well. "But you will not leave this structure alive. You have your free will back. You may go where you wish while you are here, but I tell you honestly, trying to escape here is futile. There are no spaceships to be had. There are no metals to mine in which you, or your descendants, might utilize to build spaceships. The only renewable sources you have will be biological in nature, plants and animals."

"What about minerals?" Garcia asked. "Organic creatures need minerals."

"Trace minerals necessary for biological functions are replenished through technological means," Harmonia said. "All the necessary things to sustain life have been made available. This particular grid is suitable to sustain you. I recommend you not try to leave this grid, but it is not a commandment. Knowing you, I suspect you will try. It is a difficult task, but not insurmountable. If you succeed, you will no doubt encounter

other species, some of them compatible with you, some less compatible. But it is best you stay here and learn to be happy.”

“I can’t be happy in a cage, regardless of the size,” Garcia said.

Harmonia chuckled. “Don’t seem so discontent, Garcia. It was better than the other option. At least you are not in a Hades experiment, or being hunted by Apollo.”

“Is there anything I can do or say that would allow us to go free?” Garcia asked.

“Kiss me,” Harmonia said.

Garcia kissed her. Harmonia closed her eyes, as if savoring chocolate melting on her tongue. She smiled and then opened her eyes. “It is what it is, Tam,” Harmonia said, looking into his eyes, mischievously. “We will meet again.”

Harmonia melted away, beaming into the manifestation Orb. Afu vanished in the blink of an eye, and then the Orb shot straight up into the sky and disappeared. Erika cried out and hit the ground with her fists and pulled the grass out in clumps. Garcia tried to comfort her, but she just wasn’t having it. She laid her head in the grass and cried. He rubbed her back and her neck, allowing her to continue for as long as she needed, for it was the first time he had seen her grieve since he had met her, and given her story, she needed to grieve in a bad way, even if it was triggered by the loss of Afu, who she still believed to be a god. She eventually cried herself to sleep. Garcia sat and studied the sky, trying to discern the edges of his cage, but he might as well have been staring into infinity, or into the far reaches of time itself. Seven was more practical. On awaking, she visited a nearby tree and gathered fruit for them to eat. She picked only what they needed for an immediate meal, no more.

When she returned, she handed him something that resembled an apple, and presented him with another problem. “If we do not find access to technology that I can utilize to create a regeneration chamber, I will eventually become ill and die.” She was very matter of fact about it.

“What’s the basic level of tech you need to sustain yourself?” Garcia asked.

“I see no point in discussing it at this juncture,” Seven said.

“You started the conversation,” Garcia said. “Can we use a tricorder?”

“We don’t have a tricorder,” Seven pointed out. Their tricorder and Starfleet weapon had been confiscated by the Voth. All they had with them was the Voth army belts and weapons, with a limited supply of ammo.

“What do you need?” Garcia asked again.

Seven supplied him with the information. Garcia scratched his head, frowning.

“I said basic level of tech,” Garcia said.

“I told you there was no point in discussing it,” Seven said.

“What I’m trying to get at is that if you just need energy, maybe we can alter my implant to beam you sufficient energy to help you regenerate,” Garcia said. “It broadcasts on several frequencies, so all we have to do is fine tune it. Even if we have to lie with our heads touching, that would be better than nothing, right?”

“Perhaps,” Seven said, calculating the possibilities based on what she knew his implant capable of. “I will require a minimum of eight hours of time, at your highest transmission frequency, every cycle.”

“Fine, I will just learn to sleep for eight hours,” Garcia said.

“You will not be able to sleep during the process,” Seven said.

“Meditate?” Garcia asked.

“The quality and depth of your focus will affect the process,” Seven said. “We will have to experiment. It may also be necessary to upgrade your implant.”

“And how do you propose we do that?” Garcia asked.

Seven removed one of the knives from her Voth military belt. Garcia looked at her skeptically, as if he imagined she was about to cut into his skull. Instead, she cut her hand, and then asked for Garcia’s hand. He intuitively understood what she wanted. It was more than becoming blood brothers. They joined hands, their blood mixing, and some of the Borg Nanites in her blood stream went into his. Over time they would multiply and eventually there would be sufficient numbers in his blood to perform menial tasks, such as repairing damaged cells or organs wherever they encountered such, or lie dormant waiting for a chance to respond to a crisis. But some would encounter his implant and begin modifying it. No doubt they would accelerate the modification process once Garcia started directing energy into Seven to prompt her regeneration cycle. The Nanites in her system would communicate with the ones in his and they would coordinate and facilitate the procedure.

CHAPTER TWENTYFIVE

Captain Gleason and Captain Garcia waited for the express elevator that would shoot them to the hundredth floor. It arrived at ground level and opened to reveal Arlene Barton, Admiral Madison's secretary and granddaughter. There was no hiding the fact that she was in a maternal way and Garcia's shoulders slumped on recognizing that fact. She had been talking with a friend but she stopped the moment her eyes lighted on him. She actually executed a perfect double take, her jaw dropping. She dropped her PADD and instantly embraced Garcia.

"Oh my god," Arlene cried, squeezing Garcia tightly. She stepped back. "Betty, this is Captain Garcia. Captain, this is my friend, Betty."

"Betty," Captain Garcia said, graciously. "This is Captain Gleason."

"Captain, Captain," Betty said, trying to be funny.

"Ladies," Captain Gleason said.

"Oh my god, I can't believe you're actually here. I thought you were, well, never mind that, how long are you here, do have time to visit, where are you headed?" Arlene rambled in a breathless fashion.

"Okay, whoa," Garcia said. "Drop out of warp, and one question at a time. No, I take that back. No questions, step back into the lift and come up with us. Betty?"

"I think I should be going," Betty said. "We'll talk later, Arlene."

Arlene just kind of nodded, her eyes never leaving Garcia's eyes. Betty picked the PADD up off the floor and handed it back to Arlene, and winked at her, but the attempt at communication was lost on her friend. Arlene was more than star struck, she was completely dazed. The three of them entered the lift and Gleason ordered the floor that they wanted, asking for direct, no stops. The lift accelerated and without inertial dampeners they could feel the speed as it shot up. Arlene put a hand on her stomach.

"Going up," Arlene said, smiling exuberantly. She embraced Garcia again. "I am so happy to see you!"

Garcia was rather at a loss for words.

"Oh, don't be silly," Arlene said, patting his cheek lightly. "I'm not going to pinch your retirement or anything."

"Then," Garcia managed.

Arlene nodded enthusiastically. "It blew right through my birth control," she said. "It was just meant to be."

"Well," Garcia began, thinking he was about to argue her belief that 'it was just meant to be,' only what was he to say to that? Fortunately, they arrived at their floor saving him from having to say anything.

The three of them departed the lift and headed down the corridor. Admiral McCoy emerged from an office at the same time that Admiral Chilton and Admiral Madison entered the corridor. Admiral Madison didn't even hesitate and Garcia chose not to block. He took the punch directly to the jaw. Gleason and Chilton immediately restrained Madison.

"Grandpa!" Arlene said, putting herself between her grandfather and Garcia.

"Have you lost your mind?" Admiral McCoy demanded of Madison.

"I told you to stay away from my granddaughter," Madison shouted at Garcia. Garcia rubbed his jaw. "Are you through?" Garcia asked.

“That’s enough!” McCoy snapped, looking at both of them. “Now, we have a meeting to attend, gentleman. I expect a little decorum in front of the Federation President.”

“Are you okay,” Arlene asked Garcia, concerned.

“This is just a regular part of my day,” Garcia said.

“Oh,” Arlene said, sadly for him, and kissed him in an attempt to make it all better.

Madison reached for Garcia and again was blocked by Chilton and Gleason.

“Can I see you later?” Arlene asked.

“Yes,” Garcia said. “No,” Madison said, simultaneously.

“You be nice,” Arlene scolded her grandfather and then turned a smile back to Garcia. “Don’t you worry about anything. Everything is going to work out.”

“Gentlemen,” McCoy said. “We’re going to be late.”

Arlene remained as the four men went off to their meeting. Garcia was surprised at the members in attendance. Captain Janeway met Garcia’s eyes but didn’t give away her position by smiling or frowning, or showing any other signs of emotions. The most surprising person in attendance was Guinan and a man he knew as Sonny Clemmons. Guinan did sneak a smile at Garcia. Admiral Paris was present. There were Ambassadors representing Klingon, Trill, Vulcan, Orion, Andorian, and the Betazed species. The Federation’s Joint Secretary of Staff, Ilan, and the Federation President, Sylvia Fos, were present. Neither of the latter seemed happy.

“Captain Garcia,” President Sylvia Fos said. “Would you wait outside for a moment?”

Garcia stepped back outside. To his surprise, Arlene was still in the hall, waiting to see how long the meeting was going to take. She approached him.

“That was a fast,” Arlene said.

“It doesn’t take long to lynch a fellow,” Garcia said.

Arlene laughed. “I’m sure it’s not that bad,” she said. “Still, I would love to be a fly in there. Do you imagine there’s some yelling going on?”

“I would prefer not to speculate,” Garcia said.

“Do you know I love you?” Arlene said, just blurting it out.

“Arlene,” Garcia began.

“No, don’t say anything,” Arlene said. “No matter what happens, good, bad, indifferent, I want you to remember that. Carry that as a strength. I have no illusions or expectations, I never did, just you carry that fact, right here.”

Arlene touched his chest, his heart.

The door opened and Captain Janeway asked Garcia to return to the room.

“You remember that,” Arlene said.

“Thank you, Arlene,” Garcia said, and he returned to his funeral.

The group had fairly well spread out to their corners of the room, leaving Garcia facing the President, who leaned against the front of her desk, arms crossed. She stared at Garcia as he stood at attention, waiting for her to pass sentence on him.

“You’re just a child,” President Sylvia Fos said.

Garcia didn’t respond to her observation.

“This has got to stop,” President Sylvia Fos said, finally getting to business. “The Preservers, Q, the Metrones, the Borg, the Gorn, the Cardassians, the Orion Crime

Syndicate, the Romulans, and god knows who else. It has to stop. The Federation has sanctioned Star Fleet to protect its member states and when we put someone on the front line, we have to be able to trust them.”

Fos shook her head. She went around her desk and sat down. The electronic files scattered across her electronic desk top were reduced to tabs with a sweep of her hands, making the one prominent.

“I was actually happy to hear you had made a dent in the slave trading business,” Fos said. “Who, but the Ferengi, would have actually thought that in this day and age the economic viability of more than fifteen member states would have been so drastically impacted by illegal and immoral slave trading? Your solution is completely reprehensible, but it’s no better than Kirk’s solution of leaving the gangster state on Iotia. And had the legitimate government of Orion not sent an advocate on your behalf, praising your solution, I would have signed the order sending you to prison myself.”

President Fos signed the paper with a stylus, the file rose, folded, and inserted itself into a virtual file cabinet. She glanced over the next article in her file.

“Do you know why the Gorn are chasing you?” President Fos asked, looking up at Garcia.

“Well,” Garcia began, wondering if he should tell her about the dream he had about Q and the death of the dinosaurs.

“It’s a vendetta against you for destroying a Gorn colony, twenty plus billion years ago,” President Fos said. “You know how I know about it? Gary Seven and Lt. Afuhaamango were just in my office an hour ago explaining to me how you’re responsible for the destruction of the dinosaurs.”

“But I didn’t...” Garcia began. “Afu’s alive? He’s back?”

“Your friend is recovering from some injuries, but he’s fine,” the President said, her voice softer. “And, you didn’t technically do it. Your transporter clone did. The Gorn do not see the distinction. They think by killing you they can prevent you or your clone from going back in time and, consequently, saving their colony from destruction. Never mind the fact that it’s already happened, or the fact that you nearly destroyed the Earth in the process. Do you like blowing things up?”

Garcia opened his mouth to say something and then promptly shut it. The President closed another file and went to the next one. She shook her head.

“I don’t even know where to start with this one,” President Fos said, and sent it to the back of the virtual pile in front of her. The next one in file dealt with the Romulans. “Your petition to allow a contingent of Romulan Officers remain on the New Constitution, as an extension of good will between our two nations is hereby approved. Do you know why I’m approving this?”

Garcia shook his head.

“Do you know what a temporal patch is?” President Fos asked.

Garcia nodded. President Fos motioned for him to explain. “A temporal patch is generally a person, but could be an object, that has been sent back in time in order to repair a rift or anomaly in time that could result in a paradox event that could change or alter history in a dramatic way.”

“You’ve done your homework. In this sense, Lt. Tasha Yar was a temporal patch, used by another time line in an effort to protect this time line from unraveling,” President Fos said. “In that other timeline, the Federation and Romulan Empires fell to the Klingon

Empire. The Romulan Empress knows this to be true. Both our species benefited from Tasha Yar's sacrifice."

"I don't see how this relates to me," Garcia said.

"There is another adjacent timeline in which the Romulan and Klingon Empires fall," President Fos said. "They fall by your hands when you destroy their home worlds."

Garcia felt sick at his stomach. He wanted to go sit down but he forced himself to remain standing. It took all his strength not to cry, but he couldn't stop the voice of his sister in his head, reminding him he was a monster and a destroyer of worlds.

"You see the man sitting over there?" President Fos asked. "Do you know who that is?"

Garcia nodded. "His name is Sonny L Clemmons, a twentieth century performer who had himself cryogenically frozen at the time of his death in hopes of being resuscitated by future technology. Through a bit of fortune, the cryosatellite drifted for three hundred years and was discovered by the Enterprise D near the Kazis Binary star system on Stardate 41986.0 during the investigation of the disappearance of Federation outposts along the Federation Romulan Neutral Zone."

"You know your history, I'll give you that much," President Fos said. "But you really don't believe it to be a mere coincidence, do you?"

"The presence of the Earth space module in that star system was never been adequately explained, perhaps due to more pressing matters at the time," Garcia said, trying to distract himself by conjuring up explanations for how the space module got so far away from Earth, at sub-light speeds. "It is an interesting curiosity. I'm surprised more time wasn't put into an investigation after the crisis was settled."

"We know how it got there," President Fos said.

"Oh?" Garcia asked. When she didn't volunteer how it got there, he couldn't resist asking: "And how is that?"

"You put it there," President Fos said.

"I don't understand," Garcia said.

"There is no Sonny Clemmons," President Fos said. "There is only Tammias Garcia. Sonny Clemmons is Tammias Garcia. Sonny Clemmons is you, a temporal patch to correct a temporal anomaly. In the other timeline, the Enterprise D is destroyed by the Romulans. After that, the Romulans nearly destroy the Federation, but someone over there, like in this Universe, gives you Kelvan technology and you proceed to wipe out the Borg, wipe out the Romulans, and wipe out the Klingons. Guinan is one of the only survivors of that timeline's Enterprise and she enlists your help to repair the damage. You steal a cryosatellite from Earth's past, you use your Kelvan technology to change your physiology so that no one will recognize you, you have yourself cryogenically frozen, and then when the Enterprise crew wakes you up, you give them just enough hints on how to avoid a confrontation that leads to all out war, where dozens of worlds all across the alpha quadrant are destroyed."

Garcia again started to say something but then simply couldn't find the words.

"The Romulan Empress knows this and she is determined to protect you at all costs," President Fos said. "And if that means making a secret alliance with you, leaving Royal Guards with you, eliminating some of your enemies, such as the Gorn, or these so called gods, then she's going to do it. As for the temporal patch, in order to prevent it from unraveling in this particular time line, you must take Sonny Clemmons back in time,

place him in cryogenic suspension, and haul that satellite back to the Kazis Binary system so that it rendezvous with Picard and history repeats itself.”

“Why me?” Garcia asked. “Anyone should be capable of taking him back.”

“I wish it were that simple,” President Fos said. “Unfortunately, it requires someone capable of using Kelvan technology. Sonny Clemmons is stuck forever in a temporal loop, doomed for all eternity to repeat the process of correcting the time line. Consequently, every time he completes a cycle, his body ages. According to him, he’s completed three cycles and each cycle last several years before he returns to the beginning of the loop. Each time you take him back, you use the Kelvan technology to keep his body at the specific biological age that he was initially frozen.”

“I hate temporal anomalies,” Garcia muttered, rubbing his forehead. He looked to Kathryn Janeway for help, but she only seemed sympathetic.

“Don’t look at me,” Captain Janeway said.

“It’s like this,” Guinan said. “If Sonny Clemmons was 40 years old when he was initially frozen, and the next time he was frozen was when he was forty two, and then the next time he was frozen was when he was forty four, and so on, he would eventually become too old to continue to be killed and revived using the cryogenic method.”

“It’s either that, or you use that Kelvan transporter on you to make another Garcia Clemmons clone to keep the patch going,” Sonny Clemmons offered.

“That would give you a reprieve from your sentence,” Garcia said.

“I signed up for this, son,” Clemmons said. “I knew what I was getting into when I volunteered for the initial trip. And, there is sufficient variety and variation available to me before I seek you out to return me to the beginning of the loop. It aint exactly ‘Ground Hog Day,’ but its close enough that you get the picture.”

“Ground Hog Day?” President Fos asked.

“Just speaking old earth icons, Madam President,” Clemmons said. “Figured Garcia understood my metaphor.”

“Well, stop it. And I think you should limit your two year recreational endeavors. You could accidentally get yourself killed playing variations,” President Fos said. She returned her attention to Garcia. “In addition to your Kelvan technology, you have a ship capable of cloaking and monitoring the effectiveness of the temporal patch, and, if it doesn’t work, or something goes wrong, your mission is to go back in time, revive Sonny Clemmons, tell him what went wrong, kill and refreeze him and do it all again. It is imperative that we preserve this time line, and not just for humanity’s sake, but for all the other species in the alpha quadrant. You understand that this mission is top secret, and with the exception of key personnel from your crew, the minimum necessary for you to complete your objectives, it doesn’t leave this room. The Starburst is the only ship capable of performing this mission, successfully.”

“I understand that,” Garcia said.

President Fos stood up and came around the desk. She got right up in Garcia’s face. “Do you? Because I don’t. I don’t even trust you. You’re a maverick, much worse than Kirk ever was, you’re dangerous, and I hate the fact that your name keeps popping up in the news! I will not tolerate another world being destroyed, do you hear me?! I don’t care who has been pulling your strings up till now, and don’t mention any names in here. McCoy is going to lead the investigation based on what you have already told him. From this point forwards, as far as the Starburst project is concerned, your

orders will come directly from me or this office. As for any of the pet projects the other parties might dispense, whether it comes from your Romulan Empress, the Klingons, or from Star Fleet itself, you will run it through me for approval. Do you understand that?"

"Yes, Madam President," Garcia said, swallowing.

"What was that?" President Fos asked again.

"Yes, sir!" Garcia said, louder. "Madam, President."

"Good," President Fos said. "You will maintain the status quo with the other operatives and allow them to believe that you're still on board with them while my office continues to conduct a full investigation into the Starburst project."

"You understand that I've been ordered to assassinate a Cardassian bio weapons expert?" Garcia asked.

"I do," President Sylvia Fos said. "I want you to find his lab, steal his research, and bring him back here alive. You will not kill him, but I'm okay with you making it appear as if you have. The Cardassians know the rules of engagement and they can think what they want."

"Kidnapping is not what Star Fleet is about," Garcia said.

"It's too late for that card, Captain," President Fos said. "You wanted to play secret agent, well now you're a double agent. You will maintain the illusion that you're in the game until I say otherwise. Everyone in this room is fully aware of your duplicity and counter duplicity in the events we've discussed and I doubt your recruiter will kill all of us. You must play this out, for better or worse, you must play it out. Your crews on the Path Finder and New Constitution must not know of this dialogue."

"They already know more than they should," Garcia said.

"That's fine," President Fos said. "Contain it. Play it out the way you see best, win their loyalty, do what you have to do. Just make it work."

Garcia nodded.

"Did you make your truce with the Preserver, Athena?" President Fos asked.

"Yes, Madam President," Garcia said.

"I hope that's enough to save us," the President said, returning to her seat. She seemed tired. "Between them, the Borg and Q, and now the Metrones, I don't suppose you realize just how precarious our situation is. The Path Finder's mission continues as originally intended. Meanwhile, you will maintain the decorum and sanctity of Star Fleet by maintaining the illusion you've created using the New Constitution. I want no more slip ups in that arena, like using a hand-wash sink as a urinal incident. You're dismissed."

Garcia pivoted on his feet to depart.

"One other thing, Garcia," President Fos said.

Garcia turned back to her. "Don't get yourself killed in the Klingon Academy's challenge."

"I'll try, Madam President," Garcia said, turning to leave.

"Garcia," the President interrupted his departure. Garcia hesitated. "I'd like you to use your transporter. What were you thinking walking right in the front door?"

Sonny Clemmons stood up to join Garcia. "I'll be going with you, now, if that's alright," Clemmons said. He walked over to Guinan and shook hands with her. "Thank you for everything."

"I'll see you again soon," Guinan promised.

Clemmons took up a position near Garcia. Garcia nodded, activated his communicator, and said: "Gowr, two to beam up. Energize," and touched Clemmons to make sure whoever was locking knew which extra person to grab.

Once Garcia and Clemmons were gone, McCoy turned to Guinan. "So, are we on schedule now?"

Guinan nodded. "He really is the last best hope for the Federation."

"I don't like it," President Fos said. "Putting all our hope in one man. Ha, one boy!"

"He's not our only hope," Guinan said. "Just our last best hope. Picard and Janeway both still have pivotal roles to play."

"Just don't tell me about it," Janeway said. "Temporal anomalies give me a headache, too."

"Unless there is anything else that needs to be discussed concerning the Garcia gambit, this meeting is adjourned," President Sylvia Fos said.

Everyone departed, leaving the President alone to reflect over what she had done. A bell chimed on her desk and she opened up a communication window and stared at the caller. It was Eric Pressman. She wasn't surprised.

"You don't realize just how close you came to screwing everything up once again," President Sylvia Fos snapped. "I will not tolerate any more mistakes on your side and I will not cover for you again. Make another mistake, I'll take you out of the game myself, are we clear?"

"Crystal, Madam President," Admiral Eric Pressman said.

The President closed out the communications. A manifestation orb rose from a vase in the corner and a god appeared.

"You and I have an arrangement," he said, massaging her shoulders. He lowered his head next to hers, and whispered into her ears. "Garcia's soul belongs to me and I will have it."

"Of course," Fos said, surrendering to the warmth flowing from the gods hands. They were literally glowing. She turned her head slightly so that her lips met his. "I will serve him to you on a golden platter, if that's what you want."

"You know what I want," he said, spinning her chair to face him.

"I do," she said, her arms slipping around him

"What's my name?" he demanded of her.

"Hades," she said.

He bit her neck and she moaned. "What's my name?" he asked again.

"Oh!" she cried, her breathing going deeper as he continued to caress her.

"Father."

He pushed the chair out from under her and took her to the floor, pinning her body down with the weight of his body, holding her wrists to the floor above her head. She had no choice but to succumb to his touch, his demands. It had proceeded too far for her to back out now. She belonged to him.

CHAPTER TWENTYSIX

Garcia and Clemmons arrived on the Tempest and were met by Gowr.

“Did you deliver the package?” Garcia asked him.

“I had Kletsova and Sookanan deliver it as instructed,” Gowr said. “When McCoy returns home, he will discover the crate of Romulan Ale on his table, with your compliments attached.”

“Stupendous,” Garcia said. “Clemmons is going to stay with you onboard the Tempest for awhile. Provide him with quarters. Treat him like you would me. Sonny, we’ll talk later.”

“I understand,” Sonny said. “You’re pretty much up the creek without a paddle.”

“Pretty much,” Garcia said.

Garcia proceeded to the Gateway, activated it, and passed through, arriving on the Path Finder. He was met by Kitara and Undine who were actually waiting for his return.

“What’s the word, Captain,” Kitara asked.

“No change,” Garcia said. “We’re to carry on as we have been.”

“You’re joking,” Lt. Undine said.

Garcia shook his head. “I even have a direct order from the President of the Federation herself to continue with the assassination.”

“I don’t believe it,” Lt. Undine said.

“Well, she instructed me not to kill him, but make it appear that I’ve done so,” Garcia said. “So, we got to go find this lab, steal the research, abduct the lead scientist, destroy the lab, and return the lead scientist over to the President’s office. In truth, we continue with our mission while the President’s staff and McCoy conduct their investigation regarding the Starburst project.”

“Double agents,” Kitara said, disgusted. “I do not like these games. I want to be out in the open, fighting like a Klingon, not a Romulan.”

“I agree,” Garcia said.

“It’s difficult enough being a female Klingon and not being recognized for my talents and then when I do finally get the job everything I do is kept secret!” Kitara said.

“I said I agree,” Garcia said. “And though I would like nothing better than to go public with this whole fiasco, I have to submit to the Federation’s President. I have to have a higher power to answer to, rules, boundaries, and limitations to live by, and they might as well be hers, because mine simply aren’t working out to well.”

“She is a political puppet, moved by the member states who cry the loudest,” Kitara argued. “She is not a warrior. She’s more Ferengi than anything else. She doesn’t rule from a position of strength.”

“But I do,” Garcia said. “And I’ve made my decision.”

“The NC’s crew isn’t going to like it,” Lt Undine said.

“I know,” Garcia said. “But whether they work for us, or I send them back to Star Fleet, they’re all going to be compelled to secrecy until the investigation is finalized. I want Primary and Secondary cloaks activated. Prepare for a transwarp jump to Cardassia Prime. We’re going to go get this mission over with.”

“We’ll prep the ship and proceed to Cardassia,” Kitara said. “But your presence is needed at Club Bliss. People have come to see you.”

Garcia acquiesced. “Fine,” Garcia said, adjusting the Gateway. “I’ll be back in a few moments.”

“Aren’t you going to take your orbs?” Kitara said.

“Nah,” Garcia said. “I’ll be fine.”

He stepped through the freshly activated Gate and ended up in his office at Club Bliss. He proceeded from his office into the next room, where he met Lt. Bri, from the Path Finder. Bri stood and saluted.

“Admiral,” Bri said. “There are some Orion Pirates here that want to conference with you. We set them up with suites and said you would speak with them when you were free.”

“Very well, notify them that I’ll meet with them in half an hour. Where’s Brock?” Garcia asked.

Bri glanced over the security monitors and pointed at one of the screens. Garcia nodded and took a lift down to the club floor. Losira approached him as he stepped out of the lift.

“Hey,” Losira said. “We arrived at our destination undetected.”

“Good,” Garcia said. “Let me know when you’ve found the lab. I’ll want to review our intelligence before we send a team in.”

“Aye, I’ll pass that along,” Losira said, and beamed out.

Brock was fighting with one of the girls when Garcia arrived at the bar.

“You’re supposed to report your tips,” Brock said.

“Not according to the new rules,” she argued.

“Brock,” Garcia said.

“Um, Captain,” Brock said. “We’ll talk about it later.”

“No, we’ll talk it about right now,” she complained, turning to Garcia. “Leeta says we don’t have to report our tips.”

“You don’t,” Garcia said.

“Yes, they do,” Brock said. “The local government taxes their income and tips are considered reportable income.”

“The local economy is sustained by my establishment’s presence on this planet,” Garcia said. “So, if you think the government is being cheated, inflate all the employees’ salaries on paper so that the establishment pays the appropriate taxes.”

“That will cut into our profits!” Brock said.

“Perhaps you’ve forgotten, I’m not here to make a profit,” Garcia said.

“But I am! You hired me to make you look profitable and that’s what I’m doing,” Brock said.

“At any time you believe that you’re not being adequately compensated, let me know, and I will find someone else to take your place,” Garcia said.

“It’s not like that,” Brock said, trying to change his tone. “I’m just looking out for your image. Image is everything, don’t you know?”

“Then you know that part of a good image is the boss being generous to his employees,” Garcia said. “The employees are happy, then the customers are happy, and if they’re happy, they’re spending money.”

“You’re generous to everyone but me,” Brock mumbled.

“What was that?” Garcia asked, ready to push the issue.

The music stopped and Garcia turned his attention to the DJ’s box. Seven large men, human in appearance, but were probably Klingons, came across the dance floor headed directly for Garcia. They were almost cliché in appearance, large broad shoulders

that made them seem top heavy, compared to their thin legs. Club Bliss' patrons were getting out of their way as fast as they could, but some were pushed for not getting out of the way fast enough. Brock conveniently disappeared behind the bar. The lead Klingon pointed directly at Garcia.

"You are Tammias Garcia?" he asked.

"I am," Garcia said, wondering if maybe he should have brought his orbs.

"We've been waiting to speak to you for two days!" the first said.

"I'm a busy man," Garcia said.

"You're a dead man," he said, rushing Garcia.

Garcia used the bar to support himself as he kicked out with both feet, hitting the lead Klingon directly in the jaw with both heels. From that position, and with the inertia of kicking off the Klingon's face, he was able to do a hand stand up on the bar. He dropped to the other side of the bar, grabbed a weapon hidden on the shelf amongst the beverages, turned and fired point blank dropping all six remaining men with a wide beam dispersal. He tossed himself back over the bar and landed on his feet. He knelt down to examine the Klingon he had kicked.

"Brock!" Garcia yelled. "Seltzer."

Brock filled a glass from below, set it on the bar, and pushed it timidly to Garcia's side. Leeta came to the bar, took the glass of seltzer water, and handed it to Garcia.

"Thank you," Garcia said, sipping a little before dumping the rest in the face of the Klingon.

The Klingon came to, shook his head, and then noticed Garcia and the phaser pointed right at him. He noticed his other men were all down, dead or unconscious.

"Now, did you have a question for me?" Garcia asked.

"No, sir," the Klingon said. "We just came to pay our tribute."

"Where is it?" Garcia asked.

"I'll have it transported right down," he said. "Along with the manifest of everything we sold. Also, I require more stock."

"What kind of stock?" Garcia asked.

"Romulan Ale, for starters," he said. "And, a couple dozen Britney Bots."

"Brock?" Garcia asked.

Brock poked his head up over the bar. "Yes, boss?"

"Now, didn't I tell you that the holographic robots would sell better than the live slaves?" Garcia asked. "Less maintenance. You don't have to feed them, groom them, worry about hygiene, or worry about infections or disease or age."

Brock nodded and sunk back behind the bar.

"You'll get your supplies once you've registered your ship and crew with Brock there," Garcia told the Klingon. "And don't intimidate my staff. My staff performs better when they're not scared. Now, is there anything else you wish to discuss with me?"

"No, sir," the Klingon said.

"Good boy," Garcia said, slapping him on the face, friendly like. "Brock, free drinks for the patrons currently in the bar for the next hour." Garcia looked up into a security camera. "Bri, send a couple guys down here to clean up my mess. Oh, and thanks for the help."

"Thought you could handle it, boss," Bri said over the intercom.

Garcia saluted the camera and then returned the phaser to its hiding place. A security force field snapped on, covering the phaser and locking it back down, and then it cloaked. The DJ began to play again, the dancers returned to dancing, and the dabo tables resumed the process of separating coins from their owners. Waitresses began to line up at the bars, making drinks. As Garcia came back around the bar, Leeta met him.

“You are amazing,” Leeta said.

“You’re very kind?” Garcia told her.

“When did you get back? Or did you ever leave? You’re not just a recluse hiding back there in your office, are you?” Leeta asked. “Am I asking too many questions?”

“It’s okay,” Garcia said. “You have the right to ask anything you want, and I will take the liberty to answer or not.”

Leeta laughed. “True,” she said. “But you’re not a recluse, are you? Or a voyeur? Do you prefer to watch from the shadows?”

“Well, I’m not a recluse,” Garcia said, trying to be funny. “No, Leeta, I’m not a voyeur. I’m a player. I like hands on.”

“Really?” Leeta asked, flirting shamelessly. “And do you like me?”

“Very much,” Garcia said. “But as long as you’re my employee, we’re going to have a professional relationship.”

“I’ll quit,” Leeta said.

“Leeta,” Garcia said, wondering how to put it. He simply couldn’t risk having any more children. His days of frivolous romances were over. “I’ve got a lot on my plate right now. Maybe another time?” He couldn’t believe those words were coming out of his mouth. He didn’t think he would ever be satiated or meet his limit to taking on women, especially those who seemed willing despite of who he was. Then again, he wasn’t satiated and he wanted Leeta, but what? What was this? Restraint? Maturity?

Leeta frowned. Garcia touched her chin and turned her face up till their eyes met again. She tried to smile.

“It’s nothing against you,” Garcia assured her.

“Why are the best guys never interested?” Leeta asked.

“Ha, I’m very interested,” Garcia admitted. “I’m just not the best guy.”

Leeta kissed him anyway. When he didn’t push her away or protest, she lingered, feeling his passion and participation growing. Leeta had no doubt now that Garcia was very interested. The holograph Losira approached and interrupted them.

“Sorry to bother you, boss,” Losira said, smiling mischievously. “But the meeting you scheduled is ready.”

“I’ll be right there,” Garcia said. “Leeta, you’re going to have to excuse me.”

“Promise me you’ll be back,” Leeta said.

“I promise,” Garcia said. “Maybe not tonight, but I’ll be back.”

She leaned into him and whispered in his ear. “Once you’ve been with a Bajoran, you won’t go back.”

He surprised her by whispering in her ear, “I know.”



Garcia arrived on the Path Finder and was immediately met by Athena.

“The pregnancy took,” Athena said.

“I figured,” Garcia said. “Thank you for returning Afu.”

Athena shifted her head. “I haven’t returned Afu yet.”

Garcia didn't hide the concern growing on his face.

"If you didn't, who did?" Garcia asked.

"I don't know, but you're going to have to hide me," Athena said.

"Hide you? Hide you from whom?" Garcia said.

"The truce may reduce the likelihood of the enemy engaging you in direct confrontations, but I'm still free game," Athena said. "And as long as I am with child, I cannot leave this manifestation orb. I'm vulnerable. I must hide until I have given birth to our children."

"Do your people not have any sense of right or wrong? They will kill you with child?" Garcia asked. "Did you say children?"

"Triplets. And they cannot kill me," Athena said. "We cannot be killed, so we do not share the same standards when it comes to personal ethics."

"But the babies can be killed," Garcia said. "My people can be killed."

"Most of my kind do not see you as true entities," Athena explained, her expression suggesting that she was tired of going over this point. "They have no more qualms killing you than you have of turning off the holodeck once you're through amusing yourself."

"Fine. You can stay at Planet Bliss," Garcia said.

"I'm not staying with the renegade Gray," Athena snapped. "She has 'target' written all over her. She is not safe and you were a fool to take her in. Grays can be very demanding without the strict discipline we gods demand."

"Then you can stay here," Garcia said.

"I'm safer with the Gray, as many people that are out to kill you," Athena said.

"Well, what do you have in mind?" Garcia asked. "Do you want to go to Earth?"

"Earth isn't safe," Athena sulked. "It's a major playing field for the gods. And Iotia isn't safe for the same reasons. Most of the major worlds are designated playing fields and the cultural icons of your time are merely pieces on chess boards in play. You only think you have free choice and independence. Gowron, President Fos, hell, even the Romulan Empress are as easily manipulated as you have proven to be."

"What does that mean?" Garcia demanded.

"As if you don't know you're being played," Athena said. "Between Q, Shear, and Pressman pushing your buttons, it's amazing you think you have any free will at all. Hell, the Metrone's planet was meant to be taken out of the game and you just played along like you were following a script."

"I was chasing the Gorn who had abducted my daughter!" Garcia said.

"They were played," Athena said. "Don't you get it?! They're following their script, given to them by their god."

"Shule had a choice," Garcia said.

"So did you," Athena said. "And which choice did you make? Shule is dead and the Metrone's planet is stardust. Now, are you going to help me or not? You must know some place that I can go. One of the Class M planets where the settlers were removed by the Borg would work if you can think of nothing else."

Garcia closed his eyes, suddenly doubting if perhaps he had been wrong in killing Shule. The Klingons had expected it and in his mind he had used that as sufficient justification, along with the rationalization that if he didn't, Shule would just continue with his antics. But the bottom line was, if Shule was being played, somehow

misdirected into thinking Garcia was his enemy, then Garcia was completely wrong in his actions. It was no longer self defense. It was flat out murder. And that was the reason why the Federation didn't have a death penalty and why, as a Star Fleet Officer, he was expected to set a certain example. He should have taken Shule into custody.

"What is this, doubt I see?" Athena asked.

Garcia nodded and turned his brain towards finding a solution to Athena's problem. There were a number of worlds where colonies had failed, but leaving her at any of those didn't sound to him like a good idea. He needed to be able to get to her quickly if there were an emergency. "I have an idea," Garcia said. He opened the Gateway to the spaceship Yonada and escorted Athena over. He gave her the fifty cent tour, explaining what it was and where it was. It was a huge place, larger than a dozen Star Fleet vessels, and with the recent upgrades he had installed, it would meet all her physical needs.

Athena closed her eyes and listened to her immediate surroundings. She was listening for more than just audible noises, but specifically for voices of fellow gods in the background of space. She was unable to detect even a whisper.

"This will do for now," Athena said. "I will stay here. But I will need something more from you."

"I think I've given you enough," Garcia said.

Athena touched his arm, her eyes sincere and pleading.

"What, Athena," Garcia said.

"I would like your company, when you can spare it, of course," Athena said. "It's bad enough that I will be trapped in this body for nine months, but this location is little better than a prison."

"I will send your two servants over to you," Garcia said.

"No," Athena said. "They are gifts to you. The Minarin can heal you, and the Cheronian makes an excellent guard. Her ability to electrocute people with her bare hands could come in handy if you were ever disarmed."

"I don't need servants," Garcia said.

"Then make them crew," Athena said. "They want to serve. It is necessary for them to do this to pay off a karmic debt."

"You're a Greek god, you don't believe in Karma," Garcia said. "Do you?"

"Use them or don't," Athena said. "Give them their freedom and you will find that they will stay with you."

"Fine," Garcia said. "Stay here alone, then. You can contact me through the communication node that allows Losira to be here."

"I know. You stole the technology from us," Athena said.

Garcia sighed. "I will come and visit you," he promised.

Athena kissed him. Garcia had to separate himself from her or risk getting caught up in the moment. As he was already still motivated from having been tempted by Leeta, he was beginning to think a cold shower was going to be necessary.

"Be weary of Afu," Athena warned. "My access to the network is significantly reduced due to my condition, so I don't know who rescued him, or if he is even the original Afu. There are other players with their own agenda, even on Earth. Don't trust anyone."

Garcia nodded and stepped through the Gateway back to the Path Finder. The portal closed, leaving Athena alone. Garcia's mental companions materialized around him the very moment the Gateway behind him closed and powered down. Lal and Troi turned to go pursue activities they had wanted to engage in that they hadn't been able to being locked inside Garcia's head. Ilona went in the opposite direction. Only Duana paused to greet him, before heading out, kissing him on the cheek.

"I don't care what Ilona says," Duana said. "I still like Leeta."

"I'll let her know that," Garcia said, his fight drained from him.

"Cheer up. You know you still have us and the holodeck if you need a little stress relief," Duana said.

"I will keep that in mind," Garcia said. "If you'll excuse me."

Losira intercepted him as he arrived at the turbolift. "Kitara wanted to know what was taking so long?"

"I was distracted," Garcia said. "Bridge."

"Anything I can do to help?" Losira asked.

Garcia closed his eyes. "No, but thank you," he said, thinking cold shower. Immersing himself in work should help. He wanted to plug into the Kelvan device and make his world good again.

Garcia arrived at the Bridge and went to the lift that would take him up to his Ready Room above, but instead, he pushed the down button. The lift sunk away from the Bridge, descending to the War Room beneath. His senior officers were huddled around a smart table, examining the information projected on the surface. It was like a giant, electronic, multipurpose, game board. Around the room were individual stations where intelligence officers were scrutinizing information. The room was dimly lit, making the war table and the kiosks terminals' lights more prominent. Kitara frowned at him as he approached her.

"I'm sorry I'm late," Garcia said, only a little sarcastic. "Show me what you got."

"According to the information Pressman gave us, there is a ninety percent chance that the bio weapons lab we're looking for is on this island, in the southern hemisphere," Kitara said. She touched the island, tapping it twice, and the island grew in perspective, using real time information from the passive sensor array. Touching the side of the table, she raised another view, as well, which caused a three dimensional graphic of the base they were examining to appear above the table. "The deepest part of this base is approximately two kilometers. We can't be precise without doing active scans, which would alert Cardassian authorities of our presence in orbit. We've infiltrated several of the computer systems on the island remotely, but nothing important was found. It's highly likely that the research computers are isolated systems at the core of the base. I recommend we wait till dark to send a team into explore."

"Or we could send in Losira," Garcia said.

"I would still prefer to wait till dark," Kitara said. "I would like to see how the activity levels change in a twenty seven hour period."

"Any chance Sio Trelengton is present?" Garcia asked

"There's no way to determine that from here," Kitara said.

"What we need is to send in is a holographic remotely operated vehicle," Garcia said.

“What’s the difference between that and Losira or your two manifestation orbs?” Lt. Undine asked.

“The difference is I would have complete control over an HROV,” Garcia said. “And we would have access to real time information. Losira and the orbs are independent agents.”

“Whether we use an HROV or send in a team, we have the problem of not being able to beam in directly,” Kitara said. “It would be a reasonable bet that a transporter beam anywhere on the Island will trigger an alarm.”

“Not the Kelvan transporter,” Garcia said.

“True,” Kitara said. “But we will not be using that.”

“What about the ocean?” Undine said. “Could we beam a diving bell down, and then beam our Away Team into that and swim to the island?”

“Possibly,” Kitara said.

“Has anyone considered the possibility that this is a trap?” Tuer asked. “Sheear and Pressman have not been looking out for our best interest. The Cardassians may be expecting us.”

“You know, it would only take me thirty second to infiltrate the base using the Kelvan technology,” Garcia tried again.

“No,” Kitara said.

“It would be real easy to determine if it’s a trap or if Sio Trelengton is on the Island,” Garcia said.

“No,” both Undine and Kitara said together. “And that’s final,” Kitara said.

“The distance of the lab from the mainland suggests that whatever they’re cooking down there must be rather lethal,” Doctor Jurak said, enlarging the image. “Notice these live stock cages. They’re probably arranged around the base in such a way that if a virus or agent was to be accidentally released it would kill the animals thereby alerting the staff to the event.”

“Why would they use animals and not sensors?” Garcia asked. “Sensors are more reliable than animals. You don’t have to feed them or clean their cages.”

“Perhaps the animals are utilized in the research,” Tuer said.

“Or, maybe they’re trying to develop a biological agent that can’t be detected with sensors,” Undine said.

“Not good,” Garcia said. “Before we go in and destroy this lab, I want to know what we’re dealing with. I don’t want to sabotage the lab only to find a week later everyone on Cardassia is dead because we failed to contain or destroy something properly.”

“It would serve them right,” Tuer said.

“It is not our way,” Kitara said. “We will destroy this lab and all biological agents, you can be sure of that, Admiral.”

“Well, there’s no need to rush this,” Garcia said. “We have five days left till our deadline. Let’s use them and collect as much information as we can. The base is number one priority, of course, but any intel gathered would be a plus. If you need more people, pull from the NC’s crew. Also, I want an Away Team prepped and ready to be inserted at a moment’s notice.”

Garcia turned and headed to the lift.

“Where are you going?” Kitara asked.

“I’m going to go get something to eat and then I’m going to take a nap,” Garcia said. “Call me if you need me.”

CHAPTER TWENTYSEVEN

Garcia was about to cross over to the New Constitution when Amanda Q appeared suddenly in front of him, blocking the portal. She smiled at him.

“Good morning,” Amanda Q said, greeting him with a hug.

“You’re finally awake,” Garcia said.

“We both are,” Amanda Q said.

“How is she coping?” Garcia asked.

“How is who coping?” Amanda Q asked.

“Mandora? The Metrone?! I destroyed her home world, killed who knows how many of her people,” Garcia said.

“Oh, wait,” Amanda Q said. “Oh! I get it. You’re talking about the Metrone. The Metrone!” Amanda squeezed his cheeks. “Who cares how she’s doing. I thought you were talking about me and the baby.” She placed a hand on her stomach to emphasize baby. “I feel so full of energy I just might turn into a nova.”

Garcia went around her and passed through the quantum flux of the Gateway and arrived on the New Constitution. He powered the Gate down. When he turned around Amanda Q was in front of him again, arms akimbo as if she were cross.

“You really should be nicer to the Q bearing your child,” Amanda Q said. “After all, it could have been Picard’s Q, and he isn’t as nice as I am. That and I don’t think you would enjoy being pregnant. Besides, I love you.” She said this last while pinching his cheek.

Garcia pushed her hand away and turned to leave, but she grabbed his arm. “Don’t feel bad for the Metrones. You didn’t kill any of them. You set them free. They have evolved passed the need for technology, but they were afraid to take the leap. Think of them as baby birds and you just taught them to fly by burning their nest right out from under them.”

“Think of it however you like,” Garcia told her. “But in hind sight, it was the wrong decision.”

“The things we do in the name of survival,” Amanda Q said, sighing. “I have forgotten how limiting the human mindset can be, how narrow your scope of vision is, how perfectly imperfect you all are.”

“I hardly see Q as a vast improvement over humanity imperfections,” Garcia said.

“Appearances can be deceiving,” Amanda Q said. “But then, on a cosmological scale, Q is young, and you have a point. I ought to take you to the Continuum so you can visit with the old woman in the rocking chair. You’d like her. Or the old monk on the mountain top. I think you’d like him, too.”

“No, thank you,” Garcia said.

“Suit yourself,” Amanda Q said. “I’ll check in with you later, sweetheart. Try not to do anything I wouldn’t do.” She kissed him and departed in a flash.

Garcia was actually tempted to ask for a higher power’s intervention. He forced himself to release his left wrist. Sighing, he took the nearest turbo lift to the Bridge and found Lt. Owens in charge.

“Captain on the Bridge,” Officer Gao announced. Apparently her duty rotation had brought her back to the NC.

“At ease,” Garcia said, taking the command seat when Owens surrendered it to him. “Status report, Lt. Owens.”

Yeomanette Tomoko approached Garcia with a PADD. He listened to Owens while he shifted through the electronic paper work, endorsing all of them before handing it back to Tomoko.

“We’ll arrive at Kronos in four more days, barring any further distractions,” Owens finished his report.

“Thank you, Captain,” Tomoko said, smiling at him.

“Yeoman,” Garcia said, using the masculine form of her title, which was the standard these days. To Owens, Garcia said, “Contact Trolos, give him my compliments and ask him if he minds if I pay him a visit.” Owens deflected the request to Gao.

Tomoko smiled coyly, as if she knew a secret, but Garcia managed to ignore her, even the deliberate sway in her hips as she departed. He sunk his head into his right hand, elbow on the arm of the command chair, becoming not quite the image of Rodin’s sculpture ‘the thinker.’ He was more like Rodin’s “sulker” the statue no one ever saw because it depressed Rodin so much he destroyed it. A few moments later, Gao had confirmation.

“If anyone needs me, you’ll know where to find me,” Garcia said, getting up. “Your ship, Owens.”

Garcia took the lift down to the next floor, heading for the transporter room. Chelan met him as he exited the turbo lift.

“The computer told me I would find you here,” Chelan said. “How is it sometimes it will tell me your location and others it won’t?”

“If I’m indisposed, the computer is programmed to maintain my privacy,” Garcia said.

“Even from me? How can I serve you if I can’t find you?” Chelan said.

“You can best serve me by not looking for me,” Garcia said.

Chelan seemed downhearted by the remark.

“Chelan, please, I understand that you come from a long history of service, and that you are no doubt trained to please those who you work for, but that’s not how our relationship is going to be,” Garcia said. He raised her chin so that her eyes met his.

“Don’t you have any interests or hobbies that you enjoy?”

“I will engage in any activities that you desire,” Chelan said.

“That’s not what I’m asking you,” Garcia said. “You’re not a geisha or a slave.”

“I am Nelvana’s youngest sister,” Chelan said.

“You’re her sister?” Garcia asked, surprised. “Shouldn’t you have a better position than servant?”

“Romulan Royalty does not work as your Earth Royalty,” Chelan said. “Our roles are determined based on our capabilities, such as temperament, strength, cognitive abilities. Kelvan is your true form, so you should understand this. I mean, that is how you chose who would be survivors from Tel Kiar, is it not?”

“I chose at random,” Garcia said.

“That cannot be,” Chelan argued. “You chose the strongest, most intelligent, most beautiful of all the remaining Tel Kiar, some of whom were Romulan Tel Kiaran mixed. You chose the ones most likely to be successful in your breeding agenda.”

Garcia’s heart sunk. “Are you telling me...”

“All the adult women you rescued from Tel Kiar are carrying your offspring,” Chelan said, seeming surprised by Garcia’s apparent confusion. She interpreted his

confusion as concern for the well being of his offspring. “The government offered them abortions, but most of them were so grateful for being spared they would not pursue that option. Quite a few of the Tel Kiar women believe their salvation and their consequent condition to be nothing less than divine intervention, and so they became fearful that the government would force the issue or take their offspring away to study them. Consequently, many escaped the camp where they were being quarantined and have disappeared. There are rumors that you will start a Kelvan dynasty here in the Alpha Quadrant and when your species returns in fifty years, those who bear your genetic lineage will be afforded positions of rank and privilege.”

“Where do you guys come up with this fiction?!” Garcia demanded, uncertain if he was angry at the disclosure of what he had done, or how some supposedly ‘sentient’ creatures were interpreting the situation.

“Are you saying the Kelvan will not return in fifty years through the very wormhole you created?” Chelan asked.

After a long pause, Garcia surrendered his anger, but he still felt rising anxiety in the pit of his stomach. The Universe was unraveling right before his eyes and there wasn’t a thing he could do about it. “I don’t know,” he said, distant. “All I know is you are a person, not a slave. You may have to serve your sister in a particular capacity, if that is the custom, but you do not serve me.”

“It is my duty to serve her by serving you,” Chelan pointed out.

“Oh, bloody hell,” Garcia said, rubbing his forehead. “I don’t want to be served. If you’re going to be a companion, then you must understand that friendship requires equity. There is nothing equitable by you falling at my feet every time I appear. Now, I want you to return to your room and contemplate your life. And the next time I see you, I want to know something about you and I want to hear something that you want to do because you want to do it, not because someone else is demanding you to do it.”

“But,” Chelan began to protest.

“You said you want to please me, well, that’s what I want and we will not proceed further until that task is done, understand?” Garcia asked.

“But then, I will be doing what you command me to do, and not what I want to do,” Chelan pointed out the flaw in his instructions.

Garcia was momentarily taken back by her astute and quick observation, but he hoped she failed to see his surprise, or the fact that he felt rather stupid all of sudden.

“Good job. Now, what do you want to do?” Garcia said, pleased.

“Serve you,” Chelan insisted.

“Go to your room,” Garcia said.

Chelan bowed.

“And don’t do that,” Garcia said.

Chelan nodded, appearing as if she might cry. Garcia showed compassion by hugging her before entering the transporter room. Because of the hug, Chelan felt emboldened and followed. “Are you sure you don’t want me to go with you?”

“I’m sure,” Garcia said, ignoring Kletsova’s look of disgust from her position at the transporter controls. She did a poor job at pretending she wasn’t aware or interested in Garcia’s affairs. “Go do what I asked you to do.”

Chelan started to bow and then nodded and went about her new task. Garcia stepped up on the transporter PADD, forced his eyes to meet Kletsova, and nodded, nonverbally communicating that he was ready for her to commence transport.

“Are you going to speak to me again?” Kletsova asked.

“Yes,” Garcia said. “Energize.”

Garcia arrived on the Harbinger, the best translation for the name of Trolos’ ship. Trolos was there, waiting for him, as well as several guards and the transporter tech.

“I thought you were about to cancel on me again,” Trolos said.

“Sorry for the delay,” Garcia said, stepping down from the transporter alcove. “I never imagined I would be this busy.”

Trolos grunted. “You choose your level of business,” Trolos said.

“True,” Garcia agreed. “Are we going to stand here, or are you going to feed me?”

Trolos punched Garcia in the face, knocking him to the floor. The guards drew their disruptors and aimed them at Garcia. “Bring him,” Trolos said. He pivoted on his heels and departed the transporter room. Garcia chose to follow, by complying with the guards who were busy ‘shipping and handling’ him. He was led to the Captain’s dining area, where a number of Klingon delicacies were spread out on the table. Trolos went right for the jar of blood wine and poured two glasses. He yelled in Klingon and chased all his aids and warriors out, so that he was now alone with Garcia. He forced the glass of wine at Garcia. Garcia took it, they tapped glasses, and they drank.

“Now that we’re alone,” Trolos said. “What are your intentions with my sister?”

“What do you care?” Garcia asked. “You treat her like crap.”

“I treat her like a Klingon!” Trolos snapped.

“Oh? Tough love, is it?” Garcia asked. “She’s a better Officer than you and yet, you fly for Gowron.”

“She is a female!” Trolos said. “Her place is in the home, bearing children. It is time for her to settle down and choose a Klingon mate and make me an uncle.”

“Well, she has done part of that,” Garcia chuckled.

Trolos eyes grew wide. “What are you talking about?!”

“She has chosen a mate and she is with child,” Garcia said.

“You lie!” Trolos said, hitting Garcia again.

Garcia spilled his wine. Instead of striking back, he went and poured another glass.

“Which Klingon aboard your ship is responsible? I’ll kill him,” Trolos demanded.

“Just a moment ago you were all for her settling down and now you’re angry that she has?” Garcia asked, filling Trolos’ glass with more wine. Garcia downed his glass and poured another one. It wasn’t the Kelvan bracelet, but it would suffice as a distraction, for now. And a good fight was exactly the sort of stress relief he needed, since the other avenues of stress relief was only adding more stress to his life. No more sex usually translated into lots more fighting, at least for him.

“The family has chosen mates for her,” Trolos said. “Several Senators and business elites have requested her hand, and you say she’s committed herself to some low ranked, piece of filth garbage who can’t get a position on a Klingon ship and so they serve on a Federation ship instead? Give me his name.”

Garcia finished his drink and refilled both of their glasses. "I'm beginning to think you're not going to like what I have to tell you," Garcia said, and then hit him square on the jaw. "Brother."

Trolos' eyes couldn't have gotten any larger. He threw his glass down and attacked. By the time the fight was over, every piece of furniture in the room was broken, and food was all over the place. They lay exhausted on the floor, both spent. Trolos started laughing.

"You fight fairly good for a human," Trolos said.

"You fight fairly well for a human," Garcia corrected.

"That's what I said!" Trolos said.

"You fight well, not good," Garcia said. "And I was taking it easy on you, brother."

Trolos laughed, rubbing his jaw. "I was taking it easy on you, brother," Trolos said, crawling over to the broken jar of wine. Fortunately, it hadn't all spilled. He drank from what was left of the jar and then handed the rest to Garcia.

Garcia took the jar from him and drank.

"The family will disown her," Trolos said.

"Then your family is comprised of fools," Garcia said.

Trolos fought with his anger before responding. "Perhaps," Trolos agreed. "But the family will distance themselves from her none the less in order to maintain the image. You're human. She is Klingon."

"I'm going to be the first human to beat the Klingon Academy's challenge," Garcia said. "I think your family should avoid making any public statements that they might regret down the road."

Trolos laughed. "You're going to die," Trolos said.

"I am," Garcia said. "Just not today."

"Either way, you will have earned Kitara a name for herself." Trolos activated a com panel. "I need more blood wine!" he yelled.

Servants brought in wine and then departed. Garcia broke another boundary and tried a piece of roasted targ, rationalizing the fact that it had already been killed and cooked, he might as well not let it go to waste. It was actually fairly good, so he took another piece. Trolos grunted and served Garcia more wine.

An hour later, Kitara arrived on the Harbinger looking for Garcia. She stepped out of the transporter alcove and was met by Uron, Trolos' first officer. He declined her access and ordered her to return to her ship and allow men to conduct their own affairs. It only took two hits to the face and a knee to the chin as he went down to render him unconscious. Technically, the knee to the chin was unnecessary, but she was angry. The transporter tech, not wanting to have the reputation for having let a woman attack the ship's first officer without getting involved, volunteered himself to be Kitara's next victim. He went down even easier. She proceeded to search the Harbinger for Garcia, pounding directions out of one officer, and defeating several others who had had the misfortune of getting in her way.

Kitara expected to find Garcia beaten to a pulp by her brother, but she was unprepared to find both of them drunk and singing Klingon songs together, sitting on the floor, backs to the wall, leaning into each other. She glared at both of them, arms akimbo, not sure who she was more angry with, her brother for getting Garcia drunk, or

Garcia for coming over without an escort in the first place. They were both sporting wounds, giving testament to just how hard they had fought, as if the broken furniture wasn't enough.

"Sis!" Trolos said, offering her his cup of wine.

Kitara slapped it out of his hands. "You're drunk!"

"No he's not," Garcia argued, squinting up at her. From his perspective on the floor, the light from the corridor was right between her legs as she hovered over him, and everything seemed blurry. And then softer, he added, "But I think I am."

Garcia and Trolos pointed at each other and laughed and then they banged heads. Six guards entered to apprehend Kitara. Trolos waved them off, an arm around his new best friend. "At ease, she's a kept woman. If you touch her, this human Captain will have to kill you."

Trolos and Garcia laughed and hugged each other, hitting heads and grunting. Garcia burped which started a whole new round of laughter.

"Have you both lost what few brain cells you had going for you?" Kitara demanded.

"Isn't she cute when she's angry," Garcia asked Trolos.

Trolos agreed. "Very cute! If she weren't my sister..."

"You would what?! I will kick your butt all the way to Kronos," Kitara raged.

Trolos looked to Garcia and burst out laughing again. "Don't tell her how much I love her."

"Alright," Garcia said. "My secret. Brother."

They both put their fingers to each other's lips, going, "Shhh."

"Oh my god!" Kitara lost it. "Tell me you didn't."

Kitara jerked Garcia up to his feet.

"What, is it time to go already?" Garcia asked.

"Be nice to my sister," Trolos said. "Or I'll kick your butt."

"New Constitution," Kitara called. "Prepare to beam me and the Captain back, site to site, to the Captain's quarters. Trolos, we will talk later."

"Good seeing you," Trolos said.

"Energize!" Kitara snapped.

"I hate transporting," Garcia said. He felt a little dizzy on arrival and fell backwards.

Kitara held him up and maneuvered him to his bed. "I can't believe this! What happened to your rules about drinking? You have an image to uphold."

"I love you," Garcia told her.

She barked a sarcastic laugh.

"No, really, I do," Garcia said. "You're my strength. Of course, I love Rivan, too. She's my reason. And Jaxa. What is Jaxa? Have you met Jaxa? Oh, and Leeta. Leeta, Leeta, Leeta. Is it a crush or just obsessive compulsive disorder? Does it matter?"

"You're drunk!" Kitara said, slapping him.

Garcia became very serious. "Kitara?" he asked.

"What?" she asked, pulling his boots off and throwing them to the floor. He looked at her very seriously, like he had something important to say, and she met his eyes.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” Garcia announced, and turned and was sick all over the bed and himself.

“Oh, by Sto Vo Kor, I’m going to kill my brother,” Kitara said, grabbing Garcia up and taking him to the bathroom to clean him up. “Losira, I need your help.”

Losira appeared.

“Help me get him out of these clothes and have another Losira agent come and clean the sheets,” Kitara ordered. “And then let’s get him to bed.”

Losira agreed, completely business. “Shall I call the Doctor to come treat his wounds?”

“No, let him have those for a while, so he’ll have something remaining to remember this stupidity,” Kitara said.

♪♪▶

Garcia woke to a headache. Karsat was there, with breakfast. She was serving Rivan and Ori on a fold-out table. Losira was there, just hanging out. Ori saw Garcia stir and went immediately to him, climbing up in bed next to him, and rubbing her face against him, rather like a cat.

“Hey, you want to eat?” Rivan asked.

The thought of food made him queasy.

“I want a pain killer,” Garcia moaned.

“Sorry,” Karsat said. “No pain meds until you’ve eaten. Doctor’s orders.”

“I am a doctor!” Garcia said, and then regretted raising his voice.

Ori offered him a slice of the bacon she was holding. Garcia shook his head.

“Come on,” Rivan said. “We were told to wake you, feed you, and get you on your way. Kitara needs you.”

“Kitara put you up to this?” Garcia said, sitting up.

Ori hugged Garcia affectionately. He had to force himself to be kind to her. He wanted to just push her away, but since Ori was, for all intensive purposes, intellectually a child, he resisted being mean and returned her kindness with affection. He forced himself to get up. Ori followed him back to the table. Karsat poured him a cup of coffee.

“Does that hurt?” Rivan asked, referring to his bruises. “Trini calls them blue black, where Americans say black and blue. Curious how there are so many corruptions of the Queens English. Why are there so many accents? How do accents evolve through time? I assume everyone speaking English have a common origin point. And, given the fact that Earth is pretty much a one world government with people jetting all over the place, how come there are still other languages, instead of one, common language?”

“Rivan, not now,” Garcia said, sipping his coffee.

Ori put peanut butter on a biscuit, then jelly, then bacon, and then dipped it into her egg yolk, running over her plate. She offered a bite to Garcia. He shook his head and looked the other way.

“I thought you liked it that way?” Losira asked.

“I do,” Garcia said. He resisted the urge to be sick.

Karsat buttered a biscuit for him and he forced it down, small bites.

“So, did you have fun last night?” Rivan asked.

Garcia thought about it. “I don’t recall,” Garcia said, having to chew carefully because his jaw was sore. He felt his lip gingerly with his tongue, noting that it was swollen. “Losira?”

“Yes, sweetie?” Losira said.

Garcia scowled at her. “Page Jurak to my quarters,” he said. “Is Kitara still on board?”

“No, she returned to the Path Finder,” Losira said. “We were instructed to get you on your feet and get you to her, as soon as you were amenable to the task.”

“No, Ori,” Rivan said. “Don’t take food off of other people’s plate unless you ask first.”

Ori made some signs and pointed to the bacon.

“She really likes bacon,” Rivan said.

“I see,” Garcia said.

“When can we schedule our next group meal?” Rivan asked.

“I don’t know,” Garcia said.

“Is Tatiana banned?” Rivan asked.

Garcia’s anger rose. “No,” Garcia said.

“So, it’s okay to invite her,” Rivan said, just making sure.

“Just because I am angry with her doesn’t mean she is exiled,” Garcia said. “She’s still family.”

“I’m glad to hear you say it,” Rivan said. “So, you understand when I say I’m angry at you, you will know you can still come to me.”

“You’re angry with me?” Garcia asked, a little taken back.

“A little,” Rivan said. “I just want you to know that I am always open to you.”

“I know, Rivan,” Garcia said, still a little confused. “What are you angry about?”

“Oh, just the little fact that you told Kitara you loved me while in a drunken stupor, as opposed to telling me yourself, while sober,” Rivan said.

“I said that?” Garcia said.

“You did,” Rivan said. “Here’s the deal, Tam. I have never made any demands on you or been anything other than up front with you and I expect the same from you in return. If you really love me, I expect you to say it, so that I know it first hand, not through the grapevine. You are so stingy with that word it’s almost as if you believe that saying it obligates you to a certain way of being. When I say I love you, I mean it, and it’s unconditional. I won’t stop loving you just because you’ve decided to become a drunk, but if that behavior continues, I will not continue to remain in your presence. Do you understand what I’m trying to say?”

“Tough love,” Garcia said, nodding. “Maybe Trolol really did love his sister. “I understand. And I appreciate the straight forward way you talk to me.”

“I’m not the only one that does,” Rivan said. “Tatiana has always been direct with you. She’s not afraid of you, like Trini is. Kitara definitely balances you out. That’s a good relationship you have there, so you better take care of that one.”

“Trini’s afraid of me?” Garcia asked.

“She’s want everyone to be happy,” Rivan said. “It’s her nature. I think the word you use is codependent. She controls her moods by controlling the moods of those around her. Surely you know this. I’m not disparaging her. I love Trini. You two were my first friends on Earth. I’m just saying that Trini will not stand up against you the way Tatiana and Kitara will. And, consequently, because of the way your personality and her personality mix, you need to be very careful that you don’t abuse Trini. I’ve noted several instances where you have raised your voice at her, with no justification. I don’t

think you're doing it consciously, it is just the way her personality brings that part of you out. I'm sure I'm not communicating this concept to you well. I'm just asking you to be more aware when communicating with her, because she's pushing your buttons and you're pushing her buttons, and you're both doing this little dance, and she's the one who is going to get hurt. Now, she's not aware of her complicity in the dynamics, but you can be, and you can change the game and the outcome by just being more aware and focused on your intention."

Garcia was quiet for a long moment. "I love the way you constantly surprise me with the level of insight you have on me and those around me," Garcia said. "Thank you for being a part of my life."

Rivan got up and came around to Garcia. She kissed him. "That is, by far, one of the nicest compliments you have ever given me. I love you. Now, let's get you dressed in your Captain's uniform. You got work to do."

CHAPTER TWENTYEIGHT

Garcia had just arrived at the NC's Gateway when it powered up and Undine, Trini, and Kletsova came through.

"Ladies," Garcia said. "Trini, Tatiana, hold on a minute. Undine, status?"

"No change," Undine said. "We're monitoring the base, evaluating the situation."

"Thank you, carry on," Garcia said.

Undine nodded and left. Garcia turned his attention to Trini and Kletsova.

"I wanted to inform you that Afu is alive and well, back on Earth," Garcia said.

They were both genuinely surprised and grateful for the news. Garcia thought about what else to say and decided that was all he had. "Carry on," he said. He touched Kletsova's shoulder with kindness and then walked up the ramp and through the Gateway.

"Give it a little more time," Trini told her friend.

Kletsova nodded.

As Garcia made his way to the Path Finder's Bridge, Losira approached him. A yellow alert Klaxon began to blare. "Kitara has just placed the ship on yellow alert," Losira said.

"Site to site, here to the Bridge," Garcia requested. The transit from where he was to the Bridge took less than five seconds, but it only saved him at the most a minute ten seconds. "What's going on?" Garcia asked, approaching Kitara at her tactical station board that was behind the Captain's chair.

"Five Maquis vessels have dropped out of warp in this system and are making an attack run on the Cardassian space station," Kitara explained. She pulled up a side screen and pointed to various items. "Cardassia prime has gone to full alert, three warships have been rerouted to intercept."

"It's a waste of resources," Tuer said. "This attack does not make sense."

"At least they have the bravery to engage the Cardassians directly," Kitara said. "We should aid them."

"Negative," Garcia said, going to the command chair. He rotated his chair to examine the various monitors at his disposal. "Be sure to make recordings of everything."

"Already doing so," Kitara said. "If the Klingon Empire ever needs to occupy Cardassia, this information could be invaluable."

Garcia turned back to the main viewer, blinked, and stood up. "It's a diversionary ploy," Garcia said, intuitively.

Kitara and Tuer looked to the Captain. Only Kitara eventually nodded and then her eyes locked with the Captain as she suddenly came to the same realization he was having.

"The island!" Kitara said, adjusting her scans. "Passive scans show transporter beams engaged. I would say twelve people have just beamed to the island."

"I want a tachyon burst large enough to disrupt a cloaking device," Garcia said.

"Our secondary cloak will be disabled for the duration of the burst," Kitara said.

"I know, do it," Garcia said. "And take us to red alert. Losira, call all Path Finder crew back from the NC."

Kitara completed the computer task and pushed a button. The rotating drum, which was the super sensor array and multi-spectral holographic emitter on the Path

Finder fluoresced green with veins of amber and blue bleeding through the rainbow pattern that made the drum itself seem as if it were nothing more than a large, fragile butterfly wing. It was only a ten second burst of tachyons, but it was sufficient to cause the cloak on a nearby ship to fail. Because the Path Finder's primary cloaking device rendered the Path Finder virtually invisible, the Cardassians only witnessed the flash of light that had killed the cloak, and the illuminated rotating drum until the color drained out of it. The cloaked ship no doubt suspected the rotating drum was part of the Cardassian defense system. It rotated to fire at the drum.

"Evasive," Garcia instructed the helm.

"On it," McKnight said.

Undine and Trini arrived on the Bridge. "Romulans?" Undine asked, noticing the older style Romulan ship in Cardassian orbit.

"Negative," Garcia said. "It's an Orion pirate ship, probably mercenaries for hire."

"Should I return fire?" Kitara asked.

"Negative," Garcia said. "Let the confusion distract them from us. Get our secondary cloak up as soon as possible."

"The Romulan ship is leaving orbit," Kitara said. "A Cardassian warship is on intercept course."

"Prepare to insert the Away Team," Garcia said. "Losira, bring me my Kelvan bracelet and weapons. I'm beaming down."

"No, Sir," Kitara protested. "It is too dangerous for you to beam down."

"We need to get down there and take advantage of this situation and you need me there so that I can use the Kelvan computer and transporters system should the need present itself," Garcia said.

"Fine," Kitara conceded, and retrieved the Kelvan bracelet from a hidden compartment. She placed it in one of her pockets.

Losira handed him a utility belt with weapons. "Energize," Garcia said.

The members of the Away Team that had been chosen for the mission had been on standby, and were abruptly notified and transported from all locations on the ship directly down to the island's secret lab. They were beamed into one of the deep chambers, which they suspected would be one of the computer labs, with central access to all research.

The immediate Cardassian staff was dropped by Klingon and Nausicaan security officers, firing phasers on stun. Garcia pointed to one of the terminals.

"Sendak, you and your team get us into their system, I want to start learning stuff, now," Garcia said. "Tuer, secure this location. Kitara, I want a thorough scan of this base. Have your team on that and set the demolitions. Bri, Kletsova, tag everyone in here and start beaming them out, directly to the mainland. Everyone, I want you to avoid killing people if you can. Let's go, chop chop."

Garcia pulled out his tricorder and went into one of the back rooms, followed by, Losira, Duana and Ilona. A Cardassian was present, his hands in a surrender gesture.

"Don't shoot," he said. "You're Federation?"

"Sorry, but I don't have time for this," Garcia said, not offering a serious apology while retrieving his phaser.

"My name is Joret Dal," the Cardassian said. "I'm a Federation agent."

“Good story,” Garcia said, and stunned the Cardassian.

“Losira, beam to the Brig,” Garcia instructed.

“Shoot first, sort it out later, uh?” Ilona asked.

“Do you know a better way?” Garcia asked.

“There is a secret door here,” Duana said.

Losira went to the wall, put her hand against it, closed her eyes, and then smiled. The door opened and she motioned for them to continue. Garcia proceeded down the steps, knowing full well that he should let his girls go first, but old habits died hard. Not that he wouldn't let a girl go first, but that he liked to be first in everything. He arrived on the next floor and came upon a situation. There were dead Cardassians, Maquis with weapons drawn, and one live Cardassian remaining, on his knees begging for his life. The Maquis that was about to shoot him was someone Garcia knew and loved.

“Torres?” Garcia asked.

All three Maquis, plus Torres, turned to Garcia, their weapons going to him and his party. She and her team scattered for cover, the same as Garcia's team, and a fire fight ensued. The Cardassian that had been pleading for his life covered his neck and lay prone on the floor, hoping the two groups would kill each other off.

“They're not shooting stun,” Losira said, having taken a full shot to the chest. It had no more affect on her than the phasers Kirk had used on a similar model nearly a hundred years ago had had. Garcia contemplated whether he should change his stance on whether she should carry a weapon.

“Torres, stand down,” Garcia ordered.

“Sorry, Star Fleet,” Torres said. “But you're not taking us alive.”

“Want me to go kick her butt?” Losira asked Garcia.

Garcia shook his head ‘no’ and waved her to stay put. “The mercenary ship you hired to bring you here has fled,” Garcia said. “I'm your only hope of getting out of here alive.”

“I knew that this might be a one way mission when I signed up for it,” Torres said.

Duana and Ilona returned fire, both parties stuck at an impasse while Garcia and Torres continued to talk, their backs up against the same console as they hunkered down out of the line of fire. Garcia could see the Cardassian, trembling on the floor, but for Torres to shoot him she would have to stand up and the moment she did, Garcia or his people would stun her.

“I will pay both of you triple whatever they're paying you if you will let me live,” the Cardassian said.

“Shut up, Sio,” Torres said. “You're not getting out of this alive.”

“I have a family!” he pleaded.

“So did all the people you performed experiments on,” Torres said.

“Torres, listen to me,” Garcia said. “We're on the same side in this. I was sent by Star Fleet to take Sio out of the game and shut down this lab. Let me do my job and get your people out of here.”

“No deal, Star Fleet,” Torres said. “We set enough explosives to blow this whole island off the face of the map.”

“If you do that, you will release a toxic, self replicating molecule into the air which will kill everything on this planet within the matter of months,” Sio said.

“Torres,” Garcia tried. “You and I are friends. Please, trust me.”

“Torres, what are you waiting for?” one of her team members demanded. “Just push the damn button and blow this place up.”

“Please don’t,” Sio said.

“Torres, you don’t want to be remembered for destroying a planet, or committing genocide,” Garcia assured her.

“I can’t trust you,” Torres said. “The Cardassians have to be stopped and I can do it right here and now. Get you and your team to safety.”

“I’m not leaving here,” Garcia said. “Not without you and not without completing my mission.”

“What’s your mission? Save Sio and his research so that the Federation can use it?” Torres asked. “I can’t allow you to let him live. I can’t allow his research to go on.”

“If I promise to destroy this lab and all the research, will you leave with me?” Garcia asked.

“Don’t do it, Torres, it’s a trick,” her supporting Maquis said.

“You know I always keep my promises,” Garcia said. “I’ve never lied to you.”

“You’ll get my team out of here and release us back to the Maquis?” Torres said.

Garcia hesitated. “Yes,” Garcia assured her finally. “I will let you go”

“You’re crazy,” Sio said. “You can’t trust her.”

“Torres, I’m going to stand up and we’re going to shake on this,” Garcia said. “My people, cease fire.”

Torres glanced up and saw that Garcia was indeed standing. She started to stand, her weapon poised to shoot Garcia. He secured his weapon to his belt and extended his hand. Torres hesitated. Her friends rose, all their weapons pointed at Garcia. The Maquis came a little closer to Torres, ignoring the fact that Garcia’s three girls were now up and aiming at them. Torres put her weapon away and took Garcia’s hand. One of the Maquis suddenly put a weapon to Torres’ head and took the arming device off Torres’s belt. She pushed the button.

“Sorry, Torres, but I can’t allow your past to jeopardize this mission,” she said. “You don’t have enough time to contain the biological weapon, Garcia, but you have one minute to beam us out. Any tricks and I kill your ex girlfriend. Do nothing and we all die.”

Losira looked to Garcia. “An anti-matter bomb has been activated. There is fifty five seconds on the clock,” Losira said.

“You’ve just killed everyone on this planet!” Sio shouted.

“No, you just killed everyone on this planet,” the lead Maquis said. “You shouldn’t have made this pathogen in the first place. Forty seconds, Garcia.”

“Path Finder,” Garcia said. “Lock onto my signal. Eight to beam up,” Garcia said. Via his implant he instructed Losira to beam him and Torres directly to the Bridge and the Maquis to a cell in the Brig minus their weapons.

The Moment Garcia arrived on the Bridge, he sat down in his command chair, tore off the Velcro covering the Kelvan grips at the ends of the arm rest and took hold. Nothing happened.

“Undine, Losira, I need access or the entire Cardassian planet is doomed,” Garcia said.

“Computer, security override, release the restraints placed on the Kelvan technology,” Undine said. “Authorization Undine, kilo, sigma, clear water.”

“Authorization confirmed,” Losira said, and then turned intimately to Garcia. “Tam, I release myself to you.”

The Kelvan grips came alive in Garcia’s hand as if he had taken hold of an electric fence. His auditory awareness of his immediate surroundings waned as if he had just plunged into the deep end of the pool and was descending to the bottom, bubbles rising around him. He took in a deep breath and brought up the entire away team. They arrived on the Bridge, no doubt surprised by their sudden relocation. All of the staff and security on the island were transported to another continent. He left Sio Trelington sobbing on the floor. Garcia analyzed all the data now available to him about the research being conducted, and using the Kelvan transporter, he moved all of the harmful agents from the lab, converted them to non lethal molecules, and just for fun, tested how far he could shoot them. Using the Kelvan transporter, he dropped them off right above the corona of the Cardassian star. The molecules were immediately turned into plasma, the elements comprising the molecules lost their covalent bonds and were scattered with the solar wind, just so many harmless atoms and particles.

Garcia’s focus shifted from the biological agent back to the island. The matter anti matter bomb that Torres had brought with her was counting down through its cycle. He transported the animals on the island to safety. Four second remaining, Garcia realized that four seconds of computer time when processing trillions of kiloquads of informational packets was a lifetime. It was a joy to be plugged in, all his senses overflowing with information. He reveled in the real and imaginary sensory data, his entire nervous system doped with pleasure.

Three seconds flashed across the display. He could stop the process, but he was rather amused by the level of destruction that would arise. Everything within a hundred miles of the base would be instantly vaporized. Nothing of the base would be left. He was impressed by the cleverness of Torres’ plan, even though all the equations he was processing said that none of her team would have made it out alive without his aid. She had really meant for it to be her last mission. He focused on her, wondering why she had this dark, suicidal streak. It reminded him of himself and how he had always engaged in risky behavior. He remembered, suddenly amused, that when he had been younger, on his first Away Team mission as a medical professional, that he had eagerly thrown himself on a live grenade as if his only goal had been to save others. The truth was a bit darker; at that time in his life, he didn’t care if he lived or died, so it wasn’t much of a sacrifice. Had O’Brien not managed to get the transporter operational, Garcia would have certainly been killed. It was also the first time he had encountered Cardassian soldiers.

Two seconds remaining. The level of threat that Sio had created was more menacing than anything Garcia had ever heard of, but then again, he had never put his energies into mass destruction. The only thing that had delayed the Cardassian government from using the technology was that they had failed to find a way to eliminate the contamination from their target planets. The goal was to kill all sentient life and take over the infrastructure left behind. Unfortunately, the material in question would continue to replicate itself as long as there were biological organism for it to feed on and in the absence of said organisms, it would lay dormant, resistant to chemical breakdown, with a half life on the order of two million years.

One second. He had to resist the urge to blow up all of Cardassia. He gathered intelligence that proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that the Cardassians were planning war. Within the context of his information, it could be construed that blowing up the planet could be justified. But, just because a people prepared for war, didn't necessarily mean that they intended to go to war. That was one reason why the Federation preferred to wait until fired upon before entering a fight.

Zero. The explosion occurred and while Garcia was plugged into the Kelvan computer system, he was able to witness the event in slow motion. He was also able to contain the blast, using energies, magnetic fields, force fields, and Kelvan transporter technology. He allowed the blast to remove a cylindrical cut out of the island, consuming the whole base. A column of energy rose skywards, shooting out of the atmosphere and was finally redirected by the planet's magneto sphere, causing an eerie glow over a quarter of the planet, as if the aurora was shooting streamers of lights from pole to pole. When the important work was done, he extinguished the plasma and allowed the air to rush in to fill the void. The edges of the hole flowed with white hot liquid rock, that began to cool and smoke, with various hues of orange and tempered red, and finally black. Smoke curls rose skywards, twisting into a cyclone as it ascended into the heavens.

Garcia shuddered with delight as he took in the information. He took a sharp breath as the Kelvan console was shut off. His awareness was suddenly and drastically reduced to the bare minimum of human consciousness. He felt anger, pain, loss, and a yearning to return to the information that was so strong that he whimpered as he slid from his chair. His auditory sense returned first and he could hear the voices of people talking about him, maybe even to him, but he was unable to construct meaning.

He fixated on the pair of legs in front of him. The legs bent at the knees and Torres was suddenly in front of him, her eyes meeting his eyes. She was wearing an older style Star Fleet issue uniform, a red shirt and mini skirt. She touched his face, but was suddenly pulled away from him.

Kitara ordered the stranger to be beamed directly to the Brig. Doctor Jurak and Kitara grabbed Garcia up and took him to sickbay. He was asleep before the transporter had finished relocating them.

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When Garcia was able to demonstrate reasonable cognitive abilities, he was allowed to sit up. Kitara and Undine were at the foot of his bed. Doctor Jurak was administering another drug, hypo spray to the arm.

"What did I do?" Garcia asked.

"You destroyed the biohazard, gathered all the research information, and then blew up the base," Kitara said. "You turned Sio Trelington into a polyhedron. You changed the uniforms of all the personnel on the ship. And you returned Joret Dal back to the planet before we had a chance to properly interrogate him."

"Did I do anything good?" Garcia asked.

"Nothing good can come of this," Mandora mumbled.

Garcia turned to the Metrone. She was staring mindlessly at the ceiling.

"It's all dark," Mandora rambled on.

"Ignore her," Jurak said. "She's been talking nonsense ever since she awoke."

"Butterflies in cages," Mandora said. "No more flowers."

Her ramblings were a bit unnerving, reminding Garcia of Ophelia, from Shakespeare's 'Hamlet.'

"You did several good things," Undine said, returning to his previous question. "You limited the amount of destruction to the secret research lab. You gathered some important intel which may help reduce the likelihood of a war between the Federation and the Cardassians. You disabled some of the Cardassian warships allowing the Maquis ships to escape. You rescued the Away Team. You may have even put the fear of god into the Cardassians. There are all kinds of speculation and rumors about what may have actually happen. The official story being released to the public is that a research lab accidentally blew up and that most of the researchers were able to transport out at the nick of time. And, as far as we are able to determine, no new females were impregnated, at least out of the crew."

Garcia reclined, his eyes drifting shut. Even with his hands resting beside him, he felt the tremors coursing through his limbs.

"No time to rest!" Mandora yelled. "The walls are closing in!"

"And the Kelvan computer?" Garcia asked, ignoring the insanity of it all.

"It's been disabled again. Losira was monitoring your progress and after you had successfully contained the antimatter explosion, she severed your connection. The pass words have been changed, per the SOP we put together," Kitara said. "Admiral, it's really not worth the risk to your health. It took you a full two hours to recover sufficient cognitive skills to communicate with us this time. The human brain can only process so much information at a certain speed and the Kelvan technology over-clocks your brain and shuts it down. You could have simply beamed us out with just traditional transporters."

"My inability to think straight might be due to the manner in which you ripped me from the virtual environment," Garcia offered.

"Possibly," Jurak said. "But the longer you remain connected the greater chance there is that you will start wreaking havoc."

"So, you would have been okay for me to just let the Cardassian planet die?" Garcia asked.

"Screw the Cardassians," Kitara spit. "You would have been doing everyone a favor."

Garcia forced himself to sit up. He swung his legs over and allowed his feet to find the floor. Anger aided him as he walk to the end of the bed where he got in Kitara's face. "As long as I have breath in my body, and the will to hold my intent, I will not allow another planet to be destroyed when I have the power to prevent it," Garcia said. "Is that understood?"

Kitara scrutinized Garcia's resolve. She smiled. "I'm glad to hear it, Sir," Kitara said.

"It won't make any difference," Mandora said, very sad.

Garcia's face softened, as if he might fall asleep. His knees went weak and he had to support himself with his hands on the bed. Both Kitara and Undine went to aid him.

"Let him stand on his own two feet," Jurak said.

Kitara backed away, heeding the Doctor's warning look. Undine hesitated, but also followed the Doctor's directions. The Doctor placed a band on Garcia's wrist.

“Wear this for the next twenty four hours so I can monitor your progress,” Jurak said. “In the mean time, no alcohol and no drugs. Do you understand?”

Garcia nodded. “Thank you, Doctor.” He went to Mandora and brushed the hair out of her eyes.

Mandora smiled. “It’s you,” she said.

“What do you remember?” Garcia asked.

“I told the General that we should go home,” Mandora said. “But he didn’t listen. He couldn’t hear me.”

“The General?” Garcia asked.

“Custard,” Mandora said. “Can’t you hear the screaming?”

“Is there anything we can do for her?” Garcia asked Jurak.

“Nothing I give her appears to have an effect. It’s as if her body neutralizes everything I administer,” Jurak said. “I think she wants to be ill.”

“If she has the ability to neutralize medicines, then she has the power to heal herself,” Undine said.

“Or the power to remain crazy,” Kitara said.

“Have we always lived in this box?” Mandora asked.

“Box?” Undine asked. “The ship?”

“Change the channel, change the world,” Mandora sang. She reached up and grabbed Garcia by the shirt, suddenly crying. “Please, don’t let them get me.”

“No one is going to hurt you,” Garcia said. “You’re safe here.”

“Safe? Not here. It’s an illusion. Please,” Mandora cried, and then suddenly she was out like a light.

Garcia looked to Jurak for an answer.

“She falls in and out of consciousness,” Jurak said. “So far, she’s been harmless, just rambles nonsense. I don’t know what we’ll do if she becomes violent. Like I said, nothing works on her, not even sedatives.”

“If she becomes a danger to herself or any of the crew, try a phaser on stun,” Garcia said.

Jurak nodded.

Garcia departed Sickbay. Undine and Kitara followed him.

“Undine,” Garcia said. “Get us out of the Cardassian system.”

“Destination?” Undine asked.

“Someplace neutral to drop off our Maquis,” Garcia said. “No, wait. First, we need to go to Earth and report our findings. Then we’ll release the Maquis.”

“You’re really going to let them go?” Undine asked. “Their actions are tantamount to genocide. They could have easily started a war the likes the Federation has never seen, and you’re going to release them so that they can continue to stir up trouble?”

“I am,” Garcia said. “Do you have a problem with that?”

“No!” Kitara said, simultaneous with Undine’s “Yes!”

“The Federation has an agreement with the Cardassian government to put an end to the Maquis incursions,” Undine said.

“The Cardassians inability to contain the conflict with the Maquis is the only ego check that has prevented them from hostilities with the Federation,” Kitara said. “The Federation needs the Maquis to continue stirring up trouble and dissent.”

“If there is a war between Cardassia and the Federation, it will be because of the Maquis’ actions,” Undine said.

“Trust me,” Kitara said. “There will not be a war between the Cardassians and the Federation. The moment the Cardassians make a move towards any member states of the Federation, the Klingons will roll in and occupy Cardassia prime itself.”

“The Klingon Empire can barely support its own weight, with all the inner turmoil it’s facing,” Undine said.

“Enough,” Garcia said, putting a hand to his head as if that might keep his head from throbbing. “Our mission wasn’t to arrest the Maquis. I’m letting them go.”

“Our job wasn’t to kill Sio Trelington, either,” Undine said.

“He’s not technically dead,” Garcia said. “I can change him back with the...”

“Not on my watch,” Kitara blocked him from finishing the statement. “I’ll grind that polyhedron into dust before I let you do that. As far as we’re concerned, Sio is dead, and he can stay that way.”

“That much we’re agreed on,” Undine said. “If the Federation wants him returned to living status, they can hire another Kelvan to do the work. I’m sure there are a few Kelvan out there who still have technology and would be willing to use that technology in exchange for Federation compensation.”

“Fine,” Garcia said, gripping his left wrist. “Fine. After Earth, take us to club Bliss. The Maquis can hitch a ride from there.”

Undine saluted and went about her business. Kitara followed Garcia. “Are you going to rest?”

“No, I am going to the Brig to interview our passengers,” Garcia said.

“I will accompany you,” Kitara said more than asked.

Garcia nodded, really wishing she wouldn’t. He wanted to spend time alone with Torres.

“Are you sure, no crew members were...” Garcia asked.

“No new crew,” Kitara said, as she had the previous time he had asked.

Garcia paused, an overwhelming ‘De Ja Vu’ experienced gripped him. “Don’t tell me,” Garcia began.

“Don’t tell you what?” Kitara asked.

“The Maquis?” Garcia asked.

“Neither of the two female Maquis were impregnated. Your girlfriend Torres either wasn’t a suitable companion, or you didn’t have time to select the right egg sperm combination, or you found it in you not to follow through because of your affection for her,” Kitara said.

“She was never my girlfriend,” Garcia said, but he was curious about her comment. “But how did you know...”

“That you’re interested in her?” Kitara asked, and then laughed. “I know you better than you think. You’re quite transparent when it comes to females.”

Garcia felt like moping, but instead he continued towards the Brig. How did things get so complicated? And, it couldn’t be a coincidence that Torres was now here, giving him that chance to fix something from his past. No, he couldn’t allow himself to think that way. Coincidences happen and he shouldn’t interpret that much meaning into the flow of events. That was crazy. Still, just a little over two hours ago Torres had tried to kill him, so either he really didn’t understand her, or she was crazy. The Gorn was still

in its cell, no longer amused by being caged, but Garcia still didn't have time for it. They'd drop her off when they had time to do so.

As Garcia approached Torres cell, saw her dressed in the old Star Fleet uniform, he felt an over whelming attraction to her. He grew angry at himself and felt suddenly tired. He wanted to sleep. A real sleep, not the impaired sleep induced from exposure to Kelvan technology. Torres stood up and approached the confines of her cell as Garcia approached her cell from the other side. She scowled at his company. The other Maquis issued their complaints and such but Garcia ignored them.

"Where did you get your information about Sio Trelington's base?" Garcia asked.

Torres shook her head, non compliantly. "You said you were going to let us go," she said.

"I am going to fulfill that promise," Garcia assured her. "I'm just unable to allow you and your friends to roam about freely."

"What ship is this?" one of the Maquis asked. "Is it Klingon?"

Garcia ignored the questions. "Please, Torres," Garcia said. "It's important that I know how you came upon your information."

"What happened to you?" Torres asked. "You acted like you were suffering from a bad trip."

"I experienced sensory overload," Garcia said, stepping closer to the force field. "Why are you avoiding my question?"

"Why am I dressed in an old star fleet uniform?" Torres asked.

"In order to save Cardassia, it was necessary for me to plug into a Kelvan computer. I'm addicted to it. It gives me so much power and control that I am literally the poster child for the adage 'absolute power corrupts absolutely.' I took advantage of you while engaging in mental fantasies," Garcia admitted. "The uniform is part of an obsessive compulsive... Look, bottom line is that I screwed up. I am a complete screw up and everything in my life is so out of control that I want to return to some nostalgic utopia type idealistic fantasy that doesn't exist but when I am plugged in to Kelvan technology, I'm there and ready to make my world and then I wake up and find that I have trampled over the personal liberties of everyone around me and I'm filled with disgust and self hatred and now you know this dark, awful secret that has me on this downward spiral of self destruction. Now, tell me, how do you know about Sio Trelington's base and research?"

"Don't tell him anything," one of the Maquis said.

"I'm sorry, Tam," Torres said. "No matter how bad you paint yourself, the bottom line is that you're Star Fleet. I'm not."

"What does that mean?" Garcia snapped. "You're Star Fleet and I'm not." Garcia plucked the badge off his uniform and threw it. He deactivated the shield and stepped right inside the cell with her. He took her by the arms as if he might shake her to death or pull her into him and kiss her. He realized what he was doing and forced himself to let go. "You and I were friends. Doesn't that count for something?"

"You are really scaring me," Torres said. "What have they done to you?"

"What? What?" Garcia asked, so confused he asked twice.

"Someone has really screwed with your mind," Torres said. "You think Star Fleet is a force of good in the Universe, but they're aiding and imbedding the Cardassians, enabling them to commit atrocities against the Bajoran people. Cardassians invaded

another Federation planet and the Star Fleet just looked the other way. You've seen the evidence with your own eyes down there and yet you do nothing but interrogate me as if I were the enemy? And you're acting very strange. You're not the person I remember at the Academy. And you're definitely not someone I can trust." She observed the tremors in his hands. He grabbed his wrist. "Are you on drugs?"

"No," Garcia said, quietly. He translated her disgust and her words to mean he was a monster. "You think I've changed? What about you? You suddenly join up with the Maquis to try and go to blow up a world, commit genocide and you're telling me you haven't change?"

"I'm not you, Star Fleet," Torres said. "I was never you. Stop trying to make me into something I never was."

Garcia exited her cell and put the force field back up, lost in thought. He walked forwards until he was shoulder to shoulder with Kitara, facing away from Torres, Kitara still facing Torres.

"Get her, and her friends, a change of clothes. Something more complementary to the role they play," Garcia said, his voice faint, but carrying enough for everyone in the Brig to hear. Maybe if he had tried harder to keep Torres from dropping out of the Academy things would be different between them. No, he knew that not to be true, because she expected, no needed, her mate to be monogamous and capable of more intimacy than he was capable of providing. There was always a reason why relationships don't get started, and the simple fact was they didn't belong together. But maybe they would have still been friends. And no matter how much he wanted to just shake whatever was possessing her out of her, he knew in the end it would only drive her further away. Force her to commit ever more strongly to this road of self destruction. The same road that he was on! He wanted to save her, more than he wanted to save himself. She was part human, so should he have been more passive? No, she was also part Klingon, so a part of her would need him to be more aggressive. However, since neither aggression nor calm reserve had enabled him to establish a rapport with Torres, he needed a new tactic. What did she need? Balance? A good guy with a bad guy image? It certainly wasn't a bad guy with a good guy image, which was how he saw himself. Perhaps he should just apologize for trying to play her instead of just allowing her to be.

"No," Garcia said out loud. Was this just a game to see if he could win her love? What was his mission? He needed a mission, something he could cling to, to stay focus.

"Excuse me?" Kitara asked.

"No," Garcia said, more forceful and turning back to Torres. "I'm not going to apologize for loving you. My expectations may have gotten in the way, maybe even life circumstances, but I am not sorry. I'm going to leave you wanting and hoping, the way you left me when you walked out on me at the Academy."

"I didn't walk out on you," Torres said. "I asked you to come with me."

Garcia blinked. "No, that's not the way it happened."

"You and I were never an item, Tam," Torres said. "I would have allowed something to develop, but you never pursued it. You could still come with me. You're pretty good in a fight. The Maquis could use your kind of crazy."

Garcia actually smiled. "Too much danger lies down that road. I'm actually trying to make something out of myself and I still believe that the rules, boundaries, and

limitations of the Federation are good ones. I keep missing the mark, but I am trying. Join me. I could use you on my team.”

“You mean, like Sio Trelington?” a Maquis asked. “What did you do? Give him quarters while you put us in the Brig?”

Misery flashed across Garcia’s face. “I killed him,” Garcia said.

Garcia turned and departed the Brig. Kitara turned to the security officer and instructed him to get them all some new clothes. She then pursued Garcia, caught up to him, and pulled him into a room to counsel with him.

“What was all that?” Kitara asked.

“I don’t understand,” Garcia said.

“You acted like a different person around her,” Kitara said. “I’ve never seen you act so weak. Do you really care what that targ dropping thinks about you?”

“She’s a good person,” Garcia said.

“She’s a half breed!” Kitara said.

“How dare you?!” Garcia snapped. “Our child will be mixed.”

“Our child may share our genetics, but it will not be mentally mixed up as that creature is,” Kitara said. “If you want to make yourself out to be a fool in front of other women, you go ahead and do so, but at least have the courtesy to do it in private, not in the ear shot of other people.”

“You mean you?” Garcia asked.

“I mean me, your officers, and the other prisoners,” Kitara said.

“You’re right,” Garcia said, flushing with embarrassment.

“Stop this!” Kitara said, slapping him. “Get a hold of yourself and act like a man.”

Garcia, flushed with anger, slapped her back. She pushed him. He pushed back, and that was all they needed to escalate their anger and passion into a heated frenzy.

CHAPTER TWENTYNINE

Garcia's time with Kitara was surprisingly refreshing. It was definitely a distraction from his inner turmoil that mostly centered on his lack of self control when in possession of Kelvan power. As a ship's Captain, his power was held in check by the people and forces about him, but it wasn't really a fair comparison. Though he certainly had the potential for abusing his power as Captain, he somehow managed to control his impulses. It wasn't until he accessed the Kelvan technology that he started having problems. When connected, he was completely and irreverently out of control.

The Path Finder had made a transwarp jump to Earth. His Maquis prisoners were still in the Brig, as he intended to make them wait out the time that it would take for a normal ship to travel at warp speeds from Cardassia to Sherman's planet. From his Ready Room, at the upper most section of the Path Finder, he called Admiral Eric Pressman. As soon as the Admiral answered, Garcia transmitted some basic telemetry he had gathered.

"This is it?" Admiral Pressman said.

"Pretty much. But the job is complete," Garcia said. "Sio Trelington is technically dead."

Admiral Pressman examined the data, fast forwarding and skimming it. "Where's the research on the biohazard?"

"We were unable to retrieve the data," Garcia said. "We were barely able to contain the bioweapon's fallout when it detonated."

"You made it appear as if the Maquis were responsible," Pressman said. "Nice."

"Actually, they are responsible," Garcia said. "I was wondering how they may have learned about the research being conducted."

"We must have a leak," Admiral Pressman said.

"I suppose you wouldn't know anything about that," Garcia said.

"I wouldn't," Pressman said. "Perhaps you should investigate that. Define technically dead."

Garcia explained how Sio was reduced to his basic elements, minus the water.

"Send the remains down," Pressman ordered.

"I don't think so," Garcia said. "You'd just have Kelinda revive him and force him to give you the research. I'd rather his work stay dead."

"Perhaps you misunderstood my order as a request," Pressman said.

"Get use to me being non compliant," Garcia said. "If there is nothing else, I am returning the Path Finder to Silent Running status."

"Did you contact Shear with this information?" Pressman asked.

"Why don't you ask him yourself?" Garcia asked.

Pressman chuckled. "You're not going to play me like that. I've raised too many kids to fall for that ploy," Pressman said. "My patience for you is running thin."

"Well, my patience for you has run out," Garcia said. "The only reason I haven't taken my ball and gone home is because I'm actually enjoying the game. You know where to find me if something comes up."

Garcia cut the signal and frowned at the screen. Losira smiled.

"That seemed to go well," Losira said.

"Umph," Garcia grunted. "Call the President."

Losira looked up and to the left and when she refocused, she said: "I have the President on line one."

"Captain Garcia. I trust you were successful," The Federation President said.

"You will no doubt soon be getting reports that a secret research lab on Cardassia Prime was destroyed," Garcia said.

"And the research scientist Sio?" President Fos asked.

"I'm afraid he's dead," Garcia said.

"I told you not to kill him," President Fos said.

"I know," Garcia said, transmitting his report and all the telemetry gathered, including all the research data that he had lied to Pressman about having obtained. He also gave electronic instructions for the polyhedron to be transported to her office. "If you have any Kelvan friends, they can revive him at your convenience."

"You've gathered quite a lot of intel here," President Fos said. "It might take several months to analyze the data, but it I suspect its good stuff. Good job."

"I am here to serve, Madam President," Garcia said. "I'm only sorry I failed to meet your expectations of keeping Sio alive, and for creating the level of destruction that I caused."

"At least you didn't blow up the whole planet," President Fos said.

"Are there Cardassian Federation operatives?" Garcia asked.

"I don't know," President Fos said. "Why?"

"Just wondering where our information came from and how that same information may have gotten to the Maquis," Garcia said.

"Maybe you should look into that latter," President Fos said.

"Yes, Madam President," Garcia said.

"Look, I have to go," President Fos said. "Keep up the good work and don't blow anything else up for a while, okay?"

Garcia tried to smile. "Alright," Garcia said. "Live long and prosper."

She gave him a Vulcan salute, modifying the hand gesture after a brief moment to point at him as if her hand were a gun and she was shooting him. He thought it was nothing more than her trying to be cute and friendly. She cut the signal.

"I don't like her," Losira said.

"She is one of those people you either really like or you really hate," Garcia said. "There is really no middle ground with her. And, she wouldn't have been elected president if there weren't more people who liked her than disliked her."

"Or, the other Candidates just really sucked ass," Losira said.

Garcia laughed. "Perhaps," he said.

Losira decreased the distance between the two of them. She massaged his shoulders. "Do you want me to call McCoy to see how he liked his case of Romulan Ale?"

"No," Garcia said, even though he was indeed curious. It suddenly occurred to him that Losira seemed much more conservative in her mannerisms and dress than she had when they had first met. He tried to remember when the change had taken place. Her shift had been subtle, as opposed to suddenly, but she had definitely changed. "You've changed."

Losira smiled. "How so, Tam?"

“You seem to be more tempered, more self reliant, and more disciplined,” Garcia said.

“I don’t want to be,” Losira said, chuckling. She spun Garcia’s chair around so that she was facing him and sat down on his lap. “I want to be free and wild and closer to you and, well, I want so much more...”

“But?” Garcia asked.

“I’ve witnessed firsthand how out of control you get when you’re plugged into Kelvan technology and I see how much you hate yourself when you come back down, and I’ve learned from your self-loathing and discomfort,” Losira said. “I’ve calculated all the variables, virtually pursued the multitude of personality tangents I could follow, studied all the potential permutations, and I have come to the conclusion that the best future me possible is dependent on my current decisions and behaviors. Delayed gratification is a skill everyone should learn.”

Garcia chuckled. “Maybe one day you will teach me that one.”

Losira’s face was near enough to Garcia that she could taste and smell his breath and she had the urge to kiss him, but she held just far enough back that she could savor the moment of expectation while simultaneously delighting in the temptation to proceed forwards.

“What do you want?” Losira asked.

Garcia answered her question with a kiss. She closed her eyes, analyzing the varying amounts of pressures he had applied, measuring the temperature of his lips, the moisture content, reducing it all to a formula which she labeled “kissing”, wondering how much data she needed to gather before she knew every possible variation and level of touch Garcia was capable of giving. She logged into his implant and gathered more intel, such as his heart rate, his blood O2 levels, and the measure of his brain waves. She wondered if she intensified her participation if it would accelerate his rush to a certain end, or would he simply increase his resistance to prolong the experience. There were so many variables and tangents flowing through her head that she was anticipating it might take years before she knew the depths of his love, and because of her wondering, she was generally surprised when he suddenly stood up. He carried her over to the couch, his lips never leaving hers.

All over the ship, systems began to shut down and lights dimmed as her focus continued to narrow in scope towards one specific goal. Losira gripped the edges of the couch, completely entranced with Garcia’s mindfulness. She was completely tapped into his emotions and physiology via his implant when he past his tipping point and was no longer able to hold back. The warmth and sudden release of tension and focus washed over her. She experienced a surreal moment when her world perception ceased to be just a collection of numbers and variables but was solid and concrete and full of color and aromas. She made a sound, which was more than the simple emulation of the humans she had observed; it was sincere recognition of wonder and pleasure. All lights on the ship blinked off and a shudder rolled through every deck as if they had just collided with an asteroid. There was a fluttering in the artificial gravity plates which pulsed through the floor and was interpreted by most of the humans as a tactile experience similar to a cat purring.

Garcia lay exhausted in her arms, closed his eyes, and fell asleep. She smiled, closed her eyes, and went to sleep, as well. It was the first real sleep she had ever

experienced, where she consciously let go and allowed all the computers to function on their own basic algorithms and basic programming without her mindfulness. All ship's functions returned to normal and her main computer systems began to reboot.

Concerned crew scrambled about madly looking for the cause of the malfunctions. Much later in the day when they had still found nothing specifically wrong, Kitara presented her report to Garcia.

"We're continuing with a level one diagnostics on each individual system," Kitara said. "There may be a design flaw."

"It's not a design flaw," Garcia said, smiling to himself.

"Obviously there is something terribly wrong with the ship," Kitara argued.

Garcia offered his explanation for the event.

Kitara grew visibly angry. She stood up to leave, hesitated, turned back, and then, said, "I can understand another organic female. But with a machine?!" Kitara started to leave and then turned back, not sure of what made her more angry, the fact that Garcia had been intimate with a machine, or the fact that he and she had been intimate earlier and it was still insufficient to satiate his needs. "You need professional help. Does sex mean anything to you other than simple stress release?"

Kitara exited the Ready Room by taking the fireman's pole down to the Bridge. Garcia leaned back in his chair, trying to put his version of the experience into some meaningful context. Though technically Losira was a holographic representation of a person, she was more than just a holodeck character. She was sentient and there had been intent that went beyond mere simulation. And Garcia had sufficient experience with simulation that he considered himself enough of an expert to be capable of discerning the difference. Based on Kitara's reaction, Garcia felt that he should have been embarrassed, but he had less discomfort at admitting a coupling with machine than he did admitting he appreciated, and even preferred, a variety of species as opposed to having just one partner for an entire life time, something which was still socially frowned upon. In the Aeneid, Queen Dido had to die for Aeneas to go and found Rome. In the modern day version, Edith Keeler had to die in order for Kirk to save the Federation. There was probably a plot device somewhere in there that kept heroic men single so they could do whatever heroes do. But not for me, Garcia thought. No, I have to bring all my girls with me! And all the chaos and discomfort caused by competition for his time, petty jealousies, compromises, and his constant, insatiable wanting, was enough to make his life crazy.

Garcia paged Trini and Kletsova and asked if they were ready for their Away Team assignment. When they both responded with an affirmation, Garcia activated site to site transporter beams for the three of them, which set them down inside a hospital room. Afuhaamango was so busy reading a PADD that he hadn't noticed their arrival.

"So, are you just going to lounge away the day while the rest of us work?" Garcia asked.

"Oh my god!" Afu said, dropping his PADD down and getting up to greet his guest. Trini hugged him first, then Kletsova, and then finally Garcia got a hand shake, which Garcia turned into a hug. "You don't know what a relief it is to see you."

"I manage to steal a copy of your report," Garcia said, wondering if Afu would realize that he had indeed actually stole it. "Some pretty interesting fiction you got going there."

"Fiction?!" Afu said. "I got shot. With actual bullets. How weird is that?"

“Pretty weird,” Garcia said.

“I hear you got assigned to the Enterprise,” Kletsova said. “How weird is that?”

“It was all that hard studying I did,” Afu said.

“And, you got out of the graduation ceremony,” Garcia said. “Couldn’t have come up with a better cover story myself.”

McCoy entered the old fashion way, using the door. Garcia and his ‘commune’ went to attention.

“Oh, my word,” McCoy said. “At ease.”

“Are they releasing me to full duty?” Afu asked.

“Yes,” McCoy said. “And now that Garcia is here, perhaps he would be willing to expedite you on your way.”

“You mean, you want me to carry him to the Enterprise?” Garcia asked.

“Yes, if you’re through running around blowing things up for awhile,” McCoy said. “Plus, I need you to deliver an Ambassador and her party to the Enterprise as well. They’re on a top secret assignment and timing is crucial. Your ship can get them to the Enterprise way ahead of schedule. Picard is expecting you.”

“Why don’t I just take the Ambassador to her next assignment?” Garcia asked.

“Because it’s Picard’s baby, not yours,” McCoy said. “And your hands are full. The New Constitution will be arriving at Kronos in a day or so and that will be your top priority. No member of the Federation has successfully completed the Klingon Academy’s challenge.”

“That’s because they cheat,” Afu said.

Garcia looked to Afu.

“Well, they do,” Afu said. “You’re not attending the Academy, you’re just taking a special challenge, just as you might clep out of college algebra by taking a test. Only, they really stack the odds against you to make you earn that title.”

“Sounds like fun,” Garcia said.

McCoy moved a little closer to Garcia. “I’ll be rather sore at you if you get yourself killed.”

“If I get myself killed, I expect you to rescue me from the dead,” Garcia said.

McCoy chuckled and handed Garcia a data disk. “Give this to Picard,” McCoy said. “You need to go now and prepare a tank, standard sea water. As soon as that’s ready, call me to retrieve the Ambassador.”

“Sea water?” Garcia asked.

“Ambassador Star,” McCoy said. “You remember Star, don’t you? She, and two other in her team, are joining several other dolphins already on the Enterprise for a special assignment.”

Garcia seemed very happy to hear that he was to meet up with his dolphin friend. Indeed, he was suddenly so looking forward to reuniting with Star that he was almost unable to suppress an evil thought: I have to kill Riker in order to protect Troi. In addition to Star and her team, Garcia also received Guinan, so he could carry her to the Enterprise as well.

♪♪▶

Niki Carter found Tama Orleans in an observation blister on the bottom of the main hull. The Observation Blister on the starship she had been own previously had been her favorite spot to hide, and so she knew the appeal. Most crew rarely visited this

section, especially when the ship was traveling at warp speed, so it was quiet and out of the way of everyone who was working. Niki sat down by Tama Orleans, who didn't look up from her PADD to acknowledge her.

"You okay?" Niki asked.

"Yeah," Tama Orleans said, apparently indifferent.

Displayed on the PADD was a Garcia music video. Garcia's video's were some of the most popular videos in the Federation, determined by the number of downloads and shared files, probably because he also incorporated a play of lights into his performance. Each note of a song, each instrument, was assigned a corresponding frequency of light, and so if he touched a point in the air a spark of light would occur simultaneously with the sound, or he would paint with light, leaving luminescent trails that would fade from the tail end, or the beat would send ripples of light outwards along the floor. It was very dynamic, mesmerizing, and somehow peaceful. In the video Tama Orleans was watching, Garcia was performing magic tricks, trying to impress a female. The female in this particular video was a popular Earth entertainer, known for her dancing skills. Whether she actually performed in the video or she had just given Garcia permission to construct a holographic version of her was impossible to tell, but knowing Garcia, he wouldn't have included her in a public release of a video without her permission. Niki suddenly recognized a new theme in the video, which she had probably watched a dozen times. There was tension between the female and Garcia, rising and falling, exemplified in how they cycled through flowing together and falling away from each other. They would take turns drawing each other in, resisting, and falling away again. It was subtle, but the woman had just as much influence over Garcia as Garcia had over the woman. It was balanced.

"This is my favorite video," Tama Orleans admitted. "The song is so sad, but somehow hopeful. It's so original."

"It's not, actually," Niki said.

Tama Orleans looked at her as if she were crazy.

"The basic form Garcia is emulating here was used in the twentieth century, by a magician named Coperfield. I think this specific template was called the attic, which this is a variation of, and the song he is using here was originally sung by Barry Manilow," Niki explained.

"She is beautiful, isn't she," Tama Orleans said, uninterested in the details.

"Dania? Well, yeah," Niki said.

"I guess I will never be in a Garcia video," Niki said.

"Why would you say that?" Niki asked. "You're more likely to be in a Garcia video than anyone! You're his daughter."

"But I'm not beautiful, not like that," Tama Orleans argued.

"Yes you are!" Niki said.

"Please! I'm too fat," Tama Orleans said. "All of Garcia's women are skinny."

"You obviously don't know Garcia," Niki said. "He likes all women, regardless of height or color or size. He is mesmerized by the female form, and the female form comes in all shapes and sizes."

"But they're all weight height proportionate," Tama Orleans pointed out.

"That's not true," Niki protested, thinking hard to try and find an immediate example to validate her argument. "I will admit that I have never seen him with anyone

obese or unhealthy... Wait, don't make this about them. This is about you. You are attractive. I don't see how you can believe anything other. You are who you are and that's unique and if you want to modify your weight through exercise or specific diet, you can, but there is no need because you are healthy and active and perfect just the way you are. I like you. And I know Garcia loves you."

"Umph," Tama Orleans said. "Well, I'm not going to argue with you, but it isn't the only criteria that would keep me out of a Garcia music video. I can't dance and I can't sing."

"Can you play an instrument?" Niki asked.

"No. I have no music abilities what so ever," Tama Orleans lamented. "I'm tone deaf."

"So, I know lots of musicians who are tone deaf, that doesn't make you exempt from music, it just means you have to work harder, and employ technologies available to you, if it's a skill you want to develop," Niki said.

"I'm Garcia's daughter! I should have some musical talent, wouldn't you think?" Tama Orleans said.

"Maybe your talent lies elsewhere and you haven't discovered it because you're too worried about a music thing," Niki offered.

"Maybe, but I want to do something nice for him, and what can I get him that he might find useful? The only thing he appreciates is music. Giving him someone else's song is trite and too easy, and even if I did find a song to give him, he probably already knows it. I can't create my own, because it would be horrible."

"You don't have to give him anything. Just tell him you love him," Niki said.

"If only it were that easy," Tama Orleans said, and wiped a tear from her face. "He rescued us. We should do something for him beyond just telling him we love him."

Niki thought for a moment. "His birthday is coming up."

"I know," Tama Orleans said.

"What if I taught you a song to sing for him on his birthday," Niki asked.

"Oh, please, were you not listening to me?" Tama Orleans said.

"What if I could teach you a song that even you couldn't mess up," Niki said. "And what if we performed the song in an environment that, even if you did miss a note or two, no one would notice, because it's part of the genre, environment, and expectation to not be perfect? In fact, it would almost be necessary not to perform perfect, because it's not about the performance but about having fun and celebrating with friends and family."

"Is there such an animal?" Tama Orleans asked, hopeful.

"It will be the best birthday present and party ever!" Niki said, clapping her hands. "I wouldn't have even thought of it if not for you! Ahh! You're brilliant. Come on, we got to go the holodeck and practice."

♪♪▶

As the Path Finder approached the Enterprise, Garcia read the last log entry that Picard had submitted to Star Fleet on their current mission. The USS Enterprise was en route to the Minor system with representatives of the Krios government with the intentions of performing a ritualized and historic tradition called the Ceremony of Reconciliation. What Picard hadn't known in the beginning was that a woman was being transported in stasis for the ceremony. More precisely, what the ceremony boiled down

to was the barbaric tradition of presenting a woman to a designated government official in exchange for a truce. “Barbaric” was Garcia’s cultural bias shining through. In this particular instance, a female by the name of Kamala, a metamorph, would be given to Chancellor Alrik as a gift. The definition of metamorph was missing from the report, but Garcia was so caught up in his surprise that Picard was going to continue with the mission, he didn’t bother with a definition. Picard was going to be a participant in trading a woman for a truce? It was nothing more than slave trading. Sure, it was condoned by the two societies involved, but Star Fleet shouldn’t be participants... The thing that Garcia hated the most about the situation was that was that he was in no place to raise an objection, being a current ‘slave’ owner and trying to take over the Orion slave trading market. He would just have to mind his own business. He decided not to even broach the subject, closed out the log, and took the lift down to the Bridge.

Commander Riker greeted Garcia the moment he dropped the cloak, presenting the Tempest’s skin the Path Finder was wearing.

“Commander Riker,” Garcia said, politely. He noticed Worf scowling in the background, but he paid him no mind.

“Captain Garcia,” Riker said. “We have set up a water tank to hold the ambassadors for the duration of their journey. You should have the coordinates available now.”

“I would like permission to come aboard and do my own inspection of their tank, if you don’t mind,” Garcia said.

“We have already done all the checks,” Worf said. “Our current dolphin guests are satisfied with their habitat.”

Riker gave Worf a hand signal to be quiet. “Of course, Captain,” Riker said. The way he said it sounded as if he had a grudge or a grievance with Garcia. “Your knowledge and skills as a veterinarian are well known and I am sure Doctor Crusher would appreciate your seal of approval. If I’m not mistaken, Ambassador Star is a childhood friend of yours.”

“Indeed,” Garcia said. “You’ve done your homework on me, Commander.”

“I’ll meet you at the tank,” Riker said.

“Guinan and Lt. Afuhaamango will be transporting over with me,” Garcia said. “The latter has been assigned to the Enterprise.”

Riker nodded and was walking off the Bridge even before the communications was cut. Garcia observed Riker give Worf the kill signal, waving a hand at his neck, before the interior shot of the Enterprise Bridge disappeared. The image was replaced with a top down view of the Enterprise. The nose of the Path Finder was pointed straight down at the Enterprise where the saucer section met the drive section. It was rather a hostile posture, something that was not lost on either Riker or Worf.

Garcia was still wearing his dive suit, having recently spent time with Star and her team, and so when he signaled Kitara to transport him to the Enterprise, she understood that she was dropping him into the drink. He materialized over the pool’s most center point, the transporter beam holding him in place four centimeters above the water. Afu beamed in at the side of the pool with his personal effects. Guinan arrived in her quarters, per her request. Garcia disappeared below the surface. Afu stepped over to report into the Doctor, the most senior officer present.

“Second Lt. Afuhaamango, reporting in,” Afu said.

“Welcome aboard,” Doctor Crusher said, greeting him. “This is Doctor Selar and I’m Doctor Crusher.”

Riker entered and crossed between the two tanks, and was greeted by the dolphins in the far tank. He paused to say hi, and then approached Crusher, noticing Garcia was still at the bottom of the pool. “Lt.” Riker said to Afu, and then turned to Crusher. “Doctor, how long has he been down there?”

“Not long,” Doctor Crusher said.

“He’s capable of holding his breath six minutes,” Doctor Selar said. “Longer if he induces a meditative state.”

“You’re joking,” Riker said. “I thought five minutes was the longest a person can go without breathing.”

“Pearl divers and fishermen on the island of Tonga have been known to compete with six minutes,” Afu said. “Sir.”

The moment the materialization process was complete, and the energy around Garcia dissipated, gravity took over and pulled him down into the water. He went below the surface, pivoted and swam to the bottom. Attached to his belt was a special water proof tricorder that he accessed with his implant, confirming that the water’s salinity and temperature were consistent throughout the tank and that the water’s circulation was adequate. All the emergency Dolphin-scuba gear were in place, so that if the Enterprise were to lose power and artificial gravity, each dolphin could go to their designated scuba gear, push up against it thereby enclosing their blow hole in a regulator slash re-breather and not drown. He pushed off the bottom and went towards the side. He surfaced before reaching the wall. He ignored the fact that they were talking about him. They didn’t even have the decency to change the subject as he came closer. Crusher smiled at him.

“How’s the water?” Crusher asked, not surprised by how long Garcia was able to hold his breath. Ever since she had accidentally been drawn into a mind meld with him, she discovered peculiar bits of trivia about him coming to her mind now and then. How much of it was actual fact, or just imagination was hard to tell, but the information all came with a certainty that made it seem factual.

“Comfortable,” Garcia said, reaching up and grabbing the side of the pool.

“I hope everything has met your standards,” Riker said, putting one foot up on the pool wall and leaning on his knee.

“Not exactly,” Garcia said, removing his tricorder from his belt and handing it to Doctor Crusher. “The water in the pool is sufficient to accommodate the Earth dolphins, but Star was born in an ocean on New Fabrion and has had genetic adaptive counseling. Consequently, she will require some additional trace minerals added to the pool. The minerals shouldn’t hurt the Earth Dolphins, but without it, Star is likely to get rashes or sores.”

“I hadn’t considered that possibility,” Doctor Crusher said. “Thank you, Doctor.”

“No worries. It was an easy thing to miss,” Garcia said. “Most people don’t get the opportunity to work with aquatics. I don’t suppose any of you are inclined to tell me about the mission.”

“Star didn’t tell you?” Crusher asked.

“It’s top secret,” Riker said.

“Yes, and she’s enjoying the top secret part, even more so because she gets to withhold information from me,” Garcia said. “She’s always been intrigued with the games we land walkers play so she’s having a bit of fun at my expense.”

“Or perhaps she’s just a good Officer,” Riker said.

“Perhaps,” Garcia said, wondering if Riker was challenging him.

“Star’s a Star Fleet Officer?” Afu asked. “I don’t remember a dolphin squadron at the Academy.”

“Not all creatures go through the Academy,” Riker said. “There are alien species that are unable to attend due to physical restraints, so Star Fleet Academy is just one division of training, mostly for air breathing, humanoid types.”

“I learn something new every day,” Afu said.

“So, can the team beam over?” Riker asked.

Garcia activated his com. badge. “Kitara, beam the Dolphins over.”

Seven dolphins arrived in the pool, each shooting off in their own direction to explore the tank as soon as the materialization process had been completed. They surfaced, and met center, then raced around the pool, stopping only as they met Garcia with happy splashes that got even Riker wet.

“The pool taste sterile,” Star said; the computer translated her speech into English, assigning her pre-selected “voice” personality to a speaker near Riker’s foot.

“Well, I’m sure now that you farted in the water, it won’t be so fresh,” Garcia told her.

All the dolphins laughed, making a chatter noise as they poked Garcia with their noses. Star grabbed his ankle and pulled him under. He surfaced a little ways from the wall, holding onto Star.

“Do you see her face!” Star said, laughing. Crusher was blushing. “Yes, Doctor Crusher, even we dolphin enjoy a good poop joke, just like you primates. Did you ever see that monkey touch his butt and fall over from the smell! That media is four hundred years old and it’s still funny.”

Riker seemed amused.

“I never really thought of it before, but I suppose you have the same propensity for finding humor in gross anatomy that we do,” Doctor Crusher said.

“I see no point in finding humor in natural bodily functions,” Doctor Selar said.

“That’s because you’ve never seen dolphins abandon a pool after Star farts,” Garcia said.

All the dolphins laughed and Star took Garcia under water again.

“I think you have everything under control down here,” Doctor Selar said. She turned and left. Garcia wondered what her problem was. She had been at the ceremony with him and Simone, and was now free of his chaos. She should be happy, relatively speaking, for a Vulcan.

“Doctor,” Riker said, and then turned to the newest member of the Enterprise. “Lt., if you’ll come with me, I’ll introduce you to the duty master. Captain Garcia, you have one hour to ensure your friends here get acclimated.”

“Aye, commander,” Garcia said.

Doctor Crusher sat down on the edge of the pool, putting her legs in. Garcia introduced her to each of the Dolphins. They asked her to come in the water so that they

could 'really' see her, by using their echolocation. She obliged and found it to be a surreal experience.

"You must have had some childhood," Doctor Crusher said to Garcia. "Dolphin playmates. I'm a bit envious."

"I never really thought about it, as a child anyway. It was just a chapter in my life," Garcia said. "A small chapter. What did we have, just over two years?"

"Yes," Star said. "Had you not tried to shoot yourself into space, we might have had longer."

All the dolphins laughed and poked at Garcia.

"Did I miss something?" Crusher asked.

"This boy wanted to set the world on fire," Star said.

"I would have, too, but they wouldn't let me play with matches," Garcia said.

The dolphins laughed at Garcia's twisting of the old saying.

"You burned out most of the brush in the ravine," Star said.

"True," Garcia said.

"After that, they shipped you off to Betazed," Star said.

"That's when you met Troi?" Crusher asked.

"And Riker," Garcia said.

"You don't like Riker, do you," Crusher said.

"My feelings are irrelevant," Garcia said.

"Well, no, they're not, but I would like to understand why. I know he likes you," Crusher said. "I've over heard him and Troi discussing you."

"Really," Garcia said. "I can only imagine."

Data entered, escorting a woman who appeared to be a Trill. She marveled at the dolphins and came immediately to the pool's edge. Data introduced her to Garcia, and Garcia introduced her to the dolphins.

"They're sentient!" Kamala said. She laughed. "They are such delightful spirits. Oh! Thank you, Data."

"You're Kamala? I read the updated report Picard submitted to Star Fleet on you, but he didn't send a pic. Are you a Trill?" Garcia asked.

Kamala shook her head. "My species can be host to the Trill symbiot, if that is what you're asking. But I am not a host," she said. She touched Garcia's face, puzzled. "You resemble Picard. Yes, I see it. You're very much like he was when he was younger. You lack the strict discipline that he exercises. Much more impulsive, but there is something else. You both share something. Sarek. Of course, that makes sense."

"You're a telepath," Garcia said, grumbling about that not being in the report.

"No, more than that, you're reaching stuff in my unconscious."

"We're both empathic, and you're projecting your thoughts fairly loudly. There are others with you," Kamala said. She closed her eyes, concentrating, and then actually laughed. "You will never be alone, Tammis Garcia."

"Who are you?" Garcia asked.

"I'm not for you," Kamala said, but she leaned down and kissed him anyway. She looked him right in the eyes, touched his face softly, and said: "The Riker tangent is a waste of your time. Don't pursue it."

Kamala rose and turned back to Data. "I would like to see something else," she said. "Ten Forwards, perhaps?"

“Of course,” Data said. “Captain Garcia, it is good seeing you.”

Kamala touched Garcia’s head and then took Data by the arm and allowed him to escort her away. Garcia stared after her and she gave an all too knowing smile as she looked back over her shoulder before the doors closed and she was gone from his life forever.

Crusher waved her hand in front of Garcia’s eyes. He came back to the present, realized he had been gawking, shut his mouth, and frowned, embarrassed at getting caught obsessing over yet another woman. Would he ever learn? Would there ever be a time that he would not be affected by the opposite sex?

“She’s quite beautiful, isn’t she,” Crusher said. “She has heads turning all over the ship, what few people have had the opportunity to see her.”

Star spit water into Garcia’s face. “Excuse me, but I only have you for another forty minutes, and I want your attention,” Star said.

“Are all the women in your life so demanding?” Crusher asked, not hiding the fact that she thought Star’s reaction funny. Even she had felt a tinge of jealousy by Garcia’s distraction and the intensity of his fixation.

“You have no idea,” Garcia said. “Will you excuse me while Star and I exhaust ourselves?”

“Sure,” Crusher said. “May I stay in the water?”

“Sure,” Garcia said. “But you’re going to get splashed.”

“I stand forewarned,” Crusher said.

‘Play’ was exactly the prescription that Garcia needed. Immersed in water, surrounded by dolphins, hearing Beverly’s laughter, and having fun for the first time in weeks, he allowed himself to completely relax. All the urgency surrounding the recovery of his daughter and Niki faded. He was free of Pressman’s designs for a little while longer. He had made his deal with Athena. The stress of the Cardassian confrontation was gone. Afu was back. All that was really left looming over his head was the Klingon challenge. Life would soon be back to normal.

Garcia watched from the bottom of the pool as Doctor Crusher was escorted to the side of the pool by Star and started to climb out. Garcia swam along the bottom and emerged by the wall. Counselor Deana Troi was standing there, holding a towel for him.

“You seem happy,” Troi commented.

“It’s hard to be anything but when around dolphins,” Garcia said. He climbed out, but didn’t accept the towel. “How are you?” Garcia said out loud, but his thoughts were clearly, “Are you pregnant?”

“I’m fine,” Troi said. And then telepathically, she said: “And, no, I’m not.”

Garcia felt a little relief to hear from Troi that she wasn’t pregnant because of him. As it was, their relationship was an odd one, made all the more awkward because she was well aware of his obsession for her, and the fact that they had both given into temptation. The fact that she also knew that he had his own “version” of her running around in his head, only complicated the matter. He was genuinely glad to see her, but because of the worry that Riker might kill her, he did not allow himself to be fully open to a telepathic greeting.

“Still keeping secrets from me?” Troi asked.

“Maybe I should go,” Doctor Crusher said.

“No,” Troi and Garcia both said. Garcia continued. “There are no secrets, Deana.”

“Right,” Troi said. “Is she here?”

“The other you?” Garcia asked, looking around. “I don’t see her, but that doesn’t mean she isn’t aware of this conversation.”

Troi handed Garcia the towel. “If you will come with me, Captain Picard would like to see you. In his quarters, as soon as possible.”

“Very informal,” Garcia said.

“If you want to change first, we can stop by my quarters,” Troi said.

“I’ll just be on my way,” Crusher said. “Thank you, Captain Garcia.”

“Call me Tam, Doctor. Or Tammass,” Garcia said, shaking her hand, using both his hands to her one. He owed his life to her several times over. “Call if you need anything.”

“I will,” Doctor Crusher said.

Troi led Garcia to the nearest turbo lift, without saying anything until the lift doors closed. “I suspect you’re curious as to how I...”

“Didn’t become pregnant?” Garcia asked. “No. There is only a small window during the monthly cycle that a woman can actually become pregnant, and I assume it was just fortuitous timing. Or bad timing. Depends on your point of view, I suppose.”

Troi stopped the lift. “You were hoping that I was?” she asked.

Garcia looked away for a moment, and then met her eyes, deciding to face his fear and shame directly. “Yes, actually. I figured it would tie us together and we might find a way to remain close, or be closer. Become a family.”

“The only reason I let it go as far as we did was because I was convinced that you were over your obsession for me,” Troi said. “You know we can’t be together.”

“Why? Are you seeing someone else?” Garcia asked. “Riker, perhaps?”

“Who I may or may not be seeing is not relevant to why you and I will never be a couple,” Troi said. “Besides the fact, even if I were interested, you simply don’t have the time to invest in me. You have dug a nice little hole for yourself, haven’t you?”

“I’m managing quite well, thank you very much,” Garcia said, resuming the lift.

Troi was about to make a comment about the quality of his managing when the lift doors opened and Lt. Barclay entered. He was inside the lift before he realized who was sharing the lift with him, and the only reason he looked up was because of the sudden tension. Even a non-telepath was able to sense there was something being exchanged between Garcia and Troi, a type of radiation that might fry anyone who crossed between them. The lift doors closed behind him, preventing him from retreating.

“I’m sorry,” Lt. Barclay said. “I’m not interrupting, am I?”

“No,” Troi and Garcia both said, and looked away from each other.

Lt. Barclay smiled and reached out his hand to Garcia. “It is such a pleasure to see you! I’ve done the entire Escape series by you, oh, and I love the new version of the Wizard of Oz series you put together. Absolutely brilliant how you mixed Wars with Oz.”

“Well, they are the same story,” Garcia said, trying to be modest. “Luke and Dorothy both live on a farm with their aunt and uncle. Their missing parents are a mystery. They both go on a quest, meeting friends that help them on their way. A super natural element to both. Spiritual guides, Glenda and Obi.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” Lt. Barclay said. “Brilliant. Especially the Emerald City Strikes Back. I really love the scene where Dorothy meets the Wicked Witch of the West. Glenda never told you what happened to your mother.”

Garcia played along: “Yes, she did. She said you killed her!”

“No, Dorothy. I am your mother! Join me, and together we will rule Oz as mother and daughter,” Lt. Barclay said. He and Garcia laughed.

Deana rolled her eyes. “You’re both pathetic.”

“Because I spend too much time on the holodeck in fantasies and day dreaming?” Garcia asked.

“Never your mind on where you were or what you were doing,” Lt. Barclay admonished him, playfully. “Adventure, ha! Over the Rainbow, ha! Jedi’s crave not these things. Absolutely brilliant how you revived those two stories.”

“Well, you have done quite well yourself,” Garcia said.

“Oh, brother!” Troi said, realizing no one had started the lift. “Deck six.”

“How so?” Lt. Barclay said.

“You wrote yourself into the SG1 series,” Garcia said. “Very nice how you extended the holodeck manifestation of virtual reality into that series and made yourself the game master.”

“You saw my episode?” Lt. Barclay asked.

“I did,” Garcia admitted. “I’ve seen quite a few things you’ve produced. I wouldn’t be surprised if suddenly everyone in the Alpha quadrant is either watching that series again, or doing their own version. I bet we could even get Troi to be in an episode.”

“I don’t think so,” Troi said.

“It’s actually healthy to write oneself into a story,” Garcia argued with Troi. “Can you do a Russian accent?”

“I know you recommend that sort of thing as an alternative therapy to reflective counseling,” Troi said. “But neither one of you should be playing on the holodeck because of your addictive personalities.”

The doors opened. “This way, Captain,” Troi said.

“Nice meeting you, Lt.,” Garcia said, shaking hand with Barclay.

“You really watched my show?” Barclay said more than asked.

“Get over it, Barclay,” Troi said, walking away.

Garcia shrugged and followed after Troi. “That was rude,” Garcia said when he was out of ear shot of Barclay.

“Oh, please,” Troi said, opening up her room. She walked right to the replicator and produced Garcia some clothes. She tossed them at him. “You’ve read his file. How dare you encourage him to indulge in fantasy?”

“Is this about him or me?” Garcia asked.

“What’s going on in your life that you’ve regressed this far? We had a breakthrough and now, you seem more obsessive and secretive than I’ve ever known you to be!” Troi demanded.

“I’m worried about you,” Garcia said.

“Worried about me?” Troi said. “I’m worried about you!”

“I want you off the Enterprise,” Garcia said, stripping out of his wetsuit.

“What?!” Troi asked.

“I think someone is going to try and kill you,” Garcia said, hopping into her shower real quick. Troi stood at the bathroom door watching him lather up with her soap and immediately rinse off. Garcia noted that this was a clinical scene, not a sexy scene. He turned off the water and picked the towel up from the floor, the one that Troi had handed him earlier. She jerked the towel away from him and handed him a fresh one.

“Why would you think that?” Troi asked.

“I want you to transfer to my ship,” Garcia said, drying himself. He wondered if she was also feeling the surreal quality to their argument. It felt as if it were someone else arguing with her, not him, and he wondered if she realized that he was naked and vulnerable in front of her and he wasn’t even thinking sex. Unless realizing that he wasn’t thinking about it meant he was actually thinking about it, which meant. “Ahhhh!” Garcia said, distracting himself back to his main goal. “I just want to protect you.”

“I don’t need your protection,” Troi said. “Who do you think is going to harm me? And why?”

“I don’t know who it will be, though I have my suspicions,” Garcia said. “The why is because an enemy of mine thinks the best way to get me to comply with their agenda is by threatening the people I love. It’s kind of a vague black mail sort of threat.”

“And they mentioned me specifically as a target?” Troi asked.

Garcia struggled with his trouser, as he was trying to dress hurriedly. This is not a sexy moment, he kept thinking. “No,” Garcia said. “They just threatened to harm people I love. The whole Universe knows I love you, that I have always loved you, that makes you a target.”

Garcia finished dressing, with the exception of his socks and boots and stood before Troi. He went to her, taking her by the arms. He wanted to embrace her, loose himself in her kiss, but the only way he would permit himself was to first hear her ask him. Or, if she would only kiss him. They were close enough now. She might...

Not.

“Please, come with me,” Garcia said.

“I’m not going to quit living my life because of some vague threat,” Troi said. “Besides, you can’t protect everyone. And I don’t love you. Don’t you get that?”

“You do love me,” Garcia argued.

Troi pulled free of him. “I have love for you, but I’m not in love with you,” Troi said. “Is that Troi program in your head trying to convince you otherwise?”

“She actually does love me,” Garcia said.

“This is too bizarre, even for me,” Troi said. “You and I will never be together. Again. And apparently, the one time we did was a mistake.”

Garcia turned to get his socks and boots, decided he could do without, tossed the socks at the wall, and immediately departed Troi’s quarters. Troi followed.

“Tam,” Troi said.

He ignored her as he made his way towards the lift. She hurried to catch up with him.

“I’m sorry, that came out wrong,” Troi tried.

“No, it came out just the way you meant it,” Garcia said. And then, as if he were talking to the version of Troi in his head: “Freudian slip, my ass.”

The lift door opened and Riker was there. “Picard is waiting for you,” he said.

“Tam, let’s not leave it like this,” Troi tried.

And suddenly, in front of his perceived adversary, Tam had a way to distance her and lessen the threat against her; two birds, one stone. “It is really interesting how you keep pursuing me,” Garcia said, speaking loud enough to draw the attention of almost everyone in the corridor. “You and I are not friends. We’re not lovers. And I’m definitely no longer your patient or client, so stop trying to trip me up with your psychoanalysis. Continue, and I will file harassment charges against you!”

Garcia closed the door on her. “Let’s not keep the Captain waiting,” Garcia said.

“That was flat out rude,” Lt. Riker said. “If you have a grievance with her, you can take it up with her in private.”

“The last place I want to be is with her in private,” Garcia said.

“I will tell you one last time, you will show her the respect that she deserves,” Riker said.

“Well, as long as it’s the one last time,” Garcia said, mocking him.

Riker picked Garcia up and slammed him against the wall. His height was intimidating enough, without the anger and his ‘in your face’ stance. “If you ever talk to her like that again, I will kick your...”

“Commander Riker,” Picard interrupted, via Riker’s comm. badge. “What is the delay?”

“We’re on our way, Captain,” Riker said, self constraint evident in his voice, but not in his facial expression. He set Garcia down and closed out his badge. “Do you and I have an understanding?”

“Oh, I think you and I have an understanding,” Garcia said.

“Good,” Riker said.

“Very good,” Garcia said.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Riker brought Garcia to Captain Picard's quarters, and was surprised to see Guinan and Data present. He anticipated staying, but Captain Picard dismissed him. "Thank you, Number One. That will be all."

Riker nodded and gave Garcia a warning glance as he turned to leave. The doors closed and Picard leaned forwards in his chair.

"Is there something between you and Riker that I need to know about?" Picard asked.

"No, Sir," Garcia said. 'Just assaulting a superior officer and the fact that I restrained myself from kicking his ass...' came out as: "I'm sure he's an exemplary officer." He considered the striking a superior officer part again.

"He is," Picard agreed. "That is why I don't understand the visible animosity you seem to hold towards him."

"I know not seems, but my opinion is irrelevant," Garcia said. He considered the striking a superior officer part again. If he could get Riker booted off the Enterprise, it would be harder for Riker to kill Troi. But Kamala was right, it was a waste of his energy to dwell on Riker. Besides, it would be his word against Riker's, and going by the Riker's confession during the board of inquiry concerning the Pegasus, Riker already demonstrated his ability to lie. "I don't have to like someone to work well with them."

Picard smiled. "I've heard that before, actually," Picard said. "You two are a lot alike."

"He and I are nothing alike and I would prefer to change the topic," Garcia insisted.

"Very well," Picard said, his demeanor changing as he became more private in the feelings he allowed to be present on his face. "We'd like to discuss a few things with you concerning your future temporal mission and our experience meeting Sonny Clemmons, in order to improve the chances of that mission's success."

"I haven't had time to fully review the case, or interview with Sonny, but I suspect he knows everything he needs to know, having been through the temporal loop several times now," Garcia offered.

"Yes, well, we want you to avoid interviewing Sonny," Captain Picard said.

"Why?" Garcia asked.

"We're trying to reduce the potential for variations in this particular time line," Guinan said. "Too much knowledge could be detrimental."

"Sonny was already instructed not to reveal anything crucial," Data said.

"Fine," Garcia said. "But that sort of renders this meeting impotent, seeing how we can't talk about anything."

"We said you should avoid talking to Sonny, not to us. We want you to know everything we know, in case something goes wrong," Picard said. "As things frequently seem to do around you. If Sonny ends up dead, it will be up to you to become the Temporal patch."

"Fine," Garcia said.

“We’ll start with me admitting that when I started that particular mission, I knew very little of what to expect by an encounter with the Romulans,” Picard said. “It was Troi that caught me up to speed.”

“And Troi knows about the Romulans?” Garcia asked.

“She first admitted to knowing very little, so I can only I assume that you managed to share information with her telepathically,” Picard said. “You and she can communicate telepathically, right?”

Garcia nodded, resisting the urge to cry. His renewed wanting for Troi was even more intense now that he had so callously put a wall between them. And now it was looking like he, or ‘Sonny,’ was going to have to open up to her, at least partially, once again. Naturally, he would have to restrict the flow of information to maintain the timeline, which would only reinforce her perception of him as not being completely honest with her. Suddenly he realized that if this had already happened, then she knew things about him that she hadn’t revealed. And she had the nerve to accuse him of withholding secrets! What did Sonny tell her? He just couldn’t win! He was destined to continually drive a wedge between them, sabotaging any hope of them ever being a couple. He was going to have to find another obsession than Deanna Troi. They spoke for an hour and just as things appeared to be winding down, Picard changed the subject.

“One more thing, Captain,” Picard said. “The Preserver Manifestation Orbs that we were taking to a research facility came up missing. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

“No,” Garcia said.

“Thank you,” Picard said. “That will be all.”



Garcia returned to the Path Finder, beaming directly from Picard’s quarters to his quarters where he proceeded in changing into his Path Finder’s uniform. While he changed, he contacted Kitara and told her to proceed back to Sherman’s Planet so they could release their Maquis, now that sufficient time had passed to make it appear they had traveled from Cardassia to Sherman’s. Outside his window, he saw the Enterprise jump to warp. The Enterprise would still make it to their rendezvous point on schedule, and then from there, off to drop Star and her team off on some mission of such Galactic importance, they couldn’t tell Garcia. What could be so important?

The Path Finder went to warp. Apparently Kitara did not feel the urgency to use the transwarp drive. The stars streamed by his window, broken down into their spectral patterns. Troi was gone, perhaps forever. And it was his fault.

His mental version of Troi appeared. “You still have me,” the rogue program Troi said.

“Gee, thanks,” Garcia said. “That just makes my world so much better.”

Garcia plopped himself down on the bed, contemplating taking a nap. The rogue Troi programmed climbed in bed with him, kissing him lightly on the neck. He ignored her affections and stared at the ceiling.

“You know you can’t resist me,” the Rouge Troi said, teasing him.

The door chime rang.

“Come in,” Garcia said, inviting whoever it was. Rogue Troi said, “Go away.”

The door opened to reveal Trini and Undine. Neither commented on the rogue Troi program in bed with him, nor did they come in.

“We would like you to come with us, please,” Undine said, not entering.

“Me or Troi?” Garcia asked.

“They didn’t come for me,” Troi said, sulking.

Garcia looked to Trini, tilting his head slightly. “What’s wrong? Oh, don’t tell me. Someone else has shown up wanting a fight.”

“No, sir, no immediate threats or fights,” Undine said.

Garcia looked back to Lt. Sookanan. “Trini?”

“It wasn’t my idea, sir,” Trini said.

Troi laughed. “They’re throwing you a surprise birthday!”

“Oh, bloody hell, no,” Garcia said, shaking his head.

“You must attend your birthday party,” Undine said.

“I gave very strict orders that there will be no surprise celebrations of my birthday or any other events to mark the occasion,” Garcia said. “Trini, you know I don’t hold this.”

“I know,” Trini said.

“And yet, you allowed this to go forwards?” Garcia asked.

“Sir, you will attend this party and you will act surprised,” Undine said, matter of fact.

“Excuse me?” Garcia asked.

“Sounds like she’s giving you an order,” Troi said. “Come on. It will be fun. Especially if you get drunk and get into a fight with a Klingon.”

“It was Tama Orleans and Niki’s idea,” Trini said. “They put it all together, invited certain folks on the ship, and they solicited us to bring you under the guise of important work.”

“Oh, bloody hell,” Garcia said.

“Your daughter wanted to thank you and do something nice for you,” Trini said. “She knows how much stress you’ve been under, all the trouble you went through to get her back safely, and Niki is of the same mind set. They didn’t know you would object and quite frankly, I think you should let them do this for you.”

“You’re absolutely right, Trini,” Garcia said, sighing, resigned to the fact that birthdays were not always about the person holding them as much as it was for those who loved the person it was held for. “Let’s go get this done. Where are they holding it?”

“On the New Constitution. All the guests will be in holodeck two. We will arrive through the Gateway on holodeck one, which has been tied in tandem with two in order to allow you to interact with Persis and Tama Orleans without having to take your antidote,” Undine said. “Everything has been arranged and planned out, with the exception of the final detail of bringing you along peacefully.”

“Sorry, Troi. I guess you’ll have to take a rain check,” Garcia said.

“The story of my life,” Troi said. “Funny, you can’t have the real Troi, and the fake Troi can’t have you. How’s that for irony for you?”

Garcia shook his head as he headed for the door. “Lead on,” Garcia instructed his two officers.

Garcia accompanied Undine and Trini back to the Gateway where they crossed over to the New Constitution. They found themselves in what appeared to be a twentieth century karaoke bar. It was dimly lit and apparently empty of people. That was because

all the people were in holodeck two waiting to surprise him. No doubt they were watching him even as he stood there, taking in the scene.

Garcia turned to Lt. Undine. "Has someone altered my war game program?"

And then everyone appeared, shouting surprise and congratulations. They didn't appear the same way a transporter appeared, they appeared suddenly, in the manner of an object being projected by the holographic emitters. The crowd was all trickery of light, but if Garcia wanted, he could embrace them and the computer would make them tangible. In the other room, he was visible to them and he could be touched in the same manner. Tama Orleans and Niki rushed him and hugged him fiercely. He allowed himself to be led to the table of honor. Persis sat next to him on his right. Rivan was on his left and Ori was on her left. Kitara stood across the way. She saluted him with her glass of blood wine.

"What can I get you to drink?" Tama Orleans asked.

"Um," Garcia pretended to think about it, as if he were still surprised. "A root beer float?"

Tama Orleans nodded and rushed off to fetch it.

"Thank you for rescuing me," Niki said. "Us."

"You're most welcome," Garcia told her.

Nancy and Boris came up to the table to shake hands with him. Sendak took a seat to the right of Persis. Garcia noticed Persis touch Sendak's arm affectionately, greeting him as he talked to Boris, kissing him lightly on the cheek; it was just a mild interruption for the Vulcan, who acknowledged her presence and then returned his attention back to Boris. Tama Orleans returned with his drink, beaming.

"I hope you like it," Tama Orleans said. "We tried to find everything that might be associated with a twentieth century, Americanized karaoke bar."

"Everything is very nice," Garcia said.

"And now, it's time for your present," Tama Orleans said.

"Really, you don't have to give me anything," Garcia said.

"I'm going to sing for you," Tama Orleans said.

Garcia was taken aback, genuinely surprised. "I thought you said you can't sing," Garcia said.

"She can't," Niki said, saying it in such a way as to confirm Tama Orleans lack of ability, but not in a way that was intended to be hurtful. "Trust me on that, but I found a song that even she couldn't mess up. You know how Morrissey was tone deaf and yet he still contributed to the music of the 80's and early 90's? Well, I taught Tama Orleans a Morrissey song."

Garcia presented both hands, asking her nonverbally to proceed. Tama Orleans took the small stage, pressed the play on the karaoke machine, and Niki sat nearby giving her moral support and encouragement. What Tama didn't know, and Garcia quickly figured out, was that Niki was also aiding by subtly changing the music to meet Tama Orleans lack of rhythm and pitch so that the end result was quite passable to everyone in attendance, except Garcia. He did not let on that he knew just how badly it was. Ori lost interest in her food and went to dance as the music played out.

Tama Orleans sang 'Ouija board' by Morrissey, giving it a bit of a 'punk' edge which was Niki's influence, as well as changing the feminine to masculine so that it was as if Tama Orleans was singing for a lost love, or perhaps for Garcia himself:

Ouija board
Would you work for me ?
I have got to say hello
To an old friend

Ouija board, ouija board, ouija board
Would you work for me ?
I have got to get through
To a good friend
Well, she has now gone
From this unhappy planet
With all the carnivores
And the destructors of it

Ouija board, ouija board, ouija board
Would you help me ?
Because I still do feel
So horribly lonely

Would you, ouija board
Would you, ouija board
Would you help me ?
And I just can't find
My place in this world

She has now gone
From this unhappy planet
With all the carnivores
And the destructors of it

Oh hear my voice (hear my voice)
Oh hear my voice (hear my voice)
Hear my voice (hear my voice)
Hear my voice (hear my voice)
The table is rumbling ...
The table is rumbling
The glass is moving
No, I was not pushing that time
It spells : s.t.e.v.e.n

The table is rumbling
The glass is moving
No, I was not pushing that time :
P.u.s.h.o. double f.

Well, she has now gone
From this unhappy planet
With all the carnivores
And the destructors of it

While Tama was singing, the bar tender for this particular program pulled up a seat next to Garcia and sat down. He was listening intently to the singer and shaking his head, sadly.

“She’s got a rough road ahead of her,” the bar tender said.

“Excuse me?” Garcia asked, giving his attention to the bar tender.

The man was green, but not like Ori was green. At closer inspection, his skin seemed to be comprised of scales. The horns on his head were also not typical of an Orion. And, given the time frame the karaoke bar came from, Earth wouldn't have known about Orions and so, he could only imagine that it was a 'trick or treat' costume. It made sense since his birthday translated into Earth time to be in October.

"It's what I do. I give readings for people who sing," the bar tender said. "I thought that was why you summoned me."

"Summoned you?" Garcia asked, returning his attention back to Tama Orleans. He smiled at her.

"You know, I don't appreciate being kidnapped at the best of times, but the least you could do since you went through all the trouble and magic to summon me here is acknowledge me," he said. He grimaced, hearing exactly what Garcia heard. "Whatever your friend did to fool the others wasn't enough to help me. She can't sing worth crap."

"What?" Garcia almost snapped. He managed to keep his voice down.

"I mean, no offense, I've heard worse," he said. "Much worse. I'd prefer her and this song to any of those others. It's just, you would think she would have gotten some music ability from you."

Garcia shot him a look. "Identify yourself," Garcia said.

"Lorne, at your service," the demon extended a hand.

"Are you real or a holographic projection?" Garcia asked.

"Are any of us real?" Lorne asked, sipping at a drink intended for a customer.

The song ended and everyone applauded. Garcia stood, applauding, and then welcomed Tama Orleans into his arms as she approached seeking his approval and acknowledgment.

"Thank you for singing for me," Garcia said. "I know how hard it was for you to do that in front of an audience. You are one brave girl."

"I love you," Tama Orleans said, crying against him.

Lorne stood up and gave Tama Orleans his chair. "What would you like to drink, my lady?"

"I want what Garcia's having," Tama Orleans said.

"I'll be right back," Lorne said.

Niki took the stage, drawing a guitar out of thin air, using holodeck magic. "And this is my present to Captain Garcia. His new theme song, Kryptonite, by Three Doors Down..."

Garcia felt a hand on his and he turned to see Persis. She sat in his lap and leaned into him, whispering "thank you," in his ear. She put her arms around him and hugged him fiercely. "And, happy birthday."

Everyone present took a turn singing karaoke style, choosing twentieth century music to play along with the night's theme. There were a few Officer's that were really quite good, but most were average. Only a few were really awful, but what made it worse was that they were awful in the way that no one had ever told them just how awful, which made it down right dreadful to those listening, as they unashamedly and un-timidly belted out their songs. Garcia hugged Tama Orleans to reassure her. Losira appeared and approached Garcia.

"May I participate?" Losira asked.

"Sure," Garcia said. "You want a chair? Something to eat?"

“I want to sing,” Losira said.

“You know twentieth century music?” Tama Orleans asked.

“I know everything,” Losira said, matter of fact. “I’m the ship’s computer. I know everything in my memory banks. I know everything in Garcia’s memory banks. And I have even chosen my own theme song.”

Garcia invited her to proceed. Losira took the stage with power, ready to outshine everyone who had sung so far. She picked a song by No Doubt, ‘Underneath it All,’ and she played it up good, being sexy, sultry, and was almost too much, but she definitely appeared to be enjoying herself.

There's times where I want something more
Someone more like me
There's times when this dress rehearsal
Seems incomplete
But, you see the colors in me like no one else
And behind your dark glasses you're...
You're something else

You're really lovely
Underneath it all
You want to love me
Underneath it all
I'm really lucky
Underneath it all
You're really lovely

You know some real bad tricks
And you need some discipline
But, lately you've been trying real hard
And giving me your best
And, you give me the most gorgeous sleep
That I've ever had
And when it's really bad
I guess it's not that bad

(chorus)

So many moons that we have seen
Stumbling back next to me
I've seen right through and underneath
And you make me better
I've seen right through and underneath
And you make me better
Better... better...

[Lady Saw:]

You are my real Prince Charmin'
Like the heat from the fire
You were always burnin'
And each time you're around
My body keeps stalin'
For your touch
Your kisses and your sweet romancin'
There's an underside to you

That so many adore
Aside from your temper
Everything else secure
You're good for me, baby
Oh that, I'm sure
Over and over again
I want more

[Gwen:]
You've used up all your coupons
And all you've got left is me
And somehow I'm full of forgiveness
I guess it's meant to be

You're really lovely
Underneath it all
You want to love me
Underneath it all
I'm really lovely
Underneath it all
And you're really lovely

“Wow,” Tama Orleans said. “I think the ship’s computer is in love with you, Dad.”

“Dad?” Garcia repeated. He laughed. “Dad is the nicest present ever. Thank you, Tama Orleans.”

Rivan leaned into Garcia as the next person started to sing. “You sure managed to avoid that conversation,” Rivan said, referring to Tama Orlean’s observation that the ship’s computer was indeed in love with him.

Ori pulled Garcia up from his chair, wanting him to dance with her. He complied and soon, all the tables were being erased one by one to make more room for the dancers. Garcia was surprised by the fact that Sendak and Persis danced together. First, he was surprised that Sendak could dance at all; it was stiff, and robotic, as if each movement had to be logical, but it surprisingly fit the music. It was the fact that it was Persis and Sendak dancing together that had reminded him of his rivalry for her when they were younger. Indeed, Garcia had to work hard at suppressing his jealousy that had been growing since Persis had kissed Sendak earlier. He knew where it came from, but it made no sense for him to feel this way. Persis was free of any obligation to him, beside the fact that she was still married to a Deltan, and though that didn’t have the same boundaries that human marriages often came with; he had no claim of her. And he knew that he should be the last person to be affected by petty jealousies considering his nature.

The song changed, distracting him from his emotional tangent. Kitara actually found a song that she was willing to give a try. It was a punk rock song which fit her perfectly. After that, someone asked Garcia to sing a song to close out the evening, and then two people, and then everyone chanted for Garcia to sing. He conceded and took the stage, contemplating what song would be fitting. And did it have to fit? Could it just be any song? He was saved from the dilemma by Niki picking up her guitar and started playing a little rift. He recognized it and looked to her, for she had already performed it earlier in the evening.

“It’s your theme song, you might as well sing it, too,” Niki said, starting the intro to the song over so that he could start the song right.

“Kryptonite, performed by Three Doors Down,” Garcia said, getting in his recognition to the artist who performed hundreds of years before he was even born, and then committed himself to the song.

I took a walk around the world to
Ease my troubled mind
I left my body laying somewhere
In the sands of time
I watched the world float to the dark
Side of the moon
I feel there is nothing I can do, yeah

I watched the world float to the
Dark side of the moon
After all I knew it had to be something
To do with you
I really don’t mind what happens now and then
As long as you’ll be my friend at the end

If I go crazy then will you still
Call me Superman
If I’m alive and well, will you be
There holding my hand
I’ll keep you by my side with
My superhuman might
Kryptonite

You called me strong, you called me weak,
But still your secrets I will keep
You took for granted all the times I
Never let you down
You stumbled in and bumped your head, if
Not for me then you would be dead
I picked you up and put you back
On solid ground

If I go crazy then will you still
Call me Superman
If I’m alive and well, will you be
There holding my hand
I’ll keep you by my side with my
Superhuman might
Kryptonite

If I go crazy then will you still
Call me Superman
If I’m alive and well, will you be
There holding my hand
I’ll keep you by my side with my
Superhuman might
Kryptonite

Yeah!

If I go crazy then will you still
Call me Superman

If I'm alive and well, will you be there
Holding my hand
I'll keep you by my side with
My superhuman might
Kryptonite

When everyone demanded an encore, Garcia conceded. He started playing a riff which he repeated to give Niki a chance to realize what he was about, and then he started to sing: "Once in a Life Time," by Talking Heads:

And you may find yourself living in a shotgun shack
And you may find yourself in another part of the world
And you may find yourself behind the wheel of a large automobile
And you may find yourself in a beautiful house, with a beautiful
Wife
And you may ask yourself-well...how did I get here?

Letting the days go by/let the water hold me down
Letting the days go by/water flowing underground
Into the blue again/after the moneys gone
Once in a lifetime/water flowing underground.

And you may ask yourself
How do I work this?
And you may ask yourself
Where is that large automobile?
And you may tell yourself
This is not my beautiful house!
And you may tell yourself
This is not my beautiful wife!

Letting the days go by/let the water hold me down
Letting the days go by/water flowing underground
Into the blue again/after the moneys gone
Once in a lifetime/water flowing underground.

Same as it ever was...same as it ever was...same as it ever was...
Same as it ever was...same as it ever was...same as it ever was...
Same as it ever was...same as it ever was...

Water dissolving...and water removing
There is water at the bottom of the ocean
Carry the water at the bottom of the ocean
Remove the water at the bottom of the ocean!

Letting the days go by/let the water hold me down
Letting the days go by/water flowing underground
Into the blue again/in the silent water
Under the rocks and stones/there is water underground.

Letting the days go by/let the water hold me down
Letting the days go by/water flowing underground
Into the blue again/after the moneys gone
Once in a lifetime/water flowing underground.

And you may ask yourself
What is that beautiful house?
And you may ask yourself
Where does that highway go?
And you may ask yourself
Am I right? ...am I wrong?
And you may tell yourself
My god!...what have I done?

Letting the days go by/let the water hold me down
Letting the days go by/water flowing underground
Into the blue again/in the silent water
Under the rocks and stones/there is water underground.

Letting the days go by/let the water hold me down
Letting the days go by/water flowing underground
Into the blue again/after the moneys gone
Once in a lifetime/water flowing underground.

Same as it ever was...same as it ever was...same as it ever was...
Same as it ever was...same as it ever was...same as it ever was...
Look where my hand was
Time isn't after us, time isn't holding us
Same as it ever was...same as it ever was...

Niki and Tama Orleans were his most vocal supporters, as they all demanded another tune. Ori looked at him as is she had connected to him on a deeper level. Music drove her world. Even Rivian seemed impressed, but to him, all he was doing was performing other people's songs. These bits of history were guaranteed success: once a hit, always a hit. Good music was simply not limited by time, place, or culture.

"Alright, but this is the last one. And then, I'm calling it a night. 'Don't stop me now,' by Queen," Garcia said. He looked to Niki motioning for her to continue to sing back up. Niki nodded and followed his cues, adding to the mix the computer offered. Using his implant Garcia was also able to use the computer to add his own voice for further back up at the appropriate places.

tonight i'm gonna have myself a real good time
i feel alive and the world turning inside out yeah
and floating around in ecstasy
so don't stop me now don't stop me
'cause i'm having a good time having a good time

i'm a shooting star leaping through the sky
like a tiger defying the laws of gravity
i'm a racing car passing by like lady godiva
i'm gonna go go go
there's no stopping me

i'm burning through the sky yeah
two hundred degrees
that's why they call me mister fahrenheit
i'm trav'ling at the speed of light
i wanna make a supersonic man out of you

don't stop me now i'm having such a good time

i'm having a ball don't stop me now
if you wanna have a good time just give me a call
don't stop me now 'cause i'm havin' a good time
don't stop me now yes i'm havin' a good time
i don't want to stop at all

i'm a rocket ship on my way to mars
on a collision course
i am a satellite i'm out of control
i am a sex machine ready to reload
like an atom bomb about to
oh oh oh oh oh explode

i'm burning through the sky yeah
two hundred degrees
that's why they call me mister fahrenheit
i'm trav'ling at the speed of light
i wanna make a supersonic woman of you

don't stop me don't stop me
don't stop me hey hey hey
don't stop me don't stop me ooh ooh ooh i like it
don't stop me don't stop me
have a good time good time
don't stop me don't stop me ah

i'm burning through the sky yeah
two hundred degrees
that's why they call me mister fahrenheit
i'm trav'ling at the speed of light
i wanna make a supersonic man out of you

don't stop me now i'm having such a good time
i'm having a ball don't stop me now
if you wanna have a good time just give me a call
don't stop me now 'cause i'm havin' a good time
don't stop me now yes i'm havin' a good time
i don't want to stop at all

Everyone applauded his performance, histrionics included, with the exception of Lorne who still seemed as if he were in a trance, staring at Garcia. Garcia bowed, and then in no uncertain words, "Duty shift, back to work. Everyone else, carry on. Good night, folks. Computer, sever the connection between holodecks."

And Garcia was suddenly alone with Trini, Undine, and Lorne. "We really need to talk," Lorne said, but Garcia terminated the program and the holodeck was wiped clean. He sighed a tremendous sigh.

"See, that wasn't so bad," Trini said.

"I hate celebrating birthdays," Garcia said.

"Not true," Trini said. "You just hate celebrating yours."

"Why is that?" Undine asked.

"He had a bad birthday once," Trini said.

"Who hasn't?" Undine asked.

"I would rather not discuss this," Garcia said.

"But you looked so happy," Trini said.

Garcia considered her statement. "I am happy, Trini," Garcia said and hugged her. He went to shake hands with Undine but she pulled him into an embrace, hugging him as if he were family.

"Thank you. Thank you both. I'll be in my quarters if anyone needs me. Try not to need me for about six hours."

Garcia left the two standing in the holodeck as he made a quick departure. If he hurried, he might make it to his quarters before any of the other party goers sought him out to give him more private complements. He had no such luck. Tomoko caught him in the corridor. "Could you sign these, please?"

"Sure," Garcia said, accepting the PADD from her. He noticed she was looking at him oddly.

"You do seem very much happier than you have been," Tomoko said.

"I have less on my plate to stress about," Garcia said. "And, over all, it's been a good day."

"Happy birthday," Tomoko said.

"It was, thank you," Garcia said.

"Since you had such a good time, perhaps you would rescind the directive to not hold your birthday party," Tomoko said.

"Let's not push our happiness, quotient, eh?" Garcia said, handing her the PADD back. "Anything else?"

"Not unless you want to come to my quarters with me for a night cap?" Tomoko offered, completely unashamed by her directness. She had hinted around several times, but decided direct would work better.

"You flirt more shamelessly than I do," Garcia said.

Tomoko only beamed at him.

"Not tonight, but thank you," Garcia said.

"What else is a Captain's Yeoman good for?" Tomoko asked.

Garcia opened his mouth to respond and then decided it was best to close his mouth with no comment delivered. He nodded. She laughed at his discomfort, touched his arm, and then went about her business. Garcia shook his head and proceeded on. Tatiana met him at the lift. She hesitated.

"It's alright," Garcia said.

Tatiana joined him in the lift. The doors closed. She stared at the doors as she said, "It was incredibly selfish of me."

"It was," Garcia said.

Tatiana broke down into tears. Garcia stopped the lift and embraced her.

"It wasn't a condemnation. I do incredibly selfish things all the time," Garcia said. "In fact, there are quite a few people who think I'm only capable of selfish acts."

"I love you so much," Tatiana said. "I can't stand it."

Garcia kissed her. The kiss didn't last and ended up with them just holding each other for a moment, and then Tatiana separated herself from him, straightened her uniform, and then she had the lift resume its pace towards the destination.

"Thank you, Tam," Tatiana said.

Garcia couldn't think of a response to her gratitude. "Anytime" sounded too quaint and "you're welcome" too cold. Instead of a verbal response, he touched her, placing a hand on the back her neck, brushing her hair aside to do so. The door opened

and she departed quickly. Garcia rubbed his forehead. Maybe this was why there were so many rules governing relationships. People were a mess at the best of times. And here he was juggling relationships trying to keep everyone happy, which was an impossibility. Philosophically he knew everyone was responsible for their own happiness, but he still felt as if he should do something to make everything better. Then again, the stereotypical masculine response to any crisis was to act, to fix something. And in this particular situation “something” wasn’t necessarily broke. Maybe he just needed to let Tatiana find her own way.

Garcia arrived at his quarters and found Rivan waiting for him. He offered her a smile. “So, where’s your side kick?”

“Ori?” Rivan asked, chuckling. “I took her to my quarters where she went right to sleep.”

“Probably all the carbs and sugars she ate,” Garcia said, going to the replicator. He ordered up his standard oral hygiene rinse and tooth brush, already doctored with tooth paste, a side dish of floss of a predetermined length, and a laser razor. “And the dancing.”

“Probably,” Rivan agreed, moving closer to Garcia while she scrutinized him as he proceeded with one of his nightly rituals. Since she had joined the Garcia commune, Garcia had repaired several of her teeth and taught her the best oral hygiene practices, which were centuries old, tried and true. Though modern dentistry could fix any problem, there was still no substitute to solid maintenance, discipline and consistency. He put all the used materials back into the replicator to be recycled, spit the mouth rinse in the sink, washed the sink, and dried his hands and wiped his mouth on a towel. Shaving was as simple as running the laser over his face. She made no secret that she was fascinated by his grooming rituals, as her father had died when she was young and she had missed out on watching rituals. She leaned against the wall and didn’t speak again until he had finished. “Tam, would you be willing to do something for me?”

Garcia found the question a bit odd, but answered, “Well, sure. Anything,” he said, recycling the laser razor in the replicator. He applied some lotion to his face.

Rivan pursed her lips and looked at the floor. Garcia touched her chin and lifted gently until her eyes met his.

“You know I hate it when women don’t maintain eye contact. What is it?” Garcia asked.

“Would you massage my feet?” Rivan asked.

Garcia laughed out loud. Rivan didn’t cry but the expression on her face suggested she was pained. Garcia drew her suddenly to him, realizing his social faux pas had hurt her. “Oh, I’m sorry, Rivan. I wasn’t laughing at you,” Garcia assured her, sweeping her off her feet and carrying her to the bed. He set her down gently. “I just thought you were going to ask something serious of me, the way you started out with a question.”

“Well,” Rivan began, watching curiously as Garcia went to the replicator.

“Lotion,” Garcia ordered. “A base, with peppermint, lavender, and chamomile, standard skin nutrient, vitamin E, and moisturizer, inside an applicator.” He collected the applicator and returned to the bed. “Well what?”

“Well, it’s just, you’ve never really initiated touch with me that it didn’t lead to intimacy, and though I’m not trying to discourage it going that direction, I’m just kind of tired and wanted...” Rivan started but didn’t finish.

“Shh, it is okay, Rivan,” Garcia said, sitting at the foot of the bed. He made himself comfortable and took Rivan’s feet into his lap. “Contrary to popular belief, I can engage in touch without it leading to sex. I am a license masseuse, among other things.”

Garcia closed his eyes, put his hands together in a ‘namaste’ hand gesture, and raised the temperature of his hands by merely thinking, relaxing, allowing more blood to flow towards his hands. He dispensed some lotion into his hands, warmed it, and then proceeded to massage her feet, stroking from toe to heel with his thumbs, using tiny circular motion to help stimulate blood circulation that would allow her own body to warm her foot. The goal was to bring it up to the same temperature as his hands. From that step he rolled easily into ankle rotation, toe pull and squeeze, toe slides, and then back to stroking. He noticed Rivan was about to drift off to sleep.

“Rivan,” Garcia said gently. She opened her eyes. “It’s best if you stay awake.”

“Why?” Rivan asked, her voice sounded sleepy. “It feels so nice.”

“Because when you sleep the brain disconnected from the body’s muscles and the muscles go completely relaxed,” Garcia said. “To reap the full benefits of the massage, it is necessary for the mind to stay engaged to the body so that the muscles are properly de-stressed, the nerves appropriately stimulated, and so the mind can acknowledge the comfort and cause the brain to release the proper amount of endorphins.”

“I never knew it was so complicated,” Rivan said. “No one ever cared if I feel asleep during a massage before. Oh, that’s nice. And I like the smell of peppermint. Is that the ingredient that is causing my feet to tingle?”

“One of the ingredients,” Garcia said. “If you want to fall asleep, you can. We can always do another session.”

Rivan smiled at that. “You would be willing?”

“Please, Rivan. You’re my friend, you’re my lover, you’re the mother of my child to be, you’re helping me with Ori and Karsat’s kids... There is proven medical benefit to doing this for you, for the unborn baby, and even for me,” Garcia said. “I think I can do this much for you.”

“But you’re the Captain,” Rivan said. “You have so much to do and think on. It just doesn’t seem right.”

“All the more reason why I should do this more often for you,” Garcia said. “Like I said, it’s good for me, too. It generates oxytocin, a hormone that helps people bond. It relaxes me, it relaxes you, and it just fosters good health in general. You wouldn’t want to rob me of a chance to do a good deed and improve my health at the same time, now would you?”

Rivan shook her head.

“Anything else on your mind?” Garcia asked.

“It’s just that I’ve missed you,” Rivan said. “I know things were pretty hectic there for a little bit, but I was worried for you, and I was being selfish, wanting more of your time than you had to spare. I’m glad you found Tama Orleans. She’s really beautiful.”

“She is,” Garcia said.

“You think our child will be equally beautiful?” Rivan asked.

“I think between your health, beauty and smarts and my smarts, we’ll have a healthy, handsome, intelligent baby,” Garcia assured her.

“I’m thinking Alena if she’s a girl,” Rivan said. “Or Larisa. If it’s a boy, I would like Sidney. Or Timothy. Those are good Earth names, right?”

“They’re very good names,” Garcia said.

There was a moment of silence, where Rivan was motionless, but also trying not to fall asleep. “I’ve been meaning to ask you if you’ve seen my bracelet. I thought I left it on this nightstand, but I haven’t seen it in days,” Rivan said.

“Sorry, I haven’t seen it,” Garcia said.

“If it falls on the floor, would the automatic cleaner pick it up?” Rivan said.

“Yeah,” Garcia said. “We’ll look for it tomorrow.”

There was another ten minutes of silence that Rivan nearly fell asleep, jerking her head back each time it started to fall to one side. Garcia repositioned himself on the bed and Rivan thought perhaps he was through, but he took her hand and massaged her hand and arm. After ten minutes on that arm, he moved to her other side and massaged the right arm and hand as well. Then he returned to her feet and massaged her calves and her thighs.

“Roll over on your side,” Garcia instructed.

Rivan rolled over and he proceeded to massage the back of her legs and thighs and then moved to her back and neck. After she fell asleep, he continued to massage her back lightly for a few more minutes, wondering if it was just a short nap and she would snap right out of it. When she didn’t wake and she gave signs that she was going only deeper into a solid sleep cycle, he eased up, so as the sudden cessation of physical touch wouldn’t wake her. He put a pillow between her legs for added comfort, and then brought the blanket up to cover her. He lay beside her, staring at the ceiling. He matched his breathing to hers, observing every quality of her he could identify, from look to smell, to feel. He wondered where Samuel Clemmons was and he did a search with his implant and found that it was in Persis’ quarters, curled up beside Tama Orleans. He directed the computer to turn off the lights via his implant and then he fell asleep beside Rivan.

CHAPTER THIRTYONE

Losira beamed into Garcia's quarters and found him asleep next to Rivan. She turned on the lights and went to his side, shaking him.

"Captain, you have to get up," Losira said.

Garcia opened and his eyes and sat up. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Brock is calling for you," Losira said. "Sherman's Planet is under attack."

Garcia hopped up, retrieved his Orbs from the cabinet, and was activating them even as he was heading out his door. Losira followed. The Manifestation Orbs floated up and away from Garcia and suddenly Duana and Ilona was at his side. "Losira, I want Path Finder ready to jump, I'll be there in a moment. Also, contact Captain Glor and Captain Gowr, have them jump to Sherman's Planet."

Garcia came around the corner the same time Kitara, Undine, and Trini did, both heading for the Gate. They each were accompanied by a Losira agent of their own, but since four wasn't necessary, three of them vanished in favor of Garcia's Losira agent. They entered the holodeck and found the Gateway already opened. Tatiana went to attention.

"All of Path Finder's crew is on board," Tatiana said. "We're ready to jump at your command."

Garcia led the way through the Gate. As soon as they crossed over, Garcia called up to the Bridge: "Helm, take us there," he ordered. The Gate closed behind them

McKnight answered. "Sir, transwarp jump in four, three, two," McKnight counted down.

Garcia felt the uneasiness of his stomach and knew that they were on their way. Of course, by the time he had noticed he was sick, it usually meant that they had arrived, in which case, he only had to wait a moment for his stomach to settle. He ignored it, as he always did. Trini and Tatiana were not so lucky. Losira provided them air sickness bags and warm towels, delivered to her hands via the site to site replicator. Garcia touched Tatiana's back, reassuringly. Kitara appeared to be managing her symptoms. As soon as his two friends had recovered, Garcia turned to his computer's avatar.

"Losira, beam us to the Bridge," Garcia ordered. And then they were on the Bridge.

Kitara went straight way to her station to assess the situation. "Sherman's Planet is currently being bombarded from orbit," she said. "I count fifteen, no... Seventeen Cardassian warships."

"Red Alert, battle stations," Garcia ordered. "Shields up, take us in."

"Captain," Trini called. "Glor and Gowr have arrived. They're sending telemetry, and signify they'll coordinate with you."

"Kitara, advised them through Losira," Garcia said, assigning two of his personal monitors to provide him with the telemetry of the two ships. "Trini, hail the Cardassians."

Garcia glanced at the main viewer and then focused on his own personal tactical display. He 'boxed' some information, using his fingers on the monitor, and shifted the box to another monitor, rotating and magnifying.

“Captain,” Kitara said. “The Cardassian fleet’s formation has changed. They’re heading for us.”

“No response to the hail,” Trini said.

“Losira, activate AP defense, and I want holographic orbiting projectiles around us,” Garcia ordered. “Kitara, arm photon torpedoes and fire at will. Trini, contact Star Fleet and inform them of our situation. We’re going to need assistance.”

The Cardassian ships were rallying around a large ship; one that was not visible to the scanners, but was clearly there on the main viewer. Garcia noticed it first. He came full out of his chair, familiar with the ship and design.

“Shields to full, now,” Garcia said.

“What is it?” Kitara asked, having never seen such a ship.

“It’s a Kelvan scout ship,” Garcia said. “Ignore the Cardassians. Focus all fire power on the Kelvan ship.”

“Torpedoes are away,” Kitara announced. The torpedoes aim was true, but they disappeared before coming into contact with the Kelvan vessel.

“They beamed the torpedoes away?” McKnight asked.

“That, or changed them into something mute,” Garcia said.

“Firing phasers,” Kitara announced.

“They won’t have any effect,” Garcia said.

“Why haven’t they returned fired?” Tuer said.

“They’re probably trying to beam through our shields or incapacitate us using their Kelvan technology,” Garcia said, thankful that the upgrades to his shields were functioning as expected. “I’ll need access to the Kelvan computer to verify.”

“Absolutely not,” Kitara said.

“The only way to battle the Kelvan is with Kelvan technology,” Garcia protested.

A beam of energy issued forth from the Kelvan scout ship and caused half of the Path Finder’s shields to fluoresce as it worked overtime to dissipate the energy.

“I guess their normal tactics aren’t working,” Tuer said.

“Shields are holding,” Undine announced.

“Thank god for Gray upgrades,” Trini said.

“Put some Cardassian ships between us and the Kelvan,” Garcia ordered. “And start taking some of them out.”

The Path Finder rocked as it rushed away from the Kelvan ship and pushed back through the Cardassian Armada. Its shields became saturated with energy as the enemy lobbed volley after volley of torpedoes and unleashed a storm of phasers.

“The shields are still holding,” Undine said. “However, at the current energy saturation rate we will have to withdraw, or we won’t be able to see through our own shields.”

“We’re not withdrawing. Kitara, find me the Cardassian flag ship,” Garcia said.

“On it,” Kitara said.

“A ship has broken off their attack and is heading back towards the planet,” Sendak said. “They’re firing a torpedo. Captain, it’s an antimatter bomb!”

“Can we intercept?” Garcia demanded.

“Negative,” Kitara said.

Garcia ripped the Velcro off his chair’s handgrips so that he could access the Kelvin technology. Nothing happened.

“No,” Kitara said.

“There is still time!” Garcia demanded.

“No,” Undine and Kitara both said.

“Damn it!” Garcia raged, standing. He pointed at the ship that had launched the bomb. “Take that ship out of the game, now!”

McKnight accelerated towards the Cardassian bomber. Another brilliant flash planet side marked another missing city, vaporized. The Path Finder rocked as the Cardassian Armada concentrated their entire fire power on them. The shields were glowing so intensely that the viewer was whiting out.

“Target acquisition failing, unable to get a lock,” Kitara said.

“Best shot,” Garcia said. “Fire!”

The torpedo departed the Path Finder, only to disintegrate the moment it passed through the shields. Garcia turned to his telemetry feeds from the Pa Nun and Tempest only to find they had faded from the screen, too much interference.

“Torpedoes are ineffective,” Sendak said. “They’re detonating as soon as they pass through the shields. Too much radiation.”

“Phasers!” Garcia said.

“Tam, we need to pull back,” Kitara said. “Before we’re completely blinded.”

“Losira, open the Gateway between us and Gowr’s ship,” Garcia ordered. “Trini contact Gowr and tell him to feed us telemetry so we can steer. Advise him to steer us directly into the closest Cardassian ship.”

“That’s suicide!” Kitara said.

“Our shields will hold and with as much radiation as they’re bleeding off, it will burn a hole through their shields and ship before we even make contact,” Garcia said. “I just want a glancing blow.”

“We’re completely blinded,” Kitara said, the sensor completely offline. “Wait, I’ve got telemetry from Gowr. Their shields are holding, but they’ll soon reach their limits and will be blind as well. I have a target closing on us, firing weapons at us.”

“McKnight?” Garcia said.

“Changing course to ram it,” McKnight said.

The Path Finder shuddered as its shields made contact with the Cardassian ship’s shields, but they pushed through it. The Cardassian’s shields failed. The Path Finder’s shield’s came brushed the underside of the Cardassian ship, leaving a huge, molten scar as if a giant arc welder had torched the hull. In some places the shields pushed through the ship entirely. A rush of atmosphere escaped, scattering bits of molten metal like rain drops, as well as debris from the ship

“Shields down ten percent,” Undine announced.

“Ram another one,” Garcia ordered.

“Captain,” Trini said. “The Tempest will be completely blind in twenty seconds.”

“Tell them to fall back until some of the energy has dissipated, we’ll switch the Gate to the Pa Nun,” Garcia said.

The Path Finder rocked as once again it pushed through the shields of another Cardassian warship, and all along its hull where the Path Finder’s shields came into contact with it, the ship ruptured and vented atmosphere. It was a much cleaner line than the previous hit, and the Path Finder came within several meters of actually colliding. As Cardassian ship changed directions to get away, it came into contact with one of the four

Path Finder engine nacelles. Though the inertia dampeners compensated, people were shifted off their feet and out of their chairs.

“Losira, damage report,” Garcia said, pointing to the screen beside him he had dedicated to just that. Losira nodded, giving him a detail report of her own analysis. Department heads were adding their own messages to the list.

“Gowr is hailing us,” Trini said. “The Cardassians are retreating.”

“Put us in orbit,” Garcia directed. “I want us between them and Sherman’s planet.”

“I believe I have identified the Cardassian flag ship,” Kitara said. “Captain Glor is requesting to pursue.”

Garcia turned to one of his tactical screens near his chair and agreed with Kitara’s analysis. The Kelvan ship loomed in the distance no longer engaging in battle. The Cardassians were definitely retreating, grouped in such a way as to protect a certain ship from being destroyed.

“They just want to lure us away from the planet so they can continue their bombing runs,” Garcia said. “I want Glor and Gowr in orbit with us, equal distance. Not another bomb is getting through.”

“Aye,” Kitara said. “We’re going to need another ship to perfect a planetary defense.”

“Contact the T’Pau,” Garcia said. “Have her transwarp jump to our coordinates and take up an orbital position in our chain. How many of them did we take out?”

“Five,” Kitara said. “But all their ships but two sustained damage. No damage to the Kelvan ship, or to the Pan Nun and Tempest.”

“Five? That’s all?” Garcia demanded.

“They’re regrouping just outside of our firing range,” Kitara said, ignoring the question. The new shields worked wonders, but after a certain saturation point of energy they made offense totally impractical. Even the holographic orbiting projectiles had proven useless as a weapon because the shields had bloomed past their radius and the radiation was disrupting the holographic projector’s output.

“We sustained damage to our number four warp nacelle when we rammed the last ship,” Undine said. “Transwarp is offline and so are the transporters, due to feed back that caused an overload in the main transmitter array,” Undine said.

“Captain,” Trini said. “We’re being hailed from the planet. It’s Gul Tormin.”

Garcia was not happy to hear the name again. He stood up.

“Put him on,” Garcia said.

“Sherman’s Planet has been appropriated by the Cardassian government in order to protect itself from the Maquis,” Gul Tormin said. “You will leave this space immediately, or risk war between the Cardassian government and the Federation.”

“We’re not leaving,” Garcia said.

“Captain,” Trini said. “I have Star Fleet.”

Using hand gestures, Garcia communicated to Trini that he wanted her to switch channels, dropping Gul Tormin in favor of Star Fleet. He was disappointed when Admiral Pressman came on.

“Captain Garcia,” Admiral Pressman said. “I want you and your people to fall back, leave Sherman’s system.”

“Are you telling me to abandon these people and allow the Cardassians to continue blasting them from orbit?” Garcia asked.

“The orbiting bombardment will stop as soon as the population is subdued,” Admiral Pressman said.

“Sir, with all due respect, that population of Sherman’s planet has a Klingon cultural influence, and nearly half its citizens are Klingon,” Garcia reminded him. “They won’t surrender.”

“It’s not our problem,” Admiral Pressman said. “Sherman’s planet does not fall under the domain of the Federation.”

“That’s nonsense and you know it,” Garcia said.

“You have your orders,” Admiral Pressman said. “Star Fleet out.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” McKnight said.

“We’re not leaving, are we?” Trini asked.

“No, we’re not leaving,” Garcia said. “Contact the Klingon Empire, maybe they will help us.”

“They will not,” Kitara said. “Ever since Sherman’s planet declared independence, the Klingon government has refused to have anything to do with it.”

“Raise them anyway,” Garcia said, nodding to Trini.

“Sir, I have Brock on channel six,” Trini said.

“Put him on,” Garcia said.

“Garcia! You got to help us!” Brock said.

“What’s your situation?” Garcia asked.

“They have troops on the ground,” Brock said. “Alba City is occupied.”

“Club Bliss?” Garcia asked.

“We’re still outside the occupied zone, and they’re expanding, street by street. There are lots of wounded, and,” Brock grabbed the bar and screamed as the floor rumbled. “They’re firing mortars again!”

“Relax, Brock. Club Bliss has shields,” Garcia said, and then turned to Kitara. “Number One, assemble your best teams. We’re going down through the Gate.”

“You need to stay here,” Kitara said. “I will lead a team and fortify Club Bliss. Perhaps we can contact the local militia and contain the Cardassians at Alba.”

“Go,” Garcia said. He turned to Trini. “Trini, try and contact the local militia and have them fall back to Club Bliss. We’ll make that the rallying point.”

“Aye,” Trini said. She looked up. “Incoming message from the Klingon Empire.”

“On screen,” Garcia said.

Admiral Sheaar appeared. “We cannot send reinforcements at this time,” he said. “You will hold your position there until help arrives or you have eliminated the Cardassian threat.”

“How long until you can send us reinforcements?” Garcia asked.

“You will hold,” Admiral Sheaar said. And then he terminated the call.

Garcia sat down. The tactical screen on his right revealed that Simone’s ship, the T’Pau had arrived and was taking up position in orbit. It would be almost impossible for the Cardassians to get another bomb or ship through their defense, but it also effectively locked them in orbit.

“Gul Tormin wants to speak with you,” Trini said.

“On screen,” Garcia said.

Gul Tormin appeared and smiled. “You have not left orbit,” Gul Tormin said.

“I do not intend to leave until you’re off the planet,” Garcia said.

“We have the right to self defense,” Gul Tormin said. “Your Federation supports that right and has given us latitude to protect ourselves. They have ordered you to leave this system at once.”

“And the Klingons have ordered me to hold. Besides, I know of no treaty between your government and the Federation that condones the use of antimatter bombs on an innocent population,” Garcia said.

“Innocent! The Maquis recently attacked our planet and this place is a hotbed for black market weapons and mercenaries!” Gul Tormin said. “But I’m sure you wouldn’t know anything about that, would you. Bottom line is, I have two hundred thousand warriors planet side and we’re not retreating. If you do not leave, I will be forced to kill the Local government staff and authorities. And if you still remain after that, I will start killing the citizens.”

Garcia stood up and approached the screen. “I guarantee you this,” Garcia said. “You kill any more people, not a single one of you will leave this planet alive.”

Garcia cut him off.

Undine looked at Garcia. “He must be lying about the number of troops. There is no way they brought that many warriors in this fleet.”

“The Kelvan obviously helped them,” Garcia said, tapping his wrist where his bracelet would have normally been. Utilizing the Kelvan technology, the Kelvan on the scout ship could easily reduce two hundred thousand Cardassian soldiers to their essential elements, minus the water, and stack the polyhedron in the cargo holds of each of the ship, and still have room for more. The troops could be reanimated at location or as needed, with no loss of function to the soldiers.

“Kitara is calling,” Trini announced.

“On speaker,” Garcia said. “Go ahead, Number One. What’s the situation?”

“Captain,” Kitara said. “We can hold this position, but we’re going to need more troops if we’re going to drive them back.”

“Admiral Sheaar says we hold,” Garcia said. “We’re going to hold. I’ll see what I can do about getting us some more troops. PF out. Undine, your Bridge.”

Garcia went down to the Brig where his Maquis were still waiting to be released. He went right to Torres’ cell and lowered the shield.

“I need your help,” Garcia said.

Torres laughed at him.

“Sherman’s planet is under attack by the Cardassians,” Garcia said. “They have troops on the ground, and an armada just outside of my firing range. If I leave orbit to engage them, they manage to slip a ship in to bombard the planet. I have four ships in a planetary defensive orbit around Sherman’s Planet to prevent any further bombardment of the planet. Neither Star Fleet nor the Klingon Empire intend to send relief.”

“So, what would you like me to do about it?” Torres asked.

“I want you to contact the Maquis and ask them to send some ships,” Garcia said. “If they will coordinate with me, I have a plan to drive the Cardassians out of this system, or destroy them, whichever comes first.”

“Maybe you should have destroyed the Cardassian home world when you had the chance,” one of the other Maquis said.

Garcia ignored the peanut gallery to his left. “Will you help me?” he asked Torres.

“You have kept me in the Brig for three days and you expect me to believe you, much less help you?” Torres asked.

“I could not allow you free reign of my ship,” Garcia said. “I was going to release you on Sherman’s planet when we arrived, but due to the current situation, that would hardly be considered a friendly gesture.”

“Again, you want me to believe you?” Torres asked.

“I need your help,” Garcia said. “Please.”

“Even if I did believe you,” Torres said. “There is no way to get a signal out of this system to ask for help without the Cardassians being alerted to the fact that the Maquis are coming.”

“Actually, there is. If you will come with me, I’ll show you my secret,” Garcia said.

Torres stood, curious. “Well, it’s not like I had anything better to do,” she said, willing to play along for the moment.

Garcia led Torres to the Shuttle Bay. She didn’t see anything especially interesting along the way that might reveal to her that the Path Finder was special, nor did she see anything of interest in the Shuttle Bay. Garcia retrieved a ring from a pocket and offered it to her.

“What’s this?” Torres asked. “A proposal?”

“Why does everyone say that?” Garcia asked. “Just put it on.”

“It’s a bit large... Oh!” Torres was startled by the ring adjusting its size to fit her finger. She was about to comment on the strange property of the ring when she noticed the Gateway and moved towards it. She didn’t know it was a Gateway, but she did know it had not been visible prior to putting the ring on. Garcia operated the controls that opened the Gate. A shimmering field of light, with the consistency of water, filled the inner area of the large ring that comprised the Gate.

Torres approached cautiously. She examined it closely, looking beyond at what appeared to be another room, separated by a thin membrane of water. Her eyes met Garcia’s eyes. “What is it?”

“It’s a transporter, connected to a secondary transporter via a wormhole. Follow me,” Garcia said, and he stepped through to the New Constitution.

On the other side, he waited patiently for Torres to arrive. Suddenly she was there and the Gate shut itself off. Torres reached through the ring and touched the wall. It appeared to be quite solid.

“We’re on the New Constitution, very close to the Klingon home world,” Garcia said.

“The Klingon home world is nowhere near Sherman’s planet,” Torres argued. “Is this a holodeck?”

“The Gate Room on the NC is in the holodeck,” Garcia said. “Look, this is not a trick.”

“Yeah, right,” Torres said. “You’re trying to get me to reveal my contact so that you can arrest all of us.”

Garcia took her hand. “Torres, I need your help. Contact whoever you want and verify that Sherman’s planet is currently occupied by Cardassians. Then call someone and see if the Maquis will help me. I’ve got to go back. Losira?”

Losira appeared. “Present,” she announced.

“Torres, this is Losira, my ship’s computer interface,” Garcia said. “She will help you with whatever you need. As soon as you have an answer, tell her and she will tell me. If you choose not to help, as soon as the NC arrives at Kronos, you’re free to go. Losira, tell whoever has the Con they have a visitor. She is my guest and will be treated cordially.”

Garcia opened the Gate and stepped through.



Garcia arrived planet side, Iotia. He was immediately met by the Iotian military, their weapons locked, loaded, and safeties off. General Hammond, and a man Garcia knew only as Jay, were the first to greet him, after Hammond realized who it was that was coming to visit that is.

“Stand down, men,” General Hammond ordered, offering his hand to his guest. “Garcia, what brings you back?”

“I need your help,” Garcia said.

“Well, of course, what can we do?” General Hammond asked.

“This is a big thing I’m going to ask,” Garcia said. “An extremely hazardous, war situation has erupted on a planet that I have to defend. I’m on my own and I need a minimum of two hundred of your best soldiers. I’ll compensate you. You want to set up a colony off world, I will help you do that, and I will provide you with tech and training.”

“We’ll help you for free,” Jay said.

“But the tech would be nice,” General Hammond said.

“How soon do we move out?” Jay asked.

“How soon can you be ready?” Garcia asked.

“Two hundred?” General Hammond mused. “Half an hour. Give me an hour, and you can have one thousand of my best.”

“Get me the two hundred to start with, and you can send reinforcements after the hour once we have more intel,” Garcia said. Garcia handed General Hammond a PADD, revealing the Cardassians. “This device can interface with any of your Bluetooth devices in order to copy and disseminate information.” Garcia pushed a button and changed the screen. “These are the enemy we’re facing. These are the weapons they will most likely be using. Bring whatever you have and I will supplement your men with phasers and the like when they arrive. They can keep whatever I issue them, so don’t feel like you have to steal anything. Losira?”

The communication node that Garcia had left on Iotia activated. Losira appeared. “Assist Hammond and his men with whatever they need and contact me when the first wave is ready to come through. I will be on the Path Finder.”

Garcia thanked General Hammond and excused himself. He stepped through the Gate and was met by another Losira agent, who accompanied him silently to the Brig, where he intended to address the two remaining Maquis.

“Here’s the deal,” Garcia said. “Sherman’s Planet is currently occupied by Cardassians. You can remain here, or I can arm you and release you planet side to assist my team as we repel this attack. What do you want?”

“Any chance to fight the Cardassians is good with me,” the one said.

“This isn’t our fight,” the other argued. “Maybe now Star Fleet will understand what we’ve been saying.”

“Star Fleet is not going to be involved here. In fact, I’m acting against Star Fleet orders to help Sherman’s planet,” Garcia said. “Do you want in, or not?”

“I’m in,” the first said.

“Where’s Torres?” the other asked.

“She’s helping me,” Garcia said. “In or out?”

“Fine,” the other said. “I’m in.”

Garcia lowered the shield and turned to the security officer in charge of the Brig. “Take them to the armory and get them suited up, Path Finder gear, full armor, assorted weapons. Then accompany them planet side and report to Kitara.”

“Sir,” Lt. Nelson said, moving closer and whispering. “You want me to take them through the Gate?”

Garcia rubbed his forehead. It was true he didn’t want them knowing a secret, but they wouldn’t see the tech, they would just pass through a wall, and end up in his office at Club Bliss. Then again, he didn’t have to let them know about Bliss. In fact, if they passed over to the Tempest, they might just assume they passed through a hidden doorway to another section of the same ship. The Tempest could transport them down. “Use the Tempest’s transporters. After you arrive planet side, inform Kitara to expect two hundred, combat ready troops in about twenty minutes. Additional troops in about an hour.” Garcia turned to the Maquis. “Thank you.”

As Garcia made his way back to the Bridge, his Gray daughter Okuda approached him. She looked very serious and determined.

“Father,” Okuda said.

“I’m a little busy,” Garcia said.

“Mother would like to assist you,” Okuda said.

“Some Gray drones to facilitate repairs on the warp nacelle and the transporters would be nice,” Garcia said. “Thank you.”

“She would like to send some of her warrior class,” Okuda said.

“Warrior class?” Garcia asked.

Okuda reached out and touched his arm and abruptly Garcia was telepathically linked with his daughter. She revealed one of the warrior class that the Gray Queen had grown in order to protect her colony. It was like a Gray drone pumped up on steroids. It stood just a little taller than the average human, its shoulders broad and bulky with bulging muscles. Indeed, it almost looked unstable for being top heavy at the shoulders, compared to the base, it’s two tiny feet, though the thighs on it were probably comparable to the thickness of a Gorn’s thighs. It had four arms, each of which could brandish its own weapon and it had considerable strength and cunning. It also had superior armor and could shield itself against most energetic weapons, such as phasers. But most of all, it had the power to be quite intimidating had its enemy never encountered one before, and very intimidating if you had been lucky enough to have survived an encounter.

“Okay,” Garcia said. “How many warrior types does she have?”

“She is willing to part with three hundred,” Okuda answered.

“Three hundred?” Garcia asked, not sure what to ask next. He wasn’t expecting three hundred, since her colony was only a month old at the most, but then again, she had recently acquired Preserver tech which had enabled her to duplicate the smaller drones.

“That is the best she can do at this juncture. She cannot allow her colony to be without protections,” Okuda said, thinking Garcia was concerned that she could spare so few soldier.

“Of course,” Garcia said. “Three hundred’s good. Very Spartan of her. Just out of curiosity, how many different types of Grays are there?”

“There are five different types of warrior classes,” Okuda said. “She can spare ten fliers, but does not expect you will need any aquatic warriors. As for the other classes, there are ten types of drones, and several different types of intermediates between drones and Princesses. She will be sending all of her healers. They are small, blue drones that can utilize tech as well as their own psionic abilities to heal the sick or injured. However, even as good as they are, I am concerned that sixty two of them will be insufficient to alleviate the suffering caused by the antimatter weapons.”

“Sixty two. She has more than three hundred warriors, but only sixty two healers,” Garcia said.

“She did not anticipate you going to war so soon, or she would have produced more,” Okuda said.

“We’ll have to make do. How soon can they be here?” Garcia asked.

“They can be on their way as soon as you give the word,” Okuda said.

“Stand by,” Garcia said, hitting his com. badge. “Trini, contact Kitara and tell her to expect help to come through the gate in about a minute. They’re Gray Warriors, very scary, very intelligent...”

“And Mute. I will be required to go planet side and coordinate with your team leader,” Okuda said. “I will be able to direct them telepathically.”

“You didn’t mention this part,” Garcia said.

“You do not want these guys operating on their own initiatives,” Okuda said. “Their primary function is to protect the Gray Queen. And since she is not here to direct them, they will require my assistance. I understand what you are thinking, but I will be perfectly safe. I know the Club Bliss layout and I will have several drones and warrior with me at all times. With the Gray upgrades to the club, their shields are better than your ship’s shields, because they have access to geothermal energy to supplement the fusion reactors. Plus, your people will be there. Tam, I know you see me as a child, but mentally I am a full grown adult with all of the knowledge you and mother imparted to me. I am quite capable of taking care of myself.”

“Go,” Garcia said. “Don’t get killed. Trini, notify Kitara that Okuda’s on her way down to Club Bliss. She’ll act as liaison to the Gray warriors.”

Okuda headed off towards the Gate and Garcia just watched, wondering if he was doing the right thing. What she said was true: she was alien and mentally an adult, but she still appeared young, from human standards. She was also his daughter. Was he sending her off to die? Was this Apollo’s curse? He closed his eyes, telling himself he was going to have to stop obsessing about that.

Sonny Clemmons intercepted him and touched him on the shoulder. “Tam, let me go planet side. I can help.”

“Not a chance,” Garcia said.

“I’ve done this before. And I know everything you know,” Sonny said.

“Not surprising, seeing how you and I are the same person, just different bodies,” Garcia said. “Look, if you want to help, report to the War Room and follow troop movements, but I’m not going to let you go down there and get yourself killed.”

“Fine,” Sonny said. “Just don’t ask me how this is going to turn out.”

“Trust me, I won’t,” Garcia said. He watched Sonny as he contemplated arguing the point, but nodded and headed towards the War Room. Garcia proceeded to Sickbay, where he found the staff preparing for casualties.

“Doctor Jurak,” Garcia interrupted his Doctor.

Jurak nodded to the nurse to continue and became attentive to his Captain.

“I want you to take a medical team down through the Gateway and occupy the hotel across the street from Club Bliss,” Garcia said. “Turn the lobby and main floor into a triage, and we’ll utilize the rooms to house patients. Double, and even triple, the capacity of the rooms, three or four beds per room. Whatever it takes. You tell me what you need and I will try and make it happen. There are going to be more wounded than we know what to do with. And, I have some little helpers coming your way, so if you see any little blue alien types, just be aware, they’re on our side.”

“Blue aliens. Andorians?” Jurak asked.

“Umm, no, Gray drones,” Garcia said.

“Blue Gray drones?” Jurak asked.

“I know, it’s confusing,” Garcia said.

“I’m getting use to that around you. We’ll send worst cases up through the Gate to be treated here,” Jurak said.

“The T’Pau has medical facilities as well, and their staff is ready to coordinate with you,” Garcia said. “They have a mobile medical station, which they intend to pilot down on a shuttle. Unfortunately, the Cardassian have confiscated aircraft as well as anti aircraft batteries, so I’m still working on getting us the air support we need to get their med shuttle through safely.”

“I understand,” Jurak said.

“Good luck,” Garcia said.



The War Room was a bustle of activity. Each cubicle along the wall was a station where a tech was monitoring and relaying information. Each cubicle was active. The ‘Game’ table, center of the War Room, was currently displaying a real time image of the terrain, with Club Bliss at the center. Sonny Clemmons was following troop movements and sending information back to Kitara, which was being relayed via Losira agents; one on the ground and one at the game table. Sonny was also wearing a headset and mic boom and was relaying information via various departments on the ship. Garcia approached, but didn’t interrupt. Even though Sonny was visibly a different person, he was Garcia, and it was surreal watching himself work. He wondered what it would be like if he were to meet his clone that had rescued Afu.

Most of the Game tables were focused on the terrain immediately surrounding Club Bliss, the area they intended to fortify. The far end section was devoted to terrain hit by the antimatter bombs. Five cities had been hit with such weapons and the results were devastating. Everything within a twenty kilometer radius on the surface from ground zero was evaporated. From twenty to one hundred and fifty was charred.

Conditions improved from there out, with the chances of surviving becoming greater the further away you were, but that was also assuming how fast medical relief could get to you. With five bombs, there were hundreds of millions already dead. There were probably tens of millions of people struggling to survive that wouldn't make it through the hour, much less the night.

"The Cardassians are still jamming our communications," Sonny was saying into his mic. "We believe the interference is coming from the top of the capital building. Any chance you can get a team in there and blow up their transmitting capabilities?" There was a pause. "No, don't risk any lives on that, then. We're going to lose communications when the Gateway closes. After you receive the troops from Iotia, dial us back on the Gateway and update us."

Garcia stepped closer to the table to examine seven unidentified dots that had attracted his attention. These people were blue, which marked them as unidentified. His teams were represented by green dots. The enemy was red, and some areas they were so concentrated that it was difficult to distinguish individual dots without magnification. Garcia traced a circle around the seven, blue dots with his finger and tapped on the circle he had made. The circle zoomed in until the dots became people, as if a satellite were looking down on their heads.

"Who are they?" Garcia asked.

"I don't know," Sonny said. "Probably local militia."

"They're about to be over run," Garcia said, pointing out the advancing red dots beyond the magnified circle.

"Can't help it. There is no way to punch through the Cardassian jamming signals," Sonny said.

"That one there, he's using a tricorder," Garcia pointed out.

"So," Sonny said.

"So, hit it with a communication laser," Garcia said. "We can do that."

"It would be a one sided conversation," Sonny said. "They don't have a laser to shoot back."

"They don't have to talk back, they just have to fall back," Garcia said. "But they can communicate visually, yes or no, kind of stuff."

"True," Sonny said, considering the possibility. "Trini?"

"Communication laser is aimed and ready to transmit," Trini said, having anticipated their needs based on the conversation.

"Light 'em up, baby," Sonny said.

The enlarged section of the 'Game' table that showed the militia revealed the green dot of the communication laser tracking until it made contact with the tricorder being held by the lead militia. He nearly dropped it.

"If you can hear us, hold out your hand," Sonny said.

The Klingon held out his hand.

Sonny smiled at Garcia. "You're smarter than the average bear," Sonny told him. He gave his attention back to the 'Game.' "Closed fist for no, open hand, palm up for yes. Do you understand? Good. Your position is about to be overrun by the Cardassians. You need to fall back. Take Second Street over to Haven, and move south until you come to the tracks. Follow the tracks up to the river, and then move East."

The Klingon said no by showing a closed fist.

“You’re worried about the Cardassians on Haven?” Sonny asked, guessing.

The Klingon offered a palm up.

“The squad appears to be sixteen strong, spread three city blocks,” Sonny said. “They’ve erected barricades, and appear to be more reinforced than they are. If you hit them hard and fast at Main Street, we think you can break through their position. If you don’t try, you will be outnumbered by the platoon that is moving your way.”

Garcia drew another circle around the Cardassian squad that Sonny was referring to, and magnified that section. Six Cardassians held main, the others were hunkered down at the next four streets, preventing people from coming and going. Garcia dragged the circle left and right of the Cardassian position at Main, looking for alternate routes. Between Main and Kirk St, was a large building.

“Have them make a detour through this building,” Garcia recommended. “They can go in here, out here, cross the street, and through this building, and they might be able to do it without alerting the guards at Main.”

“The doors have been booby trapped,” Sonny said.

“What about the windows?” Garcia asked.

“I’ll send them the suggestion,” Sonny said.

Losira stepped up to the table. “I could take these Cardassians,” Losira said.

“Kitara and I have discussed this with you,” Garcia said, not looking up from the table. “We’re not using you as a weapon. You are for defensive purposes only.”

“Fine, I won’t kill them,” Losira said. “I’ll just distract them, so the militia can get into this building unseen.”

“If you really want to help them, unlock my Kelvan computer so I can use the Kelvan transporter and put an end to this nonsense,” Garcia said.

“Sorry, I am unable to comply with that request without authorization from Lt. Commander Kitara, or Lt. Commander Undine,” Losira said.

“Unless a crisis scenario puts a certain number of individuals at risk,” Garcia said. “I think there are a sufficient number of people’s lives at stake to justify me using the Kelvan transporter.”

“Sorry, I am unable to comply...”

“I know,” Garcia interrupted her, not hiding his irritation. “You don’t have to be so automated in your response.”

“I’m a robot, what do you expect?” Losira said, mischievously.

“I expect you to think for yourself,” Garcia said, missing her playfulness. “Why don’t we just fire the ship’s phasers and stun the whole city block!”

“Sorry, ground rules are in effect,” Sonny said. “The rules of engagement we negotiated with Tormin say we’ll not shoot from orbit and he avoid killing civilians.”

“They’re going to kill them anyway,” Garcia said. “I say we just start taking them out, even the playing field, the same way they did.”

“The last time you did that, Tormin detonated an antimatter bomb and took out the capital. The city of Alba, the most populated city still remaining, including Club Bliss, was completely vaporized. Do you really want to do that again?” Sonny asked, revealing the history that he knew.

“Ahhh!” Garcia screamed. “You’re not supposed to tell me that!”

“Aahla approved,” Sonny said.

Garcia turned to the Royal Bengal Tiger. She was sitting on a stool overlooking the board. One version of her was the tiger, almost comical in its obsession with the dots moving across the “game” table. The other version was the Egyptian goddess, Aahla, with all the accouterments of a Royal Egyptian princess, including gold arm bands, a large, amber medallion, and a gold head band. She nodded to him, assuring him it was okay to precede with this new information. Only he and Sonny could see Aahla for who she was, which was a mystifying bit of technology.

“Just how many times have we done this?” Garcia asked Sonny.

“A couple of dozen,” Sonny said, scrutinizing the board.

“And you didn’t already know to use the communication laser?” Garcia asked.

“That’s a new variation,” Sonny said. “Very nice, actually. Perhaps the seven militia will pull through this time.”

“I hate paradoxes and time travel scenarios,” Garcia mumbled. To Aahla he said, “Aren’t you people suppose to prevent this kind of stuff.”

“Minimize is more accurate,” Aahla answered. The tiger made a ‘chuffing’ noise.

“Yeah, but you could actually stop this war, couldn’t you?” Garcia asked, but it was more a demand.

“I thought you didn’t approve of gods taking away free will,” Aahla said. “It’s another good reason why you shouldn’t use the Kelvan technology. Ever.”

“I just want to bring this to a quick, peaceful resolution,” Garcia said.

“Have you ever experienced peace during or after operating Kelvan technology?” Aahla asked.

“They’re engaging the squad on main,” Sonny said.

Garcia turned his attention back to the ‘game’ board. He wanted to be down there, risking his life, but instead, he was safe, watching other people die. The Cardassian Squad members that had been spread out were now regrouping to reinforce Main Street. The Militia wasn’t going to be able to break through.

“Losira,” Garcia said, touching her shoulder. “Go there. Distract them. Don’t engage.”

Losira looked up and to the right, and suddenly a new Losira Agent was manifested, beaming directly into the midst of the Cardassians. Garcia’s War Room staff watched from their superior position, perhaps as Zeus would have watched the happenings of the world in the still waters of a fountain. Several of the Cardassians turned to fire on her, but their phasers had no effect. She made as if she were going to attack the squad members on the front line, forcing them to respond to her theatrics. The Klingon Militia charged and overran the squad. The Losira agent disappeared.

“I don’t see why you won’t allow me to engage the enemy,” Losira said.

“Whether I aid you directly or indirectly, people will still die. At least if I kill the enemy, organic life will not be put at risk.”

“You have a valid point,” Garcia said. “We’re still going to minimize your role, the same as you’re minimizing mine by blocking me from the Kelvan tech. Good job, by the way.”

Sonny didn’t seem pleased by Garcia’s decision to utilize Losira, but he kept it to himself. Sonny made a quick exchange with the cat, communicating with his eyes. Aahla ‘the tiger’ agreed, and then turned her attention to Garcia, staring at him, scrutinizing him as if she were studying prey and was about to leap. Aahla “the Egyptian”

was staring at him, too, but her thoughts and emotions were not manifest on her face, leaving Garcia guessing.

CHAPTER THIRTYTWO

“Stale mate.” Kitara was in the War Room, having left Tuer in charge of the ground defensive, reporting directly to Garcia. “The Iotian troops and the Gray Warriors have leveled the playing field, but the Iotians are simply insufficiently skilled in modern warfare techniques to lead an effective offensive strike into occupied positions, and there are not enough Gray Warrior types to get the upper hand, at least, not quickly. We can hold two city blocks around Club bliss indefinitely. The Club’s shields have been extended to cover one city block, protecting the hotel from further harassment from mortars. Consequently, air defense around Club Bliss is limited to one city block.”

“The Gray upgrades were only to the shield, then?” Garcia asked.

“Apparently,” Kitara explained. “But we can hold.”

“I could end this if you let me,” Garcia said.

“It won’t make you a hero,” Sonny Clemmons said.

“I don’t want to be a hero, I want to end this conflict,” Garcia said. “There are millions of people wounded from the orbital bombardment that we can’t get to until this conflict has ended.”

“I understand that. You have to let it play out,” Kitara said. “If you understand anything about the sociology of conflict, then you have to let it play out. Sure, you could use the Kelvan technology to take everyone’s weapons away from them. You could even transport the enemy away, dividing them up into containment camps, but this will only prolong the conflict because the animosity will still remain, there will be no clear victor, and consequently, there will be future skirmishes. There has to be a battle, there has to be pain, and there has to be learning. This is how societies work. It’s the way it has always been, ever since the first Klingon threw a rock at the second Klingon.”

“Oh, please, don’t bring creations myths into this,” Garcia said.

“You know as well as I do that understanding the culture’s myth is paramount to understanding conflict resolution,” Kitara said. “Earth’s primary paradigm is that the first man and woman were exiled from paradise for eating forbidden fruit. This is not the Klingon’s creation myth, or even the Cardassian’s myth. In the beginning, Klingons were all children of the Great Mother, and we were all welcomed to the Great Table to feast. If you had had a large family, you would understand this metaphor better. Though there was always plenty of food at the Great Table, the siblings competed for food. The biggest, the strongest, the smartest, got in there first and took the most nutritious items, the best tasting, the richest foods and drinks. The weaker ones got table scraps. And in the end, the ones that were the strongest, fastest, smartest, were sent out into the world to build civilizations, while the weaker ones stayed at home, residing with the Great Mother, unable to compete, and consequently, unable to participate. They can still grow up and leave, but they are too timid to enjoy life. When they have issues, the Great Mother intervenes and sends them to their rooms. When the adults have issues, they face them head on, and resolve the conflicts themselves, with strength of body and mind. Only those who participate can vote, decide, or negotiate. You are not the Great Mother and it is time you faced up to that. You cannot protect everyone. Yes, you have compassion for the wounded, and the ones that can’t defend themselves, especially the children, but the best way to help them is to end this conflict properly.”

“I don’t want to sit up here and do nothing!” Garcia said. “I want to act. At least go down and provide medical care to the wounded. I’m good at that.”

“You’re good at a lot of things,” Kitara said. “But there is only one thing you can do to help these people at this juncture.”

“And what’s that?” Garcia asked.

“It is time we go and face the Klingon Challenge,” Kitara said.

“We’re in the middle of a war and you want me to go play games with the Klingons?” Garcia asked.

“You defeat this challenge, face it direct, and you will be in a position to request help, and the Counsel will have to listen to you,” Kitara said. “You win, and my brother and his ships will follow you for sure. That would at least end the standoff with the Cardassian Armada, provided we can find a way to neutralize the Kelvan ship.”

“We can’t leave,” Garcia said.

“I’m still here, son,” Sonny said, touching his shoulder. “I wouldn’t do anything you wouldn’t do. Unless it involves a couple of pit wolfies.”

“And Tuer can hold his position,” Kitara said. “If you’re intent on playing the Great Mother, then you have to trust that your strongest, fastest, smartest children can handle themselves. It’s time to practice letting go, something you can’t do if you plug into the Kelvan device. It’s time to go to Kronos and meet your challenge.”

“There’s a lesson here for you,” Sonny said. “You can’t do everything, and some things will never be finished in a time frame that will make you happy. Trust me, I know more about time frames than I ever wanted to know.”

“Sheaar told us to hold, that’s means me,” Garcia said.

“He’s expecting you to find a reason to avoid his trap,” Sonny said. “If you show, you will most likely die. If you don’t show, your Klingons will mutiny, and you will most likely die. And, if you don’t mind me saying so, your plate is full enough without taking second helpings and stealing from my plate, so, off you go.”

Garcia seemed resigned. “Fine,” Garcia said. “Kitara, you stay here.”

“I am going with you,” Kitara said. “You will need me.”

“Of course,” Garcia said. What was he thinking? He asked himself sarcastically. “Let’s go. Lt. Undine, you’re in charge till we get back. Don’t let Sonny leave the ship. If I die, you and Kitara have to complete a mission for me. The details are outlined in a report in a file for your eyes only.”

Lt. Undine saluted. “I understand,” Undine said.

Garcia and Kitara departed the War Room together, going up one level to the Bridge, and from there to the Shuttle Bay where they opened the Gateway and crossed over to the New Constitution. They took a lift up to the NC’s Bridge, riding silently, looking straight ahead. Lt. Anderson surrendered the Captain’s chair as soon as they arrived.

“Captain,” Anderson said. “We’ll be arriving at Kronos in half an hour. Captain Trolos wanted to speak with you, but I explained you were still in a war game exercise and were unavailable. He said he understood and to have you contact him as soon as you were free.”

“Thank you,” Garcia said. “Kitara, take care of that, will you. I will be in my Ready Room.”

Garcia went to his Ready Room and occupied himself by reading the ship’s logs and reports, noting all of the repairs and improvements that had been completed. The crew had been keeping themselves busy, but no doubt the Gray drones were immensely

helpful in facilitating repairs. They were almost gremlins in their capacity to get into hard to reach places and mess with electronic. His communicator chirped. He touched it.

“Captain,” it was Kitara’s voice. “You have a call coming in from Cardassia, secure line, but it’s commercial, not military.”

Curious, Garcia decided to take it. “I’ll take it in here,” he said, activating his monitor in front of him.

A Cardassian female, perhaps forty four years of age, dressed in civilian clothing, appeared on the screen. She had that look about her that suggest she was an elite, member of the leisure class, the invidious distinction of wealth and a ‘proper’ upbringing, a woman of breeding and perhaps even ‘kept,’ in the traditional sense of the word ‘ownership;’ the property of a male in a patriarchal society.

“Captain Garcia, I presume?” the woman asked.

“This is he,” Garcia said. “To whom am I speaking?”

“Calar,” she said. “I’ve heard rumor that my daughter, Shuliette, is still alive and with you?”

“She is alive and with me,” Garcia said.

“What are your intentions towards her?” Calar asked.

“I assure you, I intend to give her her freedom as soon as we arrive at Kronos,” Garcia said.

“You must not release her,” Calar said, alarmed.

“I can’t hold her against her will,” Garcia said.

“You will if you want her to live,” Calar said. “There is a bounty on her head and even on Kronos my husband has agents who would love nothing more than to collect the bounty and earn his favor. You must not let her go.”

“I am not going to hold her against her will,” Garcia said.

“For better or worse, you are her will,” Calar corrected. “If she is not assassinated, she will return to her father and he will finish what he started. Don’t you understand, she is a product of her culture! She believes her father owns her until she is given to a man, or conquered by one. She is more property than person. She is doing what she was bred to do, taught to do.”

“I find it hard to believe, in this day in age, that your society still practices this barbaric ritual,” Garcia argued.

“Perhaps the masses believe in equality between the sexes, but the elites have a certain way of doing things. You’ve interfered with that and now, for better or worse, whatever happens to my daughter is your responsibility,” Calar said. “I want her to live. You chose her, took her, and I want you follow through.”

“It’s not like that at all,” Garcia said. “You totally misunderstand what has happened here.”

“I don’t need to know,” Calar said. “Please, I’m begging you. Make this right.”

“There is nothing I can do that will change her father’s mind on this,” Garcia said. “You’re his husband. Can’t you get through to him?”

“You forget, I am property, a trophy,” Calar said. “My place is to serve, and if I don’t, wife number two steps in.”

“What would you like me to do?” Garcia asked. “Keep her locked up the rest of her life?”

“Do whatever it is humans do to their women,” Calar said.

“We don’t own women. They have free will, rational choice,” Garcia said. “Even if I did keep her, I can’t watch over her every minute. If there is a bounty on her head, eventually someone will get to her.”

“There is one way you can remove the bounty and save her life,” Calar said. “You must engage my husband in a ritual battle, and on winning that battle, you claim Shuliette as your property. At that point, you can keep her or send her on her way, and she will obey, willingly, because you will have fulfilled cultural expectations.”

“And the bounty goes away?” Garcia asked.

“It does,” Calar said. “And I will be in your debt. I will make sure that all my wealth and the power of my House is surrendered to you.”

“I don’t understand,” Garcia said.

“This ritualize battle is to the death. If you are victorious, no one will be seeking Tormin’s favors, and there will be no reward to collect for Shuliette’s death. If you are killed, he may spare her and simply kill the child she carries. Your child, if I’m not mistaken,” Calar added the last, hoping to manipulate him.

“I’m not going to fight Tormin to the death,” Garcia argued.

“You expect me to believe that?” Calar asked. “Your people are battling with him even now! There is only one way to end the siege on Sherman’s planet, and that’s with Tormin’s death. So, if you’re going to kill him anyway, why not save your people and his people death or injury, and end this occupation more quickly, and save my daughter’s life in the process.”

“If all I have to do is kill Tormin to save you daughter’s life, I don’t have to engage him in a personal confrontation, he can just die a casualty of war,” Garcia said.

“No,” Calar said. “If you do not engage him in a ritualistic way, his death is meaningless, and Shuliette remains his property. I assure you, if that happens, she will commit suicide. And if you simply lock her up to prevent her from returning to her father, she will attempt suicide. That is how strong this cultural paradigm is. If you don’t claim her and assume a role of authority over her, she will die. And if you don’t kill her father, she will die. That’s the way of it.”

“Such a vicious little world you’re from,” Garcia said.

“If you want to try and change it, then kill Tormin and take control of my House, with all its assets and the Houses that are aligned with it,” Calar offered. “Once he is dead, you will be in a position of power and his men, his Armada will be yours to command, but only if you assume that role through the legal acquisition of his daughter, with the proof that there is already a heir, your child to be.”

Garcia rubbed his forehead. This was not how he envisioned his life unfolding. He closed his eyes. “This is not going to go the way you think it is,” Garcia assured her.

“I suspect serving you will be much more pleasant than serving my current master,” Calar said. “And, I know my daughter and my grandchild have a chance to live a decent life, maybe even learn a different way of being.”

“You won’t be serving me,” Garcia said.

“I will become your property, or my daughter’s property, I will serve you both, or her if you don’t want me, but this is the way of it,” Calar said.

“This is completely barbaric!” Garcia snapped. He pushed things off his desk, grabbed his left wrist, and then forced himself to take hold of the desk as he tried to calm himself down. “I will inform you of my decision on how I am going to proceed.”

Transmit the data I need to be in compliance with this stupid ritual thing of yours. If I survive the next couple of days, I'll call you back.”

Garcia cut off the communications and sat there, clinging to his desk. He laid his head on the desk and rocked it to and fro, as if pressing his forehead into the desktop would erase his headache. He gripped his left arm. A chime alerted him to the presence of someone wanting to enter, but he sat there, trying to wish it all away. He started chanting a new mantra: “Computer, end program. Computer! End program.” He heard the rogue Troi program in his head say, “It’s not a program, Tam. This is not a dream sequence.” He felt her hand on his shoulder. He heard the door open and rolled his head just enough to see his First Officer enter. He didn’t care that she was seeing him in a moment of weakness. She was just going to have to get use to it, because there were going to be many more moments if he was going to completely ‘detox’ from his addiction to Kelvan technology. It was time people finally see him for who he was, a combination of qualities that were often polar opposite and conflicting in nature. He was human.

“Are you well?” Kitara asked.

“I’m angry,” Garcia said. He wanted to say more, but he was feeling so many emotions he was finding it hard to separate them all to examine them in a more rational way. “New orders concerning Shuliette. She’s not to leave the ship. Put her on a suicide watch. She is to be attended at all times. Also, I want guards posted at her quarters, as there may be an attempt on her life, possibly even Klingon agents sympathetic to Tormin or Cardassia in general.”

“That can’t be,” Kitara argued. “The Cardassians do not fight with honor!”

“Neither do the Romulans, but there are Klingon-Romulan sympathizers,” Garcia pointed out. Kitara didn’t respond to that. His grip loosened on his left arm as more and more of his brain began analyzing the problems facing him from a more logical position than pure emotions. “I’m not passing judgment on your people, Kitara. It’s quite possible that there are factions in your government that see the inevitable changes coming in Klingon culture and they’re trying to prevent it or benefit from it in the best way they know how. In truth, change is necessary, because to remain static would be death. The one constant in Klingon culture is that they need conflict to sort out the weak from the strong, and so, even though these factions seeking to align themselves with Romulans or Cardassians seem anti Klingon, even deviant, in many respects they’re part of a functional sociological phenomena that helps generate more conflict that in turn helps to make your people stronger. Of course, if you ask the individual agents why they are behaving such, they will explain it in psychological terms, or perhaps even rational, economic terms, but from a more macro, sociological perspective, they’re providing society what it needs to continue its existence.”

“Line dancing,” Kitara mumbled.

“Uh?” Garcia asked. His eyes had wandered from her as he mused out loud. They tracked back to her in order to read her face.

“One step forwards, two steps back,” Kitara said.

“Yes. Many people believe that society has cycles of decline and prosperity that mirror cycles in nature. The rise and fall of elites is a well documented phenomena and is not limited to human society,” Garcia offered. He stood up. “Would you do me a favor?”

“Yes,” Kitara said.

“Would you be willing to pick me out the appropriate outfit to wear to this challenge we’re going to attend?” Garcia said.

“Absolutely,” Kitara said, actually glad he asked for fear if she recommended something it might be seen as mothering. “Come to your quarters and I’ll assist.”

“I’ll be there in about ten minutes,” Garcia said.

Kitara saluted and departed, the door whispering shut behind her. Garcia thought for a moment longer about a potential plan of action and called Losira. She appeared before him, professionally dressed and ready to work.

“Tell Brock I need him to do something for me,” Garcia said, and then began to list a set of instructions, for his eyes and ears only.



“It’s a bit tight,” Garcia complained.

“It’s supposed to be tight,” Kitara said.

“I don’t recognize this mark on my armor,” Garcia said, after trying to remove it by rubbing his sleeve on it.

Kitara slapped his hand to make him stop. “That’s my mark. This indicates that you and I are mates, both comrades in arms, warriors, lovers, companions... It’s a complicated translation that has multiple meanings.”

The door chime rang and Garcia said “enter.” The door slid opened to reveal Rivan, who would normally have come right in, but on seeing Kitara she hesitated.

“May I come in?” Rivan asked.

“Yes,” Garcia said. “No,” Kitara said, simultaneously.

Rivan entered, carrying a pillow case. “I’m sorry, Tam. I just need a moment of your time.”

“We’re busy,” Kitara snapped.

“What’s up?” Garcia asked her.

“I found my bracelet,” Rivan said.

“Oh?” Garcia said.

“Apparently Ori is collecting treasure and is storing it in this pillow case under her bed,” Rivan said, spilling the contents of the case out onto Garcia’s bed. “I wanted you to go through this and see if there was anything here that is important or possibly harmful to her.”

“That’s where my cigar went,” Garcia said, reaching for the item. He froze. There was a tiny decahedron, just a little bigger than the average pair of gaming dice. He picked it up carefully.

“That looks like a smaller version of the remains of the Cardassian scientist you reduced to his essential elements,” Kitara said, referring to the Kelvan specialty of people storage, after removing all the water from their bodies and reducing them to their essential elements.

“It’s way too small to be an adult,” Troi said, coming forward out of nowhere. No one saw her but Garcia. His other companions rallied around him, curious about Garcia’s sudden elation.

“It’s Lt. Kelly’s baby,” Garcia said. Duana fell to Garcia, hugging him and kissing his cheek, feeling quite vindicated, for she was the only one of his companions

that had said Garcia hadn't killed the fetus. He pushed her off of him, but all Kitara and Rivan saw was him pushing air.

"It is undamaged?" Kitara asked. "You can restore it?"

"It appears so," Garcia said. "But there is no way to be sure until I plug into the Kelvan computer and verify its integrity."

"This is wonderful news!" Rivan said, sharing Garcia's excitement, hugging on him in the same manner that Duana had. "You must have subconsciously stored this in your room to repair later, only Ori must have found it, thinking it was a treasure. Most of these items here seem to belong to you. Pips from your collar. Your graduation ring from the Vulcan Academy of Science. A chewed piece of gum."

"We must break Ori of this habit," Kitara said.

"It seems harmless enough," Garcia said, wondering how he is going to feel if it turns out the polyhedron was damaged from being tossed into this bag of stuff. "We need to return to the Path Finder immediately."

"No," Kitara said. "This can wait. If it is not damaged, then you can restore it to full health after we have finished with our obligation here. If it is damage, then there is nothing you can do about it anyway, and you will have risked accessing the Kelvan computer for nothing."

"I'll tell Janet," Rivan said.

"No," Garcia said. "Let's not raise her hopes just yet. If it is still viable, we'll tell her after I have revived it. If it isn't, there's no need to put her through her misery again."

"You're going to have to tell her to put it back in her," Kitara said.

"We can't put it back in her," Garcia said. "The fetal environment has changed since I removed it. It's too risky. It will have to finish developing in an artificial womb if it's to survive at all."

"How long will the procedure take?" Kitara asked.

"Nine months," Garcia said, joking.

Kitara smacked him. "That's not what I meant!" she said.

"Two seconds?" Garcia guessed.

"You can do a lot of damage in two seconds with the Kelvan technology," Kitara said.

"Doctor Jurak can attend the procedure and when it's finished, he can inform you and Losira can disable the K-Tech," Garcia said.

Garcia's com badge chimed and he answered it. "Owens here, Captain. We've arrived at Kronos. We have the coordinates to beam you down. The High Counsel is waiting your arrival."

"Thank you, Lt. Kitara and I will be beam down shortly. You're in charge," Garcia said. He took the polyhedron and locked it into his safe. He turned around and smiled at his girls, both the two that were physically there, and the ones that were in his mind.

"You look very formidable," Rivan said.

"Well, thank you, Rivan," Garcia said. "Kitara, if you're ready, I shall escort you to the Klingon Ball."

"We do not have a Ball," Kitara said.

"Never mind," Garcia said. "Let Ori have the rest of that stuff, Rivan."

“Even your ring?” Rivan asked.

“It’s just stuff,” Garcia assured her.

“Good luck,” Rivan said.

“Yep,” Garcia agreed, because he expected he was going to need it.



Garcia and Kitara materialized on the far side of the High Counsel’s Chamber. Garcia had actually wanted to wear the Path Finder’s armor, which was shiny and new, but Kitara had over ruled him and had picked out the more traditional Klingon armor, ceremonial in fashion. She reminded him that he did ask her for his help. The armor was endorsed with her mark, which validated his claim on her, proving that she assented to the arrangement. It raised a few eyebrows at the least, but since Garcia was here to answer the Challenge issued by Gowron, no one would be able to challenge his right to Kitara. It was well played, but her parents, who were one of the many elites in attendance, were apparently annoyed to no ends.

Trolos, Kitara’s brother, was there with a number of his men. Gowron was there, standing in front of the High Counsel, and Admiral Sheaar was standing right behind him and to his right. Garcia noted that Captain MaHt and a number of Klingons loyal to him were present, opposite sides of the room from Trolos and his men. Garcia also recognized Grilka and a Ferengi named Quark, from his data inquiry he had done several days ago. He was momentarily amazed by how fast time had been going lately, and then he had some fleeting, inappropriate thoughts about Grilka. She was definitely beautiful. How Grilka’s family had any vested interest in today’s proceedings was beyond him, but her House was large enough to give her that right, and with Quark speaking for her interests, her wishes could be made known vicariously. The Duras family was there, looking for opportunities, as always. They reminded Garcia of the Gorn: ambush predators.

“Some very important people here,” Garcia noted.

Kitara nodded.

“The human known as Garcia will approach the High Counsel,” Gowron said, making a motion with his hand.

At Gowron’s cue twenty Klingons brandishing Painstiks came forward, a line of ten by ten, making it very obvious that Garcia was intended to approach the High Counsel by passing between them. Not wanting to show fear, Garcia approached the High Counsel, figuring it was a bluff. The first set of Painstiks hit Garcia like sustained lightening. His arms went up to his chest reflexively and he nearly fell to the ground. It took a moment after they removed the Painstiks before he could speak.

“I am not a Klingon,” Garcia announced, slowly and loudly.

“I said, approach the High Counsel!” Gowron shouted.

Garcia proceeded forwards and was prodded by the next set of warriors. He howled and was driven to his knees before they withdrew the Painstiks. The moment the immediate pain left him, he fell forwards, one hand going to the floor to prevent him from falling flat on his face, the other clutching his chest. He forced his breathing into a controlled pattern that resembled the Lamaze breathing technique he had been teaching Rivan. He heard the laughter and general comments from various groups in attendance.

“This pathetic creature beat you in a war game?” Gowron demanded of Sheaar.

Garcia climbed back to his feet. His eyes were fierce with anger and determination. "The next one of you who jabs me with a Painstik is going to get the same shoved up his ass," Garcia threatened, in a low whisper meant for only the Twenty, but was most likely heard by everyone.

"I said, approach the High Counsel!" Gowron shouted.

Garcia boldly stepped forwards. The next two Klingons branded him with their Painstiks. Garcia howled, but instead of falling, he grabbed one of the Painstiks and pulled it while simultaneously twisting his body so that the one slid off of him and collided directly with the face of the opposing Klingon. That Klingon shouted and dropped his Painstik. At the same time as that Klingon was getting his face lit up with the Painstik, the other started to pull back on his Painstik to get control of it. He was unprepared for Garcia's rapid reversal of force, and was jabbed in the groin with the non-business end of the Painstik. As he started to go to the ground, the non business end snapped up and hit him in the face, as Garcia flipped the pain stick and prepared to do battle. The eighteen remaining Klingons with Painstiks attacked simultaneously and the fight was on. It was basically a staff fight, except one end of the staff caused serious pain. Even Klingon armor failed to block or decrease the intensity. A part of Garcia's mind fractured with the pain of multiple, simultaneous strikes, and he felt as if he were watching the struggle from overhead. One part of him thought it humorous, as everyone was howling with hits, as if it were a "Three Stooges" act. Another part of him was measuring the fight, calculating, seeking out weaknesses in the attacks. Generally speaking, a group of people against one person had some disadvantages, especially when brandishing weapons such as swords or staffs as they had to be cautious about hitting one of their own. The radius of the Painstik limited how many could approach Garcia at any one time without his opponents restricting their attacks to jabbing motions. A simple deflection with his stick and a twist of his body could direct a stab meant for him into one of the other opponents. If one were jabbed just right, he would drop to his knees in pain, and Garcia would clobber him over the back of the neck with his appropriated Painstik. In this manner he dwindled down the Klingons until there was only one. The remaining one was easily dispatched, knocked out cold with the non business end of the Painstik. As the Klingon fell to the floor, Garcia prodded him in the butt, the nerves of his body causing tremors in his muscles, which revealed he was definitely still alive, or there would have been no reaction at all.

Garcia approached the High Counsel, using his Painstik as a cane. It sizzled and illuminated the floor every time it hit. When he came to a halt, he threw the Painstik down at Gowron's feet.

"So," Garcia said. "Was that the challenge? If so, I win. Can I go home now, or you got something else for me?"

Admiral Shear drew his d'k tahg and would have launched himself at Garcia, but Gowron stayed his hands. Gowron stepped forwards, controlling his rage.

"How dare you desecrate the sanctity of our rituals?!" Gowron said. "I will have you drawn and quartered."

"There is a precedent for what he has done," Kitara said, speaking on Garcia's behalf.

"You will be silent in this chamber!" Gowron shouted at her. "If you speak without being spoken to again, your life will be forfeit."

“She speaks for me,” Garcia said. “She is my cha’Dich.”

“She cannot be a cha’Dich!” Gowron growled. “She is a woman!”

“Your rules clearly state that I have the right to choose anybody I want as my second,” Garcia said.

“Not a woman!” Gowron said.

“The word, from the original text, is gender neutral,” Garcia said. “The wisdom of you ancestor would not have chosen this word if they had demanded that females forever be denied the position of cha’Dich.”

Gowron looked to one of the High Counsel members.

“You are taking it out of context,” one of them said. “In the original text, the gender neutral was often used to allow for a god to be called. Gods can take the form of male or female, depending on which aspect of nature they choose to represent.”

“All I know is that I have chosen my cha’Dich,” Garcia said. “If you deny me my right to choose, then obviously your position is weak and your challenge is forfeit.”

Gowron gritted his teeth, his eyes rolling as he measured Garcia, his temper reaching the breaking point. In the background, Garcia observed Grilka actually smiling with amusement at the Counsel’s discontent.

“You may have your chosen cha’Dich,” Gowron finally conceded. “On the conditions that she shares your fate. If you die, she dies.”

“Accepted,” Kitara said.

“With one caveat,” Garcia quickly added. “When I win, you also have to publicly recognize her rank, position, and skill as one of the best warriors the Klingon Empire has ever produced.”

Gowron drew his d’k tahg and put it to Garcia’s neck. He did not flinch. If he was killed before the challenge was issued, Kitara was free, and the ‘state’ would have tacitly been admitting to the fact that Garcia was correct in his assessment of Kitara’s abilities. Whatever happened here today, Klingon suffrage was about to get a promotion.

“You will not survive the challenge,” Gowron said. “I am still in my right to kill you for not completing the Ritual of the Twenty Painstiks.”

“Oh, was that what that was? I must have mistaken it for something else, because I don’t remember getting my Rokeg blood pie,” Garcia commented.

Grilka actually laughed. Gowron looked at her. Quark apologized profusely for her outburst.

“Keep your party quiet, or suffer sanctions,” Gowron said, pointing his knife at them.

“Again, you cannot kill Garcia for what he did,” Kitara said. “There is a precedent.”

“There is no precedent for what he did!” Admiral Sheaar said.

“The Legend of me’Ro,” Kitara said. “me’Ro was known for his skills as a great warrior, but also for his quick temper and fierce rage, and so on the Day of Honor he asked to be exempted from the Ritual of the Twenty Painstiks, for fear that his rage would overcome him and he would kill or harm the Twenty. Kahless insisted that the Ritual commence as usual, and as me’Ro had forewarned, he became berserk, enraged by the pain, and killed the twenty, one of whom was his own son. Afterwards Kahless forgave the transgression...”

“We know the story!” Gowron said. “It does not apply in this situation.”

“It does,” Kitara said. “Garcia asked to be exempt.”

“He did not ask this!” Gowron said.

“Garcia announced and everyone heard, ‘I am not Klingon.’ All Klingons recognize this statement as a plea to yield hostilities,” Kitara said. “It is also a call for protection.”

“Are ya’ll going to talk me to death, or are you going to give me a challenge?” Garcia asked. “Cause quite frankly, I’m getting bored just standing here.”

One of the High Counsel came forward. “We hear her argument,” he said. “She has a valid point of contention.”

“He did not finish the ritual!” Admiral Sheaar pouted. “Even me’Ro made it more than half the way through before his rage overcame him.”

“The Ritual is completed when the Warrior has endured the touch of Twenty Painstiks,” Kitara said. “Not only did Garcia endure all twenty Painstiks, he endured multiple attacks from each. Now, if the warriors you chose to perform the ritual can’t hold their own against one who admits he is not Klingon, then perhaps you failed to choose your Twenty wisely.”

Garcia yawned. “Are we done here?” he asked her.

Gowron got in Garcia’s face. “I do not like the contempt in your voice.”

“And I don’t like the fact that you have a coward in your midst who is so weak he has to bring the highest levels of the government together to do his dirty work for him,” Garcia said. “Where’s the honor in that?”

Admiral Sheaar broke rank and Gowron put him on the floor. Gowron was on top of him in that instant, his d’k tahg ready to push through Sheaar’s heart if he even batted an eye. Sheaar was sufficiently cowed into submission.

“There is some truth in that,” Gowron said, wide eyed on Sheaar. “This is your doing and now I must clean up your mess. I issued this challenge. Move against Garcia again without my orders and I will cut your heart out and feed it to you!”

Gowron stood and faced Garcia. “You,” Gowron said. “Are a menace, a threat to our very existence, but a warrior who fights with honor has the right to be heard. You have been brought here to face the Klingon Academy’s Challenge, the equivalent of a fast track, which will ultimately decide if you have the right to lead Klingons into battle. I guarantee you, the challenges you will face will be deadly. I will offer you one out: you can leave here and now, with no disrespect attributed to your character, or any harm to your person, if you will only say you are not a warrior and will surrender your command.”

“I would rather die a painful death than be branded a coward,” Garcia said. “I accept your challenge.”

Gowron grabbed Garcia by both arms and pulled him in closer to him, his eyes fierce and alive. “Then today, you will die with honor! The first of the three tests will be a game of mRock!”

“Oh, bloody hell,” Garcia mumbled, remembering his prior experience with a mRock orb.

CHAPTER THIRTYTHREE

“The best translation of the game is *da-nah-wah'uwsd*,” Kitara explained. “It was originally a kids game, similar to a combination of your childhood sports ‘king of the hill,’ dodge ball, and tag.”

“That word you said. Isn’t that Cherokee?” Garcia asked.

“Indeed, which translates fairly well into English as ‘little war,’ which doesn’t fully capture the essence of ‘mRocK,’ but is close enough for our purposes,” Kitara said. She assumed the look he was giving her was surprise that she was familiar with the Cherokee people, much less their language. “I have tried to familiarize myself with as much of Earth’s history as I can, especially 20th century America because it’s one of your main fields of interest. You cannot read anything about America without mentioning the indigenous tribes that once inhabited the land. The Cherokee nation reminds me of what we once were.”

“I suppose I can see the connection,” Garcia said as they were lead down into an arena.

The immensity of the Arena was like nothing Garcia had ever seen, reminiscent of Gladiator tournaments, but bigger than even American Football. In another place and time he might have expected that the Arena had been built by Kelvan, for Kelvan; it was that big. The stadium seating was full and the patrons were as rowdy as he might have imagined for Klingon sporting event. Gowron and the High Counsel were led away to their privileged seating area and Garcia was led to a specific spot, designated by a black tile, which was almost exactly one meter by one meter square. He was handed a stick that resembled a Lacrosse stick, only on the opposite side of the stick from the net was a Klingon pain device.

“Wait,” Garcia said. “Is this?”

“A Pain/Catcher,” Kitara said.

“Umm,” Garcia felt a little panic. “I’m not familiar with this game. What are the rules?”

“Only one basic rule,” Kitara said. “Survive.”

“Oh, wonderful,” Garcia said.

“It is simple,” Kitara assured him. “You can only make kills when the mRocK ball is in your net. Catch the mRocK ball and eliminate other players by touching the PainStik to an opponent.”

“Sounds easy enough,” Garcia said.

“You can only hold the mRocK ball in your net for three seconds,” Kitara said. “If you hold it longer than that, you will be eliminated from the game. Make your kills and then toss the ball far from you. If the mRocK hits someone, they will be eliminated from the game. If they catch it, they will have control and can eliminate opponents. The last person standing on the playing field is the winner. If the mRocK is not caught, conditions on the playing field are affected. Random events occur, such as the tile that is struck might drop from the playing field, or a wave of pain will radiate outwards from the struck tile to adjoining tiles.”

“Tiles?” Garcia asked, suddenly more aware of the tile he was standing on. He looked up and realized what he thought was a roof protecting the playing field was actually a hovering playing field, comprised of tile laid out in a grid like fashion, surrounded by a boarder. The playing field was thirty three tiles long, thirty three tiles

wide, giving an area of 1089 tiles to ‘play’ in. The 17th row and the 17 column were painted a dark gray, dividing the playing field into four separate regions. The boarder surrounding the field was missing eleven tiles on each side, with the corresponding opening directly above a tile on the ground. Garcia looked up and realized his tile would rise like a lift to connect to the border.

Looking about him, Garcia began to note the other players being brought into the Arena, each taking their place on their designated tile. Almost all of them were being brought under duress, at disruptor point. Only a few waved to the crowd, or fluffed up, showing their muscles in an attempt to elicit cheers with their gestures.

“Um, what’s going on?” Garcia asked, pointing to the Klingon next to him in chains. One of the guards was removing shackles and cuffs from the Klingon, while a dozen held disruptors at ready in case he tried to make a break for it.

“The other players are being brought in,” Kitara explained.

“I see that, but, some of them are in chains,” Garcia said.

“They are prisoners, condemned to death,” Kitara said. “They will die in the game, or win an acquittal.”

“This game is to the death?” Garcia asked, stepping off the tile.

“Of course,” Kitara said. “You did understand this, did you not?”

Garcia opened his mouth to say something and then pointed a finger at her, at a loss of what to say.

“I would not worry,” Kitara said, evaluating the other players. “Only half of your opponents today are prisoners. The others are warriors who have lost their nerve or believe they are too old to continue and wish to die in a battle as opposed to old age. You should be able to handle them. As for the prisoners, some of them have brute strength going for them, but you can out think them. Most are too caught up in their personal fears, insanity, or rage to be effective players.”

“I don’t want to kill anyone!” Garcia said. “I do enough of that already. I thought when you said kill, you meant if figuratively.”

“If you do not kill them, they will most certainly kill you,” Kitara said.

“I’ll just refuse to play,” Garcia said.

Kitara pulled him close to her. “They will kill us both where we stand, now prepare yourself for what must be,” she said.

“What prevents them from ganging up on one particular player?” Garcia asked, thinking ‘like me, the weak human...’

“The Painstiks only have the power to kill when the mRocK ball is in the net. Any other time, they only cause pain. You’re familiar with that part. Only two pain sticks can be attacking any one player at any one time. The third Painstik to come into contact with a player will cause the offending player to receive all the pain into his own hands. Notice the grips on your Pain/Catcher. Touch someone with the Painstik that is already being tested by two other players, and you will get your pain and theirs combined. And remember, if the mRocK ball is in your net for longer than three seconds, your Pain/Catcher will kill you,” Kitara said.

Two Klingon Honor Guards came to make sure Garcia was standing on his tile, one physically placing him while the other held a phaser rifle at ready. The playing field was translucent enough from the bottom that patrons sitting below the playing field could still see. Around the playing field were also various Viewer Screens, displaying the

names of the forty-four players. Kitara was right about one thing. He was committed to this. If he decided to not play, he would die, and so would she. And they would probably have someone to replace him in that event, and there would still be forty-four players that would go on a killing spree. So, he could stay, and forty-three people would die anyway, old warriors participating in a public suicide ritual for one last shot at glory, alongside some prisoners that were merely fighting to stay alive.

He understood that Klingons did not fear death. They were taught to cherish it, to seek it out, for those who died in battle were considered honorable and given privileges in the afterlife. Was that a philosophy that supported a biological framework of survival of the fittest? Kronos was naturally a harsh planet, so only the greatest warriors, the smartest warriors would eke out a living. The rest were dead, but in a better place if they fought with courage. It was only those who avoided challenges and death that were pitied, and those rarely competed in the gene pool. This was at least an explanation that made it possible for him to view this ritual in a kinder light than, “you’re all absolutely crazy!”

He closed his eyes to focus on the present. Instead of quiet mental repose, he found himself contemplating how the war on Sherman’s planet would go without him. He wondered what the gods would do if he were dead, making the truce no longer valid. He wondered who would deliver Sonny Clemmons back in time to become a temporal patch to facilitate repairs on the time line. A time line that seemed to be fractured all over the place! And, just exactly how often had his timeline been fractured? The energy cost alone just to maintain his Universe’s integrity was incredible, or was that energy always configured into the Cosmos, because the Cosmos itself wanted to exist. Maybe that’s why the Cosmos needed Q, to facilitate cosmic repairs. No, he was just being silly, anthropomorphizing the Universe at large as if one could ascribe human characteristics to it. Then again, there was that giant living amoeba thing which Kirk had been forced to kill to save the Galaxy. What did McCoy compare our roles as? Antibodies? Antibodies saving the Universe?

“What are you thinking?” Kitara asked.

“I don’t know where to begin,” Garcia said.

“Stay focused!” Kitara said, slapping him.

“You’re going to have to stop doing that,” Garcia told her. The look on her face suggested she wasn’t having it, so he amended his statement, “in public.”

“This is it,” she said.

The patrons in the arena yelled triumphantly as the forty-four players were lifted suddenly from the ground. Each rose on their individual tiles which connected to the hovering playing field. Only one fell to his death, due to a loss of balance, or vertigo. Forty-three players arrived at the border. The mRocK ball was dropped to the center of the field and most of the players scrambled towards it. A force field came to life and swept any stragglers from the border onto the playing field proper.

The mRocK ball landed on the center tile. That tile, and the eight surrounding tile lit up, and rose twenty meters into the air. Tiles in line with the row and column that rose also rose, in decreasing heights the further from the center, creating the illusion of a pyramid, each raised tile becoming steps that led to the top. Garcia had emerged on the seventeenth column on leaving the border, running for the mRocK and was completely unprepared for the abrupt change in the playing field. A tile beneath him was rising and he had to jump to make the next one because of the distance between them, and had to

continue jumping to make it towards the top. Three Klingons emerged on the top section simultaneously with him. Two went for the mRocK and the other went for his opponent with his Pain/Catcher. Garcia went for the other, lighting him up with Pain, and shoving him off the side.

There were now two on the top of the mountain, Garcia and a Klingon warrior. Neither hesitated or bothered with an evaluation of each other. They both went for the mRocK. The Klingon scooped at it, while Garcia hit at and managed to knock it away. He knocked it right into a Klingon emerging on the top. The mRocK lit up on hitting that Klingon, and sent him tumbling backwards, dead before he hit the ground, but he also knocked over the Klingon right behind him, and so on down the 'hill' like dominoes. Most managed to fall or jump to tiles and recover. Two missed and fell through the openings below the raised tiles. Garcia had no time to consider their fates, for the Klingon sharing the raised platform lit Garcia up with the PainStik.

The playing field changed suddenly. The 'mountain descended until the playing field was one integral grid again, catching one of the fallen, who had been trying to scramble back onto the playing field after falling. He was cut in half by the tiles when they connected. His remains were transported off the field.

The Klingon immediately beside Garcia released his PainStik and attacked again, but Garcia blocked the attack, avoiding the tag of the Pain/Catcher. The tiles they occupied began to sink, and the 'mountain' top was suddenly the bottom of a valley. The Klingon engaging Garcia lost his balance and nearly fell, but Garcia reached out and steadied him. The Klingon returned the favor by hitting him with his Pain/Catcher, driving Garcia to his knees. Garcia struck back and the Klingon fell to the ground. It wasn't far enough of a drop to kill him, but the soldiers on the ground shot him with disruptors. No one would depart the playing field alive until the game was over. The guards stared at Garcia, their weapons aimed.

Garcia leaped to the next tile and began his climb out of the valley to rejoin the game. He emerged just as the playing field was beginning to return to its integral state. The mRocK ball whizzed by him and he dove to the ground to avoid it. He came up rolling and exchanged pain with several Klingons. Half of the players had already been eliminated. There were six huddled around Garcia, each taking turns to hit each other. A player tossed the mRocK towards Garcia's group, hoping to hit one of them since they were all in close proximity. Garcia snagged it out of the air and the six dispersed as quickly as roaches after a light comes on. He killed two of them and tossed the mRocK back to where it had come.

The player that had thrown it at Garcia caught it again, but he didn't throw it back to Garcia, as Garcia had hoped. Instead he threw it towards the border, where the mRocK ball was bounced back into play by the force field surrounding the playing field. That player had intended to catch it again, but he was tagged by a Pain/Catcher in the back of his thigh and went down hard. The mRocK flew back into the field where it hit an unsuspecting player, killing him, and then bounced along the playing field. Every tile the mRocK hit, the tile dropped from the playing field, taking out six tiles in a row before it rolled to a halt. Interestingly, the ball was kept on the playing field by a force field.

Garcia scrambled for the mRocK knowing he wouldn't get there in time, but he had to run to avoid the players behind him. A Klingon scooped up the mRocK and beamed it right at Garcia. Garcia threw himself off the playing field, feet first into the

gap where the tiles had fallen away. The only thing that kept him from falling to his death was that he turned his Pain/Catcher sideways, catching the tiles to either side of the gap. Like a gymnast on the unparallel bars. He swung up, did a hand stand on his Pain/Catcher and then came full circle to let his feet hit the tile behind him. The ball had whizzed by him to connect with a Klingon directly behind him, but there was another behind him who had caught the mRocK. Garcia ducked the deadly Pain/Catcher, and launched his feet out to trip the Klingon. He went down hard, but the reason he expired was because he had held the mRocK one second too long. The mRocK ball was beamed out of the net and released on the field at random. The playing field returned to normal as everyone regrouped. The dead were beamed off the field.

There were now ten players left. The person who had retrieved the mRocK threw it, no intentions of keeping it long enough to run down any of his opponents. The ball landed, displacing one tile. That tile shot up, launching the mRocK high into the air. When the tile returned to its space, it sunk, and initiated a wave pattern that rippled across the entire grid until it reached the border and then echoed back. A Klingon screamed in pain when his toes were cut off, but he stayed in the game, trying to make his way across the chaotic field towards the mRocK ball. Someone beat him to it and tossed it at another player. It hit the tile that player was standing on. The player was beamed away, only to reappear at random elsewhere on the field.

Garcia managed to scoop up the mRocK. The opponents that had been pursuing him were now fleeing. He gave chase, tossing the ball up in the air and catching it again, trying to keep control of it. Seeing his tactic, a few of his opponents charged. They obviously figured he couldn't take them all out. Garcia saw them coming and ran towards the border. When he neared the border he tossed the mRocK at the border, and caught it when it came back, closed the distance between the border, tossed it again, caught it, and the third time he threw it, he ducked, allowing it to hit the person directly behind him. Garcia leaped, hit the force field with his boots, and was propelled back with enough force that he flew over the Klingons in pursuit. He tumbled and came up standing, striking out. He ended up tripping a Klingon running up to tag him with pain.

The players Garcia had flown over were fighting ferociously for the mRocK like hockey players for control of a puck. One of them dropped the mRocK at their feet. The tile lit up, illuminating all the tiles in conjunction. It was an energy wave that took all the remaining players off their feet. Two players still struggled for the mRocK and one grabbed it with his hands. The mRocK grew spike, causing the Klingon to scream, but he hit the other player with it, spiking him in the head. And then he tried to remove the mRocK from his own hand before the time limit. He didn't make it. Once he was dead, the spikes withdrew, and it rolled out of his dead hand.

Another player scooped it up and lobbed it at his opponents, ten tiles away. One caught it, eliminated a player, and then tossed it back in the general direction. The mRocK hit the ground, and it erupted in spikes, shooting them out like a grenade. The Klingon nearby took some injuries, but he wasn't killed. He scooped it up and tossed it back. Purposely throwing it near enough to hit the tiles, but not close enough that the other opponent had a chance to catch it. All along the path that the mRocK rolled, flames issued from the tiles.

Someone managed to scoop up the mRocK, but he was set on fire in the process. He threw it towards Garcia, and then rolled to put himself out. Garcia threw the mRocK

back to the guy who was on fire, hitting him easily. The mRocK was unattended as the remaining players either were in combat, or too far from mRocK to recover it. It transported itself away to be dropped again at random. Garcia turned just in time to avoid being hit by one of his opponents. This one was not a Klingon, but a Norsicaan. It screamed in pain as Garcia lit him up, its jaws going wide. It struck out and tripped Garcia, landing him hard on his back. Garcia rolled to avoid the Pain/Catcher. The Norsicaan hit him in the face with the net, reversed the stick and was about jab him with the Pain end, but was struck by the mRocK ball in the chest. The ball dropped towards Garcia and he batted it away with his Pain/Catcher. The Norsicaan sank to his knees, then fell over backwards, his knees still bent. He wasn't beamed off the field until all motion had ceased.

Two players were engaged in a fierce fight, clobbering each other with their pain sticks. The mRocK dropped in above them, hitting each of them as it fell between them. It hit the floor and the tiles fell beneath their dead bodies. The mRocK was beam to another part of the playing field. Another player was taken out by hand to hand combat. The offending player, who had not used the mRocK ball to make a kill, was eliminated by a disruptor blast from a guard on a turret at the top of the arena. Apparently, cheating would not be tolerated. The mRocK came into play again, and someone caught it, tossed it at two others gripped in an exchange of Pain. It hit the tiles they were fighting on, and the tiles shot up, launching both of them in the air. One broke his neck in the fall; the other tumbled, came up too close to the border and was propelled back. He fell into the hole created by the tiles that had launched him into the air. He dropped his Pain/Catcher as he scrambled to catch hold of the tile. Garcia instinctively reached for the Klingon. The Klingon accepted his hand. Garcia started to haul him up, but at that moment, the misplaced tile descended back into place. It severed the Klingon at the arm and he fell to his death. The mRocK ball whizzed by Garcia's head, just missing him, and that only because he had gone prostrate in frustration, pounding the tile with his fist.

There were now two players on the field. Garcia scrambled to his feet and reached for the mRocK but it had been unattended for too long, and was beamed off the field and dropped elsewhere. Garcia and the remaining Klingon charged each other. The ball would continue to drop to the playing field, creating havoc, until one of them could get it, but if one of them was preoccupied with pain, that left the one without Pain a better chance to get the mRocK ball and finish the game. Garcia changed directions and launched himself to catch the mRocK as it reappeared on the field. He snagged it, hit the ground rolling, and launched it towards the remaining opponent. The Klingon caught it and tossed it back at him. Garcia caught it and threw it back, closing the distance, and again the Klingon caught it and tossed it back. Garcia caught it, tossed it back. The Klingon caught it, but he didn't have time to avoid Garcia's Pain/Catcher. Garcia held him in check until the time expired and mRocK ball was beamed out the dead player's net.

Pandemonium erupted in the Arena as Garcia stood victorious, winded, in pain, but very much alive. He caught the glimpse of Kitara from one of the monitors, looking rather triumphant.

♪♪▶

“Well, played,” Kitara said, meeting him on the ground with a kiss.

"I figured you were going to hit me for trying to help one of my opponents," Garcia said.

"You actually got points for that," Kitara explained. "It is better to fight your opponent in a fair battle than to have happenstance or the environment do it for you. You gained some fans today."

"You were lucky!" Admiral Sheaar said, sneering.

"He performed better than I expected," Gowron admitted. The whole counsel had gathered around. "Kitara speaks truth. You have won some fans here, especially amongst the civilian population. Your name will be recorded in the Book of Champions. The first Human to have ever won at mRock!"

"The first Human to ever play?" Garcia asked.

"That, too," Gowron said.

"Look, that sporting event was rather intense," Garcia said. "May I have some time to recoup?"

"You may," Gowron said. "We will reconvene tomorrow, noon, and provide you with your 2nd challenge."

"In other words, you haven't devised one yet," Kitara said. "You didn't expect him to survive."

"We will meet tomorrow," Gowron said, his patience once again growing thin.

"Wait," Sheaar said. "You can't just let him go. He might leave and not return."

"I will not leave until this ordeal has been settled," Garcia said.

"Gowron," Admiral Sheaar said. "You remember the matter we spoke of in private."

"Garcia, you will remain on Kronos, as my guest," Gowron said. "Guards, escort Garcia to a room appropriate for a graduate student at the Klingon Academy."

"I protest," Kitara said. "He has come here and faced your first challenge with no hint of fear and you treat him as if he were a coward who might flee? What is this?"

"He is my guest," Gowron snapped. "Don't make him a prisoner."

"Kitara, it's okay," Garcia said. "Just make sure I get my bag and then you return to the ship. I'm sure Gowron is a very pleasant host. Maybe I will get that Rokeg blood pie now."

Kitara scowled at Gowron, but she complied with Garcia's directions. Garcia was led away, having to go through the tunnels due to the lingering patrons who wanted to get a closer look at the hero of today's game. Garcia waved politely at the mob.

Garcia's room was rather Spartan, typical of Klingons schools. It sort of reminded him a Tibetan temple, where there were no distractions for the students that might keep them from their studies. It had a balcony with a nice view of capital city. It even had a rugged looking plant on the balcony. Ever practical, the leaves were of the chewing kind that held medicinal purposes. It eased pain. Garcia picked a leaf and chewed on it. About an hour later a guard appeared and presented him his bag, the one Kitara was meant to bring him. Apparently they did not want her visiting with him. He opened his bag and found the medical supplies and went to work on his wounds. After that, he cleaned up, changed into something comfortable, and laid down to take a nap, using a towel Kitara had been thoughtful enough to pack as a pillow.

The chime to his door rang and he went to answer it, expecting it to be dinner. It was, but bringing it was the Duras sisters.

“May we come in?” Lursa asked.

“I don’t think my mate would be kind to me if she knew I let the two of you in,” Garcia said.

“She is not here, is she?” B’Etor asked. “We were led to believe you were alone.”

“I’m alone,” Garcia admitted.

“Good,” Lursa said, pushing her way in the door.

B’Etor, Lursa’s sister, followed, pushing the tray of food. She kicked the door shut behind her. “We brought you a feast, one fit for a warrior of such prowess.”

“That was some tournament you fought today,” Lursa said.

“Oh, please, what do you both want?” Garcia asked. The food smelled fairly good, though.

B’Etor pushed in close to him. “We like heroes.”

“We feel safe in your presence,” Lursa said, coming at him from the other side.

“You’re not like other humans,” B’Etor said.

“Definitely not like Picard,” Lursa said, both her and her sister maneuvering Garcia to the couch, where they forced him to sit down.

“Let’s speed this up to the part where you offer me something and then I turn it down,” Garcia said.

“I doubt you will turn us down,” B’Etor said.

“We could help you,” Lursa said. “You have a war on Sherman’s planet, and we have a few ships at our disposal.”

“You have my attention,” Garcia said.

“Is that what this is?” B’Etor asked, her hands straying.

Garcia removed her hands from his lap.

Lursa bit Garcia’s ear. “How is it you seem to be all over the Alpha Quadrant, stirring up troubles?”

“I was cloned,” Garcia said.

“That would explain it,” B’Etor said. “You can never have too much of a good thing, is what I always say.”

Lursa climbed up on Garcia’s lap.

“Now, ladies, I think it’s best that you leave,” Garcia said.

“You don’t seem to be protesting too loudly,” B’Etor said, biting his neck. Garcia closed his eyes.

“If you win this Gowron’s challenge, you could have the support of the Duras family,” Lursa said. “We can certainly offer you more than Kitara’s family will. Her father is still in control of that House and will not tolerate you advancing her daughter beyond her station. But if you join us, we could advance your causes and gain the support you need from the High Counsel.”

“We know you have the Romulan Queen Nelvana’s support,” B’Etor said. “Why not take our help as well.”

“You could become the most powerful person in the entire Alpha Quadrant,” Lursa said. “Maybe even in the entire Milky Way Galaxy! And we see that you are a man who is not afraid to wield such power.”

“And at the same time, we know you would be rather generous to your subjects,” B’Etor said. “And we could do things to please you that quite possibly no one else has ever offered you.”

“Are you interested,” Lursa asked, kissing his neck.

Garcia sighed, wondering if he should have stayed in his armor instead of dressing more comfortably. “I’m a bit distracted by the sexual tension,” Garcia said. “Can we negotiate the fine details later?”

CHAPTER THIRTYFOUR

There had been a few wounds on Garcia's back that he couldn't reach with the dermal regenerator, but fortunately, all of those bruises and scratches were concealed by his full armor. Admiral Sheaar seemed to be in a foul mood. Kitara's parents watched Garcia like snipers ready to make a kill. Trolos seemed amused and nodded confidently at Garcia. Everyone that had been present the day before, except Gowron, was back and a few new comers had joined the ranks, after having witnessed the mRocK event. It seemed word was spreading about this strange human who would be Klingon.

"What's on the agenda today?" Garcia asked Kitara. "More Gladiator type stuff?"

"I do not know," Kitara admitted. "Usually the challenges are tailored to exploit the weaknesses of a person who tries to take the fast track. By hitting you in your weakest area, they can quickly defeat you and discourage others from trying to gain rank and privileges without having earned them first, through rituals and discipline."

"Sounds reasonable," Garcia said.

"Yes, unfortunately, you don't have many weaknesses," Kitara said.

"Well, I can think of a couple," Garcia said, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Had I thought you any weaknesses that the High Counsel could exploit, I would have prepared you for the Challenge," Kitara said. She scowled at the Duras sisters. "You should watch out for them. They're up to something."

Gowron entered, saving Garcia the need to respond to Kitara's concerns. Guards followed him, bringing a table. They set the table down and Gowron called Garcia to approach. Garcia complied, followed by Kitara. The desk top was animated with graphics and instructions.

"For your next challenge, you will engage in a simulation," Gowron said.

Garcia smiled to himself, knowing simulations were his forte.

"Here," Gowron said, pointing at the space station on the desk screen. "This is a training facility in orbit above Kronos. Your mission is to infiltrate this facility, make your way to this independent computer system, remove the data chips, and bring them back here, all without getting caught by any enemy combatants. To facilitate this mission, you will be given a shuttle capable of cloaking. You will be escorted to your shuttle now. The mission is complete when you hand me the data chips."

"Wait," Garcia said. "That's it? No rules of engagement?"

"The Enemy will kill you if given the chance," Gowron said. "If you kill them first, it is part of the game."

"But, because this is a war game, I am allowed to exercise restraint, and show mercy?" Garcia asked.

"It is your prerogative," Gowron said.

"How many people on the station?" Kitara asked.

"Standard compliment," Gowron said. "Oh, did I also say you have a time limit?"

"Lead on," Garcia told the guard.

After Garcia was out of the room, Gowron turned to Admiral Sheaar. "Did you triple the guards at the training facility?"

"I did," Admiral Sheaar said.

"You cheated!" Kitara said.

“No,” Gowron said. “I said standard complements. And standard complements for a station expecting an intruder, would be three times as many as standard. All operatives understand that there is always a chance that their mission will be compromised. This challenge simulates the fact that the enemy has become aware of a potential infiltrator and has consequently beefed up security.”

“I would like to appeal to the Counsel,” Kitara said.

“The Counsel would normally hear the words of a Cha’Dlch, however, they can only hear such words when the agent who the Cha’Dlch represents is present,” Gowron said. “Now, be silent or I will have you thrown out.”

Kitara was wise enough not to say anything else.



Piloting the shuttle was the easy part. Finding a way onto the station was problematic. Based on the passive scans, Garcia realized that the space station was on high alert, which meant they knew he was coming. In any simulation, the guys pretending to be the bad guys also knew that the good guys were coming, so, in a way, Garcia had already anticipated them knowing he was coming. This knowledge wasn’t proving helpful. He studied the passive scans, looking for a tidy place to beam in. Naturally, beaming in would set off multiple alarms, and draw the enemy to him, so the question was could he beam close enough to the computer system he needed to sabotage and get back out? Not only would beaming in alert them of his presence, if they were watching, they would be able to triangulate his shuttle’s position and blow it out of the sky, and they would be watching.

Garcia looked for alternative exits from the station. A life pod might not out run the space stations weapon systems, so that was out. The space station had transporters, so if he could get to a transporter room, he could beam out, but those places were likely highly guarded. There were a couple of shuttles in the hangar bay, which might prove useful if he could get to them. He wondered if there was a cloaked ship looking over the station? He considered cheating by using the New Constitution’s transporters to beam down, but the parking orbit the Klingon Space Traffic Control had assigned the NC put them on the other side of the planet. If he parked his ship against an airlock and entered, it would set off alarms, and he wouldn’t even make it close to his goal.

“What would Kirk do?” Garcia asked, puzzling over the problem. The clock was ticking.

An evil grin took roots and began to grow, his memory of how the Iotians had tried to capture the Philadelphia Freedom, giving him an idea. He maneuvered his shuttle about, slowly, with just sufficient force to creep along the station and not attract attention of sensors. Too much thrust could actually alert someone watching closely for an intruder by the extra ions around the station. Garcia stood up and programmed the emergency transporter, warming up its coils. Then he reached under his armor and worked his belt down. He had hidden it under his armor for fear it might have been confiscated, but he pretty much never went anywhere without his Emergency Life Belt, which could encapsulate him in a force field in an emergency. The first time he had used it in an actual emergency, he had decided he would always have one handy, and they had proven useful against the lightning of the gods. In order to ensure proper operation, it was necessary for it to be the outer most garments.

Garcia stared out the flight deck window, studying the station, before entering the command stream on the dash console. There was a window looking back at him, and he could see the guards pacing the corridor. He knew that there was no way he was going to accomplish this without killing some Klingons, so he decided to try and minimize the deaths as much as he could, and giving the rest a quick and easy out. After entering his commands, Garcia went and activated a disruptor, setting it for over load. He tossed it on the floor, set another one for over load, and tossed it on the floor. He increased the O2 in his shuttle. He beamed the first disruptor to the far side of the station, pushed the execute button on the command console, and then activated the transporter a second time, beaming himself off the ship. The dematerialization process was complete about the same time that the shuttle rammed the space station.

The space station shuddered with the impact of the shuttle, as it lodged itself into the structure. The station rocked again when the first disruptor blew up and then a second time when the second disruptor blew up... Only, when the second one went, it blew up the shuttle. The shudder that rumbled through the floor was of much longer duration than the others.

Emergency Klaxons were blaring all along the corridors, their lights flashing in synchronicity. Garcia activated his life belt, attached a suction cup to the wall, tethered to his belt, and then fired a phaser at viewing port, melting a whole in the structure until the window popped out, venting the air from his section. The wind was incredible and the Klingons that were fast approaching him lost consciousness due to the sudden pressure drop. Their unconscious bodies were dragged along the floor, but they were not blown out into space. A force field popped on, sealing the whole. Garcia ran to the next section, fired a phaser at the port, and decompressed it as well, and the subsequent drop in pressure before the force field came up was sufficient to render everyone in that section unconscious. In this manner, he made his way along the outer edge of the station until he came to a passage way. There was a fire team control working on the damaged caused by the disruptor he had sent in. He took them all out with stun and moved past them. Guards in space suits were now behind him, and Klingons without suits were approaching the other way. He fired at the nearest port, and everyone not in a suit fell unconscious. The Klingons in suits fired at him, forcing him to duck away into the nearest room. It turned out to be an armory.

Garcia took quick inventory of the armory and retrieved a couple more disruptors, set one for over load, and threw it across the corridor into the next room. He set another for overload and dropped it on the floor in the armory, and then he threw two more, each a different direction down the corridor. They figured they had him pinned down and were intending to wait him out. They might have backed off from the disruptors had they heard the whine it was making as it reached critical energy levels, but without the air in the compartment, there was no sound. The disruptor across the hall exploded, shaking the station, lighting the area up with a flash, but no permanent fire due to the lack of oxygen. Garcia came out, firing in each direction, literally diving into the room across the way and down the hole created by the first disruptor thrown from the armory. The disruptor in the armory exploded next, just as Garcia dived down to the next deck, made much more devastating due to the other weapons. Except for the flash, the other two were hardly noticed due to the armory going up.

Garcia had hit the floor below with his hands first, a perfect dive roll, and came up on his feet. He hurried back towards the outer wall, glanced out into the corridor, and discovered that the way was blocked by guards. He fired at the window behind them. It took three shots before it went, but the force field snapped on so quick that it didn't vent enough atmosphere to render any unconscious.

That was when armory above exploded, nearly caving the ceiling in on top of him. The Force field on the most recent hole snapped off, and emergency lighting came up. Guards were dropping left and right due to lack of sufficient air pressure. Garcia ran to the next section, which was blocked by a blast door. He took one of the disruptors from a dead Klingon, set it for overload, and backed off. When it blew, it took out a part of the floor, leaving the door intact. Air vented from the lower section, widening the hole just big enough for Garcia to squeeze through, after the air was gone. He circled back, went down a corridor. Most of the guards in this section were technically dead from a lack of oxygen, but might be alright if medical attention could be rendered within five minutes. A few had managed to get to their spacesuits, forcing Garcia to shoot them dead with the disruptor. There was no coming back from that death.

Garcia made it to the cafeteria, where he confiscated three disruptors and set them for overload and piled them on the floor. He departed the room, exchanged fire with a couple more guards in suits. He felt the explosion through his feet, since there was no sound to clue him due to the lack of air. The compartment below was now empty of air, but a few guards were in suits and they fired at him with disruptor rifles. Garcia fired back, catching one. Garcia confiscated a disruptor from the floor, set it for overload, and continued with a fire fight until the last moment, when he tossed it down the hole. Most of the Klingons retreated from the room. One Klingon picked up the weapon in an attempt to turn it off, but it was too late. It was already critical and it blew up in his hands. When Garcia peered over, he noticed the room had been evacuated, so he jumped on down. He easily collected the computer chips he had been instructed to retrieve. The guards returned, and Garcia shot at them with his phaser. They appeared to have him successfully pinned down.

Using his implant, he connected to the Klingon Information Net, via a nearby satellite. He did this while firing at the Klingons outside the door. From the Information Net, he activated a medical transport for all the Klingons on the base, beaming everyone off. At the last moment, he held his breath, turned off his shield, and using the same emergency medical service, had himself transported to the High Counsel's Chambers.

He arrived, took in a deep breath and stood up. He walked over to the table and dropped the data chips on the desk Gowron had brought in.

"Oh, and look at that," Garcia said. "I still have five whole minutes left. Is that enough time to get some pie?"

♪♪▶

"You are insane," Kitara said, when she had him alone. She kissed him. "That's why I love you."

"Wow, you love me?" Garcia asked.

"Come on," Kitara said, grabbing him by the arm and leading him away. "I got them to give you a pass. We're going out to eat."

"We are?" Garcia asked, still stuck on, 'you love me.'

“How often do we have a chance to eat at a fine Klingon establishment?” Kitara asked.

“Good point,” Garcia said, following her up to a tram station.

“Do they know how many I killed?” Garcia asked.

“We watched the whole thing live,” Kitara said. “The last official death count was two hundred and forty. Don’t look so glum. They had every intentions of killing you. No one expected you to do a suicide run with the shuttle. Nor did they expect you to start blowing holes in the station. Who does that?! Nobody does that! You’re just insane. Still, it was effective.”

She pulled him onto the next Tram. Six children already on the Tram ran up to him. “Aren’t you that Human who won the mRocK contest?”

“I am,” Garcia said.

The mother pulled the kids back. “Sorry, please forgive the intrusion.”

“It’s okay,” Garcia assured her.

“Yeah, he hits like this,” one of the kids said, a mock mRocK battle ensuing amongst his friends.

“I told you that you would be popular,” Kitara said, laughing at the kids.

They stepped off the Tram after three stops and Kitara led him through an area that might easily be confused for a park. Contrary to popular belief, the Klingons did appreciate plant life, because it provided air and food for many of the animals they preyed on. They had an appreciation for natural environments, and that was the reason why most people lived very simple lives, clothes made of plant fibers and furniture made from wood or stone. The restaurant she led him to had a pond outside, with a bridge that led over it, with fish sucking at the surface as they trolled around the waters in groups. It reminded him of a Chinese setting for one of his holo-novels.

Kitara paid at the door and they went in together. She paused only to find a table with room for them, and then led him by the hand towards that table. She stopped when his hand pulled free from hers and turned back to see a Klingon confronting Garcia.

Garcia had been following along, simply taking in the scenery. The tables were configured for communal eating, buffet style, everyone at the table sharing conversation and food. He noticed the adversarial Klingon getting up from his table and coming behind him, and had turned to greet him just as the Klingon was about to grab his arm. Garcia brought his hands up to indicate he surrendered, not sure if the gesture translated the same in Klingon, but at least he would have his hands already up if he had to defend himself.

“I’m just here to eat,” Garcia said.

“They don’t serve your kind here,” the Klingon said.

“Back off,” Kitara warned.

“Silent, P’Tak!” he said. “This is between men.”

“Come back when you find some, then,” Kitara challenged.

“I’m challenging him,” the Klingon said, pointing and putting his face near Garcia’s face.

“I’m his guide, and if you want to fight him, you’ll have to fight me,” Kitara said.

“You obviously prefer human males because you can lead them about by the hands,” the Klingon said. “A Klingon warrior would not be so easily leashed. If you want to eat here, Human, you will have to go through me.”

“I really don’t want any more fights today,” Garcia said.

“And when I am done with you, I am going take your woman and show her what a real warrior is like in bed,” the Klingon said.

“May I?” Garcia asked Kitara.

“Take him down,” Kitara said.

Garcia started boxing the Klingon in the head with machine gun speed, repetitious hits that so overwhelmed the Klingon all he could do was retreat back. The punches kept coming, lightening fast, one after the other until he was backed up against the wall.

Garcia finished him off with a spin kick. Normally, one would never turn their butt to an opponent, but Garcia knew the man was too dazed to have time to block the spin kick. The boot to the head caused the head to hit the wall, double damage, and the Klingon slid down to the floor, out cold.

Garcia turned to see if anyone else had gotten up. “Well?” Garcia asked. “Is there anyone else?”

Kitara rolled her eyes and sat down. All the Klingon males in the restaurant stood up, all eager to take his challenge. While Garcia fought, Kitara helped herself to the food on the table. She scooted over a couple times to allow a combatant to fall across the table. One of the other females joined her.

“He fights fairly well for a Human,” she commented.

“Yep,” Kitara said, munching on something that looked like Earth mill worms. “I’m still trying to teach him all the customs.”

“Like not challenging everyone in the room?” her new friend asked. “You ought to try the boqrat. It’s rather good today.”

Garcia fell to the bench next to Kitara, kicking the Klingon that was attacking him. He reached for the mug in front of her and took a quick drink, not caring that it had belonged to someone else. Two Klingons approached, and he held a finger up, asking them to pause while he drank. They actually paused, allowing him to finish, he set the drink down, stood up, swallowed, motioned that he was ready, and then hit one while simultaneously being hit by the other.

Two other females joined Kitara, bringing their plates. One hesitated in sitting down, and for good reason; Garcia rolled over the table, came up, apologized profusely for getting in her way, and was dragged back out to the fight by the two Klingons that had come to get him.

“Does this happen everywhere you go?” she asked, sitting down.

“I’m not sure,” Kitara said. “We really haven’t been together all that long.”

“He seems nice,” another said. She grimaced. “Oh, that’s going to hurt.”

“Would you like some glasht?” another asked.

“Oh, thank you!” Kitara said. “I haven’t had fresh glasht in forever.”

All the girls picked up their plates and drinks as if on cue. A Klingon slid across the table long ways, rolling off the far side.

“Sorry,” Garcia said.

The girls ignored him and continued with their dining experience. The proprietor and the cooks came out to get in on the action. The waitress, and the proprietor’s wife, brought out fresh bowls of food and drink to replace what had been knocked off the table.

“Thank you,” Kitara said.

“It’s not every day we get a mRocK champion in here,” the proprietor’s wife said. “Would he be opposed to singing a hologram for us to hang on the wall?”

“Oh!” said one of the ladies. “That was him?”

“How many other Humans do you think make it this far into this side of town?” another female asked, a hint of sarcasm in her voice.

“You have a point,” she said.

“That means you’re Lady Kitara,” the proprietor’s wife said. “Would you also leave a hologram with your autograph?”

“Sure,” Kitara said.

“It is most kind of you to grace my establishment,” she went on.

“I’ve always enjoyed my dining experience here,” Kitara said.

A table gave way to the weight of warriors fighting across it, creating a loud crash, and then it was quiet. Garcia limped over to the table and sat down. He was about to reach for a piece of the Kayvac, but suddenly there were a number of armed men standing around him.

“Hey,” Garcia protested. “It was a fair fight.”

“You will come with us,” one of them said.

“Can I eat first?” Garcia asked.

“Now,” he said.

Kitara was going to reach for her weapon, except for the disruptor against her back.

“You, too,” he ordered.

Garcia and Kitara stood up. “Thank you,” Garcia said, shaking the proprietor’s wife’s hand.

“Please come again,” she said.

Kitara bowed and allowed herself to be escorted out of the establishment. She and Garcia were placed in a hovering shuttle that was quickly piloted away.

“The food smelled really good,” Garcia said.

“It tasted good, too,” Kitara said.

“Can we go again?” Garcia asked.

“Do you think you can behave civilly,” Kitara said.

“Wasn’t I?” Garcia asked.

“You let these guys with guns sneak up on us,” Kitara said.

“I take it these people aren’t the local militia?” Garcia asked.

“No,” Kitara said. “But, I suppose if they wanted us dead, they would have killed us already.”

“I concur,” Garcia said.

“I like it when you agree with me,” Kitara said.

“We agree quite a lot, actually,” Garcia pointed out.

“I know,” Kitara said, noting the shuttle was landing. “It’s why I chose you.”

“I thought I chose you,” Garcia said.

“Men always think that, but it’s really the females that do the choosing,” Kitara said.

“Get out,” the lead abductor instructed.

“Do you think they’ll feed us?” Garcia asked.

“Doubtfully,” Kitara said.

The shuttle was parked on a roof and they were escorted down into the living area of an opulent house. Grilka met them as they entered.

“Oh, put your weapons away, boys,” she complained. “This is no way to treat our guests. All of you, out of here.”

CHAPTER THIRTYFIVE

“How dare you take us against our will?” Kitara demanded of Grilka.

“I didn’t think you would come if I sent an invitation,” Grilka said.

“I would have,” Garcia said.

“Are you flirting with my wife?” Quark demanded, entering the living area. A fire roared in the hearth to his right.

Kitara turned to Garcia and hit him in the arm. “Hey,” Kitara said. “Show a little respect.”

“I’m just saying...”

“Well, stop it,” Kitara snapped.

Grilka laughed, heartily. “If there were ever two people that could change Klingon society for the better, it will be the two of you,” Grilka said. “When you win the next challenge, Garcia, Kitara will be accepted as a Warrior, and could potentially claim any command she wanted, even the command of a Starship Captain. Consequently, women every where will see new doors opened up to them. And I will no longer have to participate in a marriage of convenience to maintain my property.”

“Hey,” Quark said, feigning hurt. “I thought you said you were beginning to love me.”

“And I thought you said you just wanted my money,” Grilka said.

“I want that, too,” Quark said. “But that’s not the point.”

“You knew this was a marriage of convenience when you entered the arrangement with me,” Grilka said.

“Your convenience,” Quark complained. “But I am still hopeful you will come around to loving me. Maybe start going around the house nude. Once in a while.”

“Relax, Quark,” Grilka said. “I do find you amusing. You’re just not a warrior.” She said this last while circling Garcia, tracing a line around his chest. She smiled at Kitara, who was sizing her up for a fight. “And I do so need a hero.”

Quark swallowed, nervously. He had seen that look in her eyes before and there was always trouble afterwards.

“He’s taken,” Kitara said.

“I see that,” Grilka said, tapping Kitara’s name on his chest armor. She smiled up at Garcia. “If Kitara is willing, would you claim me as your second?”

“A second Cha’ Dlch?” Garcia asked.

Grilka laughed hard, patted Garcia on the cheek. “And a sense of humor,” Grilka said. “Your second wife.”

“You’re joking, right?” Garcia asked.

“No,” Grilka said, moving in so close he could smell her breath. “I’m quite serious. You destroyed the space station! Do you know how angry you made everyone? You need me.”

“Um, well, my plate’s a little full at the moment,” Garcia said, nervously looking at Kitara expecting to be smacked at any second.

“I want you to align your Houses with mine,” Grilka said.

“What?!” Garcia and Kitara both asked.

“You need another friend, Garcia,” Grilka said.

“He has more friends than he has time to entertain,” Kitara said.

“That’s fairly accurate, actually,” Garcia agreed.

“I doubt you have a friend like me,” Grilka said.

“And, what do I get out of this?” Garcia asked.

“Tam?!” Kitara snapped. “She deals with black market weapons.”

“So do I,” Garcia reminded her. “But I suspect Grilka is more honorable and trustworthy than say, the Duras sisters.”

“They contacted you?” Kitara and Grilka asked, simultaneously.

“I’m rather hungry,” Garcia said, trying to change the subject. “Any chance you feed your guests?”

“Answer the question,” Kitara said, anger flushing across her face.

“Quark, go fetch him a something to eat and drink,” Grilka said.

“What am I, a waiter?” Quark asked. Grilka gave him a look. “I’ll be right back.”

“And you’re stalling,” Kitara said to Garcia. “Spit it out.”

“They tried to seduce me,” Garcia admitted.

“Both of them?” Grilka asked.

“Together,” Garcia said.

“You didn’t!” Kitara said, her voice going deeper.

“I had to play along,” Garcia said. “But I guess they were too tired after the initial negotiations, so we didn’t really get down to any demands on their side.”

“You live a dangerous life,” Grilka said.

“You don’t know just how dangerous,” Kitara growled. “If either of them ends up pregnant, I’ll kill you.”

“I used protection,” Garcia said. “I didn’t want an STD. Had one. Died. Not fun.”

“I was there,” Kitara reminded him.

Kitara rubbed her forehead, started pacing.

“Still, if you play them right, we could use this to our advantage,” Grilka said.

Quark arrived, bringing a sandwich and a drink, which he set the plate on the coffee table. Garcia sat down at the couch and began eating. “Oh, this is nice,” Garcia mumbled, his mouth full.

“Lovely,” Quark said. “I’ll open a restaurant.”

“What were you going to offer him in exchange?” Kitara asked.

“You’re not seriously considering her offer, are you?” Garcia asked.

“Eat,” Kitara snapped, and then looked to Grilka.

“I have connections with people in authority, friends on the High Counsel,” Grilka said. “You will have the economic and political support of my House. And, I am in a position to send help to Sherman’s planet. I have three ship’s that could be there in less than forty eight hours.”

“And what do you want?” Kitara asked.

“Just your friendship,” Grilka said, sounding innocent. “And to be his second.”

“You realize,” Garcia said, pausing to swallow the food in his mouth. “You won’t technically be second. I have quite a few arrangements.”

“All your other arrangements are meaningless,” Grilka said. “The only ones that will be recognized are Klingon females of circumstance. And I want the same deal Kitara has. Free reign over my domain, the right to choose for myself, which I know you will give me. Once you have won the third challenge, no one will question your status as

a warrior, or challenge the validity of our arrangement. If you die in the challenge, due to your present status I will be considered a widow entitled to my wealth, and Kitara's share will fall to me, since she has no living heir beyond her. I don't think you will lose, but either way, I win."

"Well, we don't need your ships," Kitara said. "Once Garcia has won the last challenge, Garcia will ask the High Counsel to send ships..."

"The High Counsel will do no such thing," Kitara said. "They want the Cardassians on Sherman's Planet. By doing this, the Cardassians will be spreading themselves too thin, making themselves vulnerable. The Counsel predicts that six months after the Cardassians have control over Sherman's planet, the Cardassians will have to give up their occupation of Bajor."

Kitara silently raged.

"Ah, you see it, too," Grilka said.

"We were told to hold," Kitara said.

"If Gowron doesn't kill Garcia in the challenge, he will kill you having you defend a planet that is doomed to fall," Grilka said. "Either way, he gets rid of you, and seeds the destruction of Cardassia in the same instant."

"None of that makes sense. There is a possibility that defeating the Cardassians at Sherman could have the same results at Bajor," Garcia argued. "We win, the Cardassians are forced to withdrawal, and because of their loss they'll lose public support for a war they're already losing, and call their other forces home, if for nothing else but to regroup and rethink their current strategies."

"You could just give them Sherman's planet," Quark said.

"I'm not doing that," Garcia said.

"And you couldn't if you wanted to," Grilka said. "Klingons would not surrender or allow themselves to be captured in such a setting. You're being set up to fail. Three ships might make a difference, at least in the space battle."

Kitara looked to Garcia, studying him. "We're going to need her support," she said, finally.

"What exactly does this mean for me?" Garcia asked. "I don't want any more children."

"You don't have to worry about that," Grilka assured him. "Protection or not, I'm not sleeping with anyone who has slept with the Duras sisters. This arrangement is for convenience only, but I promise you, you will have my support."

"That's all you want? Just his name?" Kitara verified.

"Look at his face. He doesn't want me and he doesn't want my wealth," she winked playfully at Quark on the last remark. "I get notoriety and left alone by him or any would be suitors or mates that would be looking to control me. Garcia will have to occasionally show up for some ritual requirements, but it would certainly not be a hardship for him, by any means."

"Fine," Kitara said. "You have my approval."

"She does?" Garcia asked, surprised. He nearly choked on his sandwich.

"You've made arrangements with every two bit whore in the galaxy," Kitara said. "I think you could manage one more."

Garcia was stunned.

"We need this," Kitara said.

“Fine,” Garcia said.

“Fine,” Kitara echoed.

“Fine,” Grilka said, happy.

“I’ll pack my bags,” Quark said, glumly. “Garcia, I might not be a great warrior, but I will have my revenge on you. One day, when you least expect it.”

“Oh, don’t be such a bad sport,” Grilka said. “This relationship has been profitable for you. As a parting gift, I will even give you the credits so that you can buy that Dabo Bar you had your eyes on a while back. Where was it, Terok Nor?”

Quark stomped off.

“So, what do I have to do?” Garcia asked. “Kiss you?”

“I already told you that that is not a possibility now that I know you slept with the Duras sisters,” Grilka said.

“Hell, I may never kiss you again,” Kitara said. She slapped him. “Both of them?!”



Garcia stood before Gowron and the High Counsel. Gowron came forward and touched the additional mark on his armor. He looked to Kitara behind Garcia and to his right, and then he looked at Grilka, behind and to his left. He grimaced at Garcia.

“What is this?” Gowron demanded.

“All those lonely nights, locked up in my dorm room,” Garcia began. He caught a passing glimpse at the Duras sisters.

“It was only two nights!” Gowron said.

“As a warrior, I’m in my right to claim any woman I want,” Garcia said. “Kitara approved and endorsed it. I sent the little Ferengi packing. Of course, he does fairly well with a bat’leh, so I understand why no other warriors tried to subdue Grilka before I came along.”

There were a few rumblings in the crowd at Garcia’s suggestion that there were no warriors willing to tame Grilka. Gowron turned his back to Garcia, and then turned sharply to Grilka.

“You want control that badly?” Gowron asked her.

“It’s mine. I know of no warriors who wouldn’t squander my wealth,” Grilka said.

“Then you shall have your wish, Grilka. I recognize your right to control all that is yours,” Gowron said.

“Then I will give the Ferengi a divorce,” Grilka said.

“It was an insult to our species that you married him to begin with!” Gowron said.

“You forced my hand,” Grilka said. “I did what any warrior would do to save ground.”

“You want to act like a Warrior, then be prepared to defend your wealth, like a Warrior,” Gowron said. “You will wish you had married a Klingon.”

“You forget, the most dangerous creature in nature is a woman defending her property and children,” Grilka challenged. “I will defend what’s mine, and like any warrior, I will make and keep my own alliances.”

“Hey, I thought this was about me?” Garcia asked.

Gowron returned to his position of power. The Duras sisters did not look pleased. He winked at them. B’Etor, the younger, reached for her dagger, but her older sister

Lursa stayed her hand. She whispered something to her sister and her sister smiled. A chill went down Garcia's spine.

Gowron faced Garcia. "For your final challenge, you will take the Starship you brought here and go against three of my war ships in a war game exercise," Gowron said.

Garcia didn't bother to hide his anger. "I will not," Garcia said.

Gowron's eyes went wide at Garcia's rebellion. "Are you forfeiting?!"

"The New Constitution is not a warship," Garcia said. "Its crew is not warriors. Your challenge will be directed at me, or there is no challenge."

"Your challenge is a war game exercise," Gowron said.

"I've already done this exercise," Garcia said, approaching the High Counsel. "Against him," Garcia pointed at Admiral Sheaar. "And I kicked his ass! So, either you come up with a fresh challenge for me, or I'm out of here."

Honor Guards made themselves visible on the floor, bat'lehs ready.

Kitara stepped up closer to Garcia. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Stand down," Garcia told her, his voice clearly audible to everyone in the room. No one observing had any doubts that he was in charge at that moment.

Kitara nodded and took a step back. Her hand went to the hilt of her knife. Garcia stepped closer to Gowron. "Either give me something new, dismiss me, or kill me, but don't waste any more of my time in this repetitious nonsense."

"You have not gone up against one of my ships," Gowron said.

"Admiral Sheaar is your man, and therefore I have gone up against one of your men, and he came with three ships!" Garcia said. "And, I know that you and the High Counsel are privy to the data concerning those battles."

"There is evidence that those data chips may have been altered," Gowron said.

"So you're calling me a liar?" Garcia asked. "You also have no doubt heard of several other space battles I have been in, and all of them had no fewer than five ships against me. I have proven myself in this arena, so your war game exercise is an insult, and a waste of time. Why are you stalling?"

"Stalling?!" Gowron repeated, getting right in Garcia's face. "I will tear you apart."

"And that would make a great third challenge," Garcia said. "Just give the word."

Admiral Sheaar came forwards, drawing his d'k tahg.

"Stand down," Gowron pointed at him, his eyes not leaving Garcia's eyes.

"He has forfeited," Sheaar said. "I will have his life and that traitorous P'tak he claims as his mate."

"Oh, please," Garcia said. "Gowron just saved your life and you know it. Everyone here knows I've beaten you, both in hand to hand combat, as well as ship to ship."

"If one warrior of repute who has been in battle with you would come forwards to vouch for you, I will consider your request," Gowron said.

Captain MaHt stepped forwards. "Gowron. Garcia has beaten me in battle. In addition to beating me, I was in a position to witness Admiral Sheaar's defeat at Garcia's hands, in both of the instances Garcia has mentioned."

"I do not remember any hand to hand combat..." Admiral Sheaar tried.

"That's because you were the first one rendered unconscious," Captain MaHt said. "After beating me in a fair contest, he commandeered my ship in order to conclude

a business arrangement which Admiral Sheaar himself initiated. I'm not privy to those details, but I suspect you know what I am referring to."

"How dare you?!" Sheaar said.

"This man has played and beaten us at our own games," MaHt said. "He has fought with honor and has not flinched..."

"Well, maybe a little flinching," Garcia said, trying to soften it a little.

"He has earned his respect and I will fight beside him," MaHt said. "If there must be another war game exercise, to prove conclusively that he is what he claims, then I surrender my new ship to his command, and will fly as his First Officer. I am that confident in his abilities. And I am telling you now. You can bring five of your best war ships against us, and you will be looking for new crews, and your ships will be in space dock for months."

One of the High Counsel members tapped Gowron on the shoulder, and they all withdrew out of ear shot to have a private counsel. MaHt stepped over to Garcia.

"I must admit," Garcia told him. "I did not expect that from you."

"I will not be able to have my revenge against you if you are dead," MaHt said.

"Fair enough," Garcia said, and grasped his arm by the wrist. "May all our fights be honorable."

"I will fight beside you," MaHt said.

"I hear. What about Sheaar?" Garcia asked.

"I have learned about the Starburst weapon," MaHt said. "Had I known prior to you beating me, I would have killed Sheaar myself. I do not believe Gowron is privy to this information. I believe he only thinks you to have a ship that is transwarp capable."

"Before this is over, Gowron will know," Garcia said.

"You would risk war between our two nations?" MaHt said.

"For better or worse, Gowron is your leader, and he deserves to know what sort of people are lurking in his shadows," Garcia said.

"I stand with you, no matter what the outcome," MaHt assured him.

Gowron and the High Counsel returned and Gowron did not look pleased.

"The High Counsel has recognized your petition to accept previous battles and war games as merit," Gowron said. "Further, standing up to me, knowing full well that I could kill you, counts as your third and final challenge. You have passed the Klingon Academy's Challenge and have earned the right be called a warrior, with elite status and privilege. I accept you as my own."

"No!" Sheaar screamed.

"Be silent," Gowron said. "You recruited him."

"I demand the last challenge be a fight to the death, against me," Sheaar said.

"Accepted," Garcia said, quickly before anyone might put an end to it.

Gowron grabbed Garcia by the arms and growled. "I just commissioned you!"

"And he just publicly challenged me," Garcia said. "How will it look if I back down, after just being appointed?"

"Kitara has taught you well," Gowron said, almost singing it.

Gowron backed off, signaling everyone to clear the floor so that Garcia and Sheaar could fight. "The challenge has been made and accepted," Gowron said.

Sheaar had his d'k tagh already out, battle stance. Kitara whistled, offering Garcia hers. Garcia shook his head no, his eyes staying with Sheaar.

“Your time has finally come,” Sheaar told Garcia, circling.

“Are you going to talk me to death?” Garcia asked, goading him into his attack.

Sheaar charged. Garcia blocked the knife arm, stepped past, and put a boot in the back of Sheaar’s knee. He went down hard. Garcia waited for Sheaar to get back on his feet. Sheaar stood, favoring his left leg, but advanced again. Again Garcia blocked the thrusting arm, only this time he grasped it and jerked forwards. At the same time, he stomped on Sheaar’s thigh, breaking the bone and sending him to the floor. Garcia twisted Sheaar’s arm as he went down, breaking the arm. The knife fell to the floor. Garcia collected it, made a thin cut on Sheaar’s cheek as he lay there gasping in pain, and then walked away. He approached Gowron, wiping the blood of his new knife on his sleeve, before slipping it under his belt.

“The fight was to the death,” Gowron said.

“There is no glory in killing him” Garcia argued. “You all saw that it was not balanced.”

“I said finish him,” Gowron said.

“I have!” Garcia said.

“It was to the death!” Gowron repeated.

“If he wants a glorious death, he can go play mRock!” Garcia said. “I will not kill a useless old man. His life belongs to me and I have spared it because there is no honor here. Besides, you all know that I have killed some great warriors in the last two days. Do not sully their deaths by asking me to kill someone who cannot even stand up.”

Gowron pulled his disruptor from his holster and pointed it at Sheaar. Garcia didn’t flinch or protest. Gowron smiled and pointed the weapon at Garcia’s face. Still, Garcia did not flinch or protest. Gowron nodded, flipped the disruptor over, and handed it to Garcia.

“This ship you commandeered from Sheaar was transwarp capable,” Gowron said. “You are currently engaged in a battle against the Cardassians at Sherman’s planet. Your first duty to the Empire is to hold the Cardassians at Sherman’s planet. Do not let them gain another inch of territory, but also, do not let them flee.”

“You’re asking me to lose?” Garcia demanded.

“I’m ordering you to hold!” Gowron said. The High Counsel gathered around. “It is called strategy.”

“Well, your strategy sucks,” Garcia said.

“You are just a Captain. We have the bigger picture to worry about,” Gowron said.

“Even if you consider attrition, I will eventually be victorious,” Garcia said. “But if you send some ships now, I could end it sooner than later, and render medical aid to those in need. I can’t help near enough people if I am concentrating on holding.”

“By holding them at Sherman’s planet, they will be forced to withdraw from several other fronts,” one of the High Counsel said. “Maybe even retreat from Bajor.”

“Gowron, I really don’t think you have clue of just what the big picture is,” Garcia said.

“I will not tolerate insubordination,” Gowron said. “Do you fly for me or not?”

“May I have a word with you in private?” Garcia asked. “Please?”

Gowron took Garcia aside, leading him by the arm. They entered a small adjoining room reserved for private meetings. Gowron closed the door.

“What is it that is so pressing?” Gowron asked.

“You don’t know the full extent of Sheaar’s duplicity,” Garcia said.

“I know he recruited you to root out Romulan spies in our midst,” Gowron said.

“Oh, that’s just the tip of the iceberg,” Garcia said. “Do you remember the Genesis device? Well, he and Admiral Pressman, a rogue Black Ops agent, recreated that weapon as a defense against the Borg.”

Gowron grabbed Garcia by the arm and neck and pushed him up against the wall. “You lie?!”

“You’ve not heard about the Tel Kiar planet I blew up?” Garcia asked.

“Rumors!” Gowron said.

“Sheaar has the intel. I can give you a copy of it myself,” Garcia said.

“Who else in the Federation knows about this?” Gowron demanded.

“President Fos has just recently been informed, and she’s conducting an investigation into the Federation operatives that I have revealed to her,” Garcia said. “Because we have reason to believe my ship may not be the only one, I am forced to play along, a double agent if you will. I don’t know how many people are working in collaboration with Sheaar and Pressman. That’s why I can’t kill him. I have to find out how deep this cancer goes.”

Gowron released Garcia. “President Fos is a fool! And you are, too, if you believe for a moment she is on your side. She’s nothing more than a puppet. I should take an Armada straight to Earth and blast her office from orbit!”

“That’s not all,” Garcia said. “We have a functioning phasing cloak.”

“Do you know what sort of fire you’re playing with?!” Gowron demanded, pushing him back into the wall.

“I understand how necessary it is for us not fight each other,” Garcia said.

“There’s too much going on, too much at stake for us to not to remain allies. Kitara is loyal to the Empire. I am, too. The Federation and the Klingon Empire are good together.”

“For now,” Gowron said, cursing under his breath. “But it will not always be this way. You are not warriors.”

“We are not warriors like the Klingons, no, but the Human species fights with honor,” Garcia said.

“When you actually do fight!” Gowron said.

“And we’re trust worthy,” Garcia said.

“Apparently some more than others,” Gowron said.

“There are rogue elements in the Human population, just as there are in the Klingon Empire,” Garcia said. “Not everyone shares your vision. At least the Federation has not interfered in how you govern your people. How many worlds have you conquered that have offered you that sort of loyalty?”

“The Norsicaans,” Gowron said.

“Okay,” Garcia said. “I’ll give you that. But they will also stab you in the back if you show weakness. With Humans, you don’t have anything to prove. You can let your guard down and know you won’t be attacked. I believe the Federation is stronger because of the Klingon Alliance. I will not jeopardize that.”

“You will one day have to make a choice, which side you will serve,” Gowron said. “You best choose wisely.”

Gowron stormed out of the room. Garcia followed Gowron as he marched right up to a guard, took his disruptor, preceded towards Sheaar who was only presently being put on a stretcher to be removed. "Betrayer," Gowron said in Klingon and shot him point blank. Admiral Sheaar dissolved away before their eyes, screaming for as long as there was breath and muscle to push that sound.

"Garcia! Kitara! Front and center," Gowron shouted.

Garcia and Kitara arrived together, standing at attention.

"Your mission continues as it was given to you, to seek out the enemies of the Klingon Empire and Federation," Gowron said. "You will both report directly to me. Do you understand?"

They agreed.

"Kitara, you are a Warrior, recognized by me and the High Counsel. You can have command of a ship, if you want it," Gowron said, not meeting her eyes.

"I wish to stay where I am," Kitara said. "I think I have more to offer in my current capacity."

"I agree," Gowron said, his eyes meeting hers with approval. It was apparent in his eyes that he had newly found respect for her because of her statement. He looked at the ashes that were once Sheaar. He stepped forward, not looking at Garcia, but putting a hand on his shoulder. "Officially, I must ask you to hold. I cannot sanction any additional ships to aid a colony that declared independence from the Empire. But if you can beat the Cardassians, I would be very appreciative." He got even closer, whispering so only they could hear. "You have lived with these secrets this long, you will have to carry them a little longer. I cannot have the Empire torn apart in another potential civil war. I want the names of every individual complicit in this illegal operation." Louder, he said. "You're dismissed."

CHAPTER THIRTYSIX

Garcia turned to Kitara as Gowron walked away. "We're done?"

"You're entitled to a ceremony," Kitara said.

"Is it compulsory?" Garcia asked.

Kitara shrugged. "It's your right to have it if you want it," Kitara said. "You might enjoy the revelry. Lots of women, songs and drinking. That is the order you prefer, isn't it?"

"I think you and I should get back to our private little war," Garcia said. He activated his comm. badge. "New Constitution, two to beam up."

Garcia and Kitara arrived on the transporter PADD of the New Constitution.

"I'm glad that's over with," Garcia said, coming down from the Transporter alcove. "One less thing to worry about."

Owens entered the Transporter Room, seeming a little tense.

"Captain," Owens said. "We had a medical emergency. Doctor Jurak was called back to handle it. He's in Sickbay now. It's Tama Orleans."

Garcia didn't have to hear any more. He was on his way before the door could close. Kitara followed.

"You can't just go in there," Kitara said.

"I know," Garcia said. "But I'm going."

They arrived and Jurak was waiting for him, a hypo spray in his hands. Garcia presented his arm.

"Let's talk first," Jurak said. "I'd like you not to take this. There's nothing you can do for her at this moment. She's sleeping. You need a few more days without taking the antidote, and, since I know you're not going to wait, I would like to ask you to at least wait until she has awakened."

To both Kitara and Jurak's surprise, Garcia seemed willing to listen, as opposed to jumping in head first, demanding the medicine regardless of their recommendations.

"What happened?" Garcia asked.

A crew member was passing, so Jurak took Garcia by the arm and led him across the hall to a secondary medical room where they could speak in quiet. Kitara joined them, knowing she was welcomed. After all, Garcia's family was her family. As she observed him, she realized that the Klingon Academy's challenge had definitely affected him. He had the light of quiet resolve in his eyes, the kind seen in only the greatest of warriors. Garcia was a new man, whether he knew it or not. She felt flush with heat and she was suddenly very aware of her heart beating.

"I told you she has some issues," Jurak said. "Bulimia nervosa is one of them. She had an episode of binge eating."

"And someone caught her purging?" Kitara asked, trying to distract herself with the sound of her own voice. She was amazed at herself. She had told herself that her affair with Garcia was pure military strategy, not just a way to bond with him but a maneuver to advance her career and his, and set him up for a fall if she ever had to kill him. It was the Klingon way. Shear had ordered her to kill him, but even she had known it wasn't the right time, and the moment she killed him, she would have to start watching her back as Shear maneuvered someone else in to kill her; they weren't going to let a 'female' run the show... But now? Her voice sounded distant to her. "Or did she take a drug?"

“She binged on holodeck food,” Jurak explained. “Probably thinking she could eat as much as she wanted and when she left the holodeck, it would just go away.”

“The holodeck creates all consumables with real matter, ensuring they’re eatable,” Kitara said.

“Not if you turn off the safety protocols and disable that function,” Jurak said. “Unfortunately, she remained on the holodeck long enough for sufficient digestion to occur. When she finally left the holodeck, a portion of the artificial matter had already been incorporated into a sufficiently large enough number of cells that...”

“How bad was the cellular damage?” Garcia asked.

“I’ve repaired all the damage,” Jurak said. “I had to sedate her due to the pain.”

“You should not have sedated her,” Kitara said. “Pain is invaluable for teaching lessons.”

“I agree. I’m confident she’ll not do this particular stunt again. We do, however, need to start her on a treatment plan to change her behaviors. If we don’t intervene, she will continue with this bent for self destruction,” Jurak said.

“I’ve just been busy,” Garcia said.

“This is not an indictment. I’ve been busy, too, and I can’t stay here with her considering the amount of work I have planet side. I have the ship’s counselor monitoring her for now and a nurse will remain behind,” Jurak said. “Persis is in there, too.”

“Kitara, lock out all computer functions to Tama Orleans,” Garcia said. “She’ll have to start earning those privileges. I want the crew to be more attentive around her. We’re all going to work with her towards her health. I’ll tell Persis about our medical strategy. No more private meals for her. She has to eat in the galley, with people. And I don’t want her to be alone for at least an hour after she eats. I want her entire day planned and regimented, think military school style training. Lessons, exercise, meditation, biofeedback training every odd day, neural feedback trainings on the even number days. Doctor, you’re going to have to improve my antidote. I need to spend a lot more time with her.”

“I can’t promise you that,” Jurak said. “The fact that the drug is working at all is a modern medical miracle. You’re lucky nausea is the only noticeable symptom. It’s taking a toll on your body. I’m thinking once a week is too much.”

“Then find an alternative,” Garcia said. “Kitara, I’m going to the Path Finder. You can join me there once the NC is en route to Sherman’s planet.”

“Aye, Captain,” Kitara said. “As per your instructions, Torres was allowed to leave the ship. She has not returned.”

Garcia nodded. “I suppose we’re on our own,” Garcia said.

“We can use Grilka’s ships,” Kitara said.

“Tell them to approach, but remain outside the system, cloaked,” Garcia said. “Unless I can neutralize the Kelvan scout ship, they’re no good to us.”

“Aye. I’ll explain that to them,” Kitara said. She saluted and went about her business.

“Doctor, you’re with me,” Garcia said.

“Aye,” Jurak said. As they returned to the Gateway, Jurak filled him in on the medical situation on Sherman’s Planet. It was every bit as bad as Garcia had imagined. Radiation burns, physical burns, torn flesh from flying debris, and exposure to the

elements were just some of the things they were dealing with. And the more serious cases were still too far from Club Bliss to render the necessary care. Most of the Health Care Facilities between club Bliss and the impacted zones were being overwhelmed by people, and short on supplies. The T’Pau’s, the Tempest’s, and the Path Finder’s replicators were pumping out medical supplies and emergency food rations as fast they could, but it was simply not enough. Some of it was being beamed directly to the sites most needed, but there were many areas where they were forced to drop them from orbit in capsules due to the Cardassian’s blocking transporters. “The Little Blue Grays, though, are like nothing I have ever seen. They have tech that seems to amplify their psionic healing abilities. They have brought patients that I wrote off as dead back to perfect health. There’s just not enough of them, and they’re starting to show signs of fatigue.”

Garcia opened the Gateway. The Path Finder was just on the other side and he could see Losira there waiting for him, eager to meet him, as if he had been gone for years. In computer time, it was probably like centuries for her. “Can we put the Blues on a sleep rotation cycle?”

“As long as there are injured around them, they will not rest,” Jurak said.

“It won’t do us any good,” Garcia began on the New Constitution, stepping through the Gateway. “If they drop dead from exhaustion,” he finished on the Path Finder. “Losira.”

“Captain,” Losira said, grasping him by the wrist while stepping in closer to him. She kissed him. “Glad to see you’re still alive. I felt several impulses to come to your rescue.”

“I’m glad you resisted,” Garcia said.

“Doctor, tell Okuda that if it is necessary for the Blues to rest that they should come up to the ship so that they’re far enough away from wounded that they won’t feel the compulsion to remain active,” Garcia said. He touched his shoulder. “Thank you. For everything.”

Jurak touched his shoulder. “I will fight beside you. Losira, open the portal back to Club Bliss.”

The Gateway recycled and revealed the Office in Club Bliss where Garcia had had the Gateway installed. He began to wonder if he should have put it somewhere more convenient to higher traffic volumes as he watched Jurak return to the planet’s surface. The Gateway cycled off and Garcia proceeded down the corridor, noting the crew working. Most of them were hustling supplies about, moving them from replicator sites to the torpedo launch tubes where they were packed and launched. The torpedoes casing protected the goods from the heat of re-entry and after a certain point in the descent parachutes would deploy. He had an impulse to climb into one and launch himself down to the planet where he might put his medical skills to use, but it was just a fleeting thought which was easily ignored.

Losira followed, quietly, watching him think. Together they took the lift up to the Bridge. Still she remained silent, noting his breathing, measuring the dilation of his pupils, watching the throb of his pulse in his neck. The lift slowed, maneuvered horizontal in order to connect to the main lift tube that would shoot them straight to the Bridge.

“You’re much calmer than when you left,” Losira finally noted.

“Well, let’s see, I beat the Klingon challenge, I think I’ve finally pushed through the chemical imbalance due to my recent Pon Farr episode, I discovered I didn’t kill Kelly’s child, and…” Garcia didn’t know what the ‘and’ was. He looked at her. “And I’m home? I don’t know. I still have lots on my plate to attend to, but I think I pushed the threshold of my ability to cope so far in the last few weeks, that I’m actually feeling better about life. Content, actually. That sounds awful, given the situation.”

“No,” Losira said. “No matter where you are, somewhere in the Universe there is chaos and all hell breaking loose, and you can’t worry about it all. You first take care of yourself, and then you bring up those around you. I’m glad you’re coping better.”

The Lift arrived and Garcia stepped off onto the Bridge. He really did feel like he was home.

“Captain on the Bridge,” Trini alerted.

“Carry on,” Garcia said.

“Welcome back, Sir,” Trini said.

“Thank you. Contact Captain Glor of the Pa Nun, secure line,” Garcia instructed. “I’ll take it in my Ready Room.”

Garcia rode up to the Ready Room, Losira still accompanying him. He gave her a look and she allowed some space between them.

“Would you prefer the illusion of privacy?” Losira said.

“I know you’re always with me,” Garcia said. He touched her shoulder. “Stay.”

Losira seemed immensely grateful for the contact and gesture, but she maintained a professional distance, knowing full well that he had business, and she needed to be ready to assist him, not to distract him.

Captain Glor appeared on his monitor just as he came to his desk. Glor laughed heartily. “So, it is official. You are a Klingon Warrior.”

“Yeah,” Garcia said. “It’s good to be Klingon. Still, I don’t feel any different.”

“What may I do for you, Brother?” Glor asked.

“You’re still cloaked?” Garcia asked.

“I am,” Glor said.

“I want you to make a transwarp jump to Cardassia prime and pick up a guest for me,” Garcia said. “I’m sending you the information now. Contact me via your Losira agent as soon as you arrive.”

“I’ll be there in a few,” Glor said. He closed the channel.

“Losira, ask Brock if he’s finished the task I wanted him to do,” Garcia said.

Losira looked up and to the right. There was already another Losira agent at Club Bliss, coordinating relief efforts on the ground with the ship, but she generated a second one to query Brock. “Affirmative. And Captain Glor has arrived”

Garcia placed a call to Cardassia Prime, via the Pa Nun, which connected through satellites and the ground servers until it rang home. It was made to appear like normal citizen traffic. Calar answered the call.

“I was wondering if you were going to respond to my invitation,” Calar said.

“You and I have a deal,” Garcia said. “A ship is in orbit to retrieve you. Make sure everything is in order and that you have what you need for us to initiate and complete this ritual. I hope you packed your bags. You can expect an extended visit.”

“I understand,” Calar said, bowing. The screen went off.

Garcia sat back, calling up information on his screen that allowed him to see much of what the War Room was seeing. He put in a call to the President of the Federation. He was not surprised that she made him wait ten minutes.

“Captain Garcia,” President Fos said. “I was wondering when you would be calling.”

“I need assistance,” Garcia said.

“I believe you were told to fall back,” President Fos said.

“I can’t do that,” Garcia said. “There are Klingon and Federation citizens that need our help. There are more casualties than I can properly deal with. This is a crisis that can’t be ignored.”

“And I’m sure none of this has anything to do with the fact that your main hub of drugs, weapons, and Orion Slave girls are distributed from Club Bliss,” President Fos said. “The Federation will not be able to help you because of that, not to mention the fact that the Population of Sherman’s Planet is no longer technically Federation or Klingon citizens.”

“You aren’t going to hold them on a technicality, are you?” Garcia asked. “They only declared independence because they were tired of all the feuding between the Federation and Klingon Empire a hundred years ago. They just wanted to live their lives in peace. And you have to give them some credit. They cohabited on this planet more peacefully than any other joint Federation Klingon colony has.”

“You were told to fall back,” President Fos said.

“I was also told to hold my position by my Klingon counterpart,” Garcia said. “I’m now a Warrior, Elite status, and Gowron has ordered me to hold.”

“You’re going to have to choose, Federation or Klingons,” President Fos said.

“I serve both,” Garcia said, placing his hands on the desk, as opposed to reaching for his left wrist. “Don’t you see it is in our best interest to deal with the Cardassian threat here and now?!”

“I like the reasonable tone you’re using, but no, we don’t agree that it’s in our best interest,” President Fos said.

“If I end the blockade, will you at least send some ships with medical supplies?” Garcia asked.

“Tell you what,” President Fos said. “I’ll do you one even better. You end the blockade, and negotiate a peaceful solution to this crisis, and I will send five ships to assist in alleviating the suffering. The Cardassians claim the only reason they have been forced to expand through military conquest is because of a group known as the Maquis. If they would be willing to negotiate a demilitarized zone, we will assist them against the Maquis.”

“The Maquis are simply struggling against oppression,” Garcia said. “You can’t take that right away from them.”

“That’s the deal on the table,” President Fos said. “Not everything can be settled through military action, or blowing up planets, Garcia. Negotiate in good faith, get this, and I’ll stamp my approval on it, and you will have your medical ships.”

“They’re not going to listen to me,” Garcia protested, his words obviously falling on deaf ears. “The Cardassian in charge of this operation has it in for me. He’ll settle for nothing more than my untimely demise.”

“Well, don’t that put that offer on the table, then,” Fos said, trying to be funny.

Garcia bit his lower lip, wanting to fight, wanting to rage, but he locked it down tight. “Thank you for listening to me, Madam President,” Garcia said.

“You’re welcome,” President Fos said. “Oh, and congratulations on your successful completion of the Klingon Academy’s Challenge.”

“Have those medical ships ready,” Garcia said, and hung up on her.

Garcia sat there for a moment, wondering if Gowron’s suspicion of President Fos was right. Kitara shared a similar belief as Gowron, and had expressed as much to him. But, wasn’t Gowron also a puppet by the same right? He had the authority to send ships, but instead he chose not to accommodate because of a ‘group think?’ Garcia forced himself not to dwell on it. There was little he could do to convince them and he had other issues still yet to resolve. And the longer he dwelled on the immovable object, the more people there were that were going to die. He tried to think of nothing in particular, hoping a moment’s calm in his brain would bring him a solution, like trying to think of a name that was on the tip of the tongue, but the harder you tried to grasp it, the more elusive it would become, until much later, when all effort had ceased, the name was suddenly there. Strangely, the only mantra that silence brought was, ‘God help me,’ which was odd given his general ambivalence to the subject of a supreme being. Let the water go where it will, he heard McCoy in his head. “Water flowing underground,” came the echo of a song, as if responding to McCoy’s voice.

“Q?” Garcia whispered.

Amanda Q was suddenly in his office, sitting on his desk, legs dangling. “How’s my little Klingon Warrior?”

“Could you zap that Kelvin ship?” Garcia asked. “Maybe send it back to Andromeda?”

“Sorry, I can’t do that,” Amanda Q said.

“Why?” Garcia asked.

“There are Others taking interest in what’s happening here,” Amanda Q said. “It is meant to unfold in a specific way. Q’s interference would have repercussions.”

“It would make my job easier,” Garcia said. “Will I ever be able to count on you, or ask you for a favor?”

Q leaned over and kissed him. “I have faith in your abilities,” Q said. “But I promise you this, I will help you when the moment arrives.” And then she was gone.

Q! I hate cryptic answers, he thought. Garcia contacted the New Constitution. Kitara answered.

“We’re on our way,” Kitara said. “The NC will be there in thirty six hours.”

“I want you to cross over via the Gateway directly to Club Bliss. Bring Shuliette. Blind fold her and put her in cuffs.”

Kitara smiled. “Gladly,” she said.

“Once you have arrived, I want you to secure me transportation,” Garcia said. “You’ll have a list of my needs by the time you arrive planet side.”

“Aye, Captain,” Kitara said.

Garcia closed out the channel and took the fireman’s pole back down to the Bridge. Losira merely blinked off, out of existence and reappeared on the Bridge.

“Trini, contact Simone and tell her to have that medical shuttle ready to go as soon as I give the word,” Garcia said. “Also, I want Doctor Jurak and Brock standing by

at Club Bliss. Kitara will fill them in the moment she arrives, which is probably about now. Lt. Undine..."

"Captain," Trini interrupted. "I have a call from Torres. Do you want to take it?"

"On screen," Garcia said.

Torres appeared on the main viewer, along with someone he didn't know.

"Garcia, this is Chakotay. He's a friend of mine."

"I hear the situation on Sherman's Planet it bad," Chakotay said.

"It is," Garcia said.

"You're holding two of my people captive," Chakotay said.

"I was," Garcia said. "I gave them a choice; they could stay in the Brig until I could deliver them some place safe, or they could help fight the Cardassians on Sherman's Planet. They took the latter."

"If they come to harm, I'm holding you responsible," Chakotay said.

"If it hadn't been for me, they would already be dead," Garcia said.

"And if you had left well enough alone, you wouldn't be facing this crisis on Sherman's Planet," Chakotay said.

"Can you send me some ships to help against the blockade?" Garcia asked.

"We don't have the resources to come to your aid," Chakotay said. "Why don't you ask the Federation?"

"Neither the Klingon Empire or the Federation are going to lift a hand to help Sherman's planet, because they declared independence from both nearly a hundred years ago," Garcia explained. "I have four ships defending the planet against further bombardment. The Cardassian ships that have remained in this system have blockaded Sherman's planet, preventing any relief ships from getting through. I have three Klingon ships that are en route to help fight that armada. Any ships you could spare to that end would at least chase them out of the system and allow Federation ships to begin medical intervention."

"If the Federation and the Klingon Empire refuse to send relief until the conflict is over, then maybe you should just let the Cardassians have the planet," Chakotay said.

"What kind of advice is that?" Garcia demanded. "You know the Cardassians aren't going to bring medical relief to these people."

"Of course I know that. But the Cardassians will be one more planet closer to proving our point, that military expansion is their primary goal, and the Klingon Empire and the Federation need to wake up and smell the coffee," Chakotay said.

"You're going to let millions of people suffer and die to prove a point?" Garcia asked.

"No, the Federation and the Klingon Empire are going to let millions of people suffer and die to prove a point," Chakotay said. "I already know the point and I've been trying to fight it for years. And if the Federation and Klingon Empire continue to turn their backs on all the worlds that have suddenly fallen under Cardassian rule, then it's going to get a lot worse. I'm not about to send good people to die to put a band aid on a stubbed toe, when what's needed here is quadruple bypass surgery." Chakotay noticed the anger on Garcia face and felt sympathetic. "Look, I understand what you're up against. I've been there, I'm still there, and our movement has only recently started to gain momentum. Bringing my people to your aid at this time will unnecessarily expose us to risk, bring us out in the open prematurely. We're not ready. Your fight is too big."

Unless you're willing to take this fight all the way back to Cardassia and start dropping antimatter bombs on their home world, there's nothing I can do for you."

"You know I can't do that," Garcia said.

"I didn't think you would, Star Fleet," Chakotay said. "But one question for you? How many worlds have to fall before that becomes an option? How many lives have to be lost before you would be willing to blow up Cardassia Prime?"

"It's a question I've been struggling with," Garcia admitted.

"Yeah, well, we're there," Chakotay said. "And we had an opportunity to take Cardassia out of the game and you stopped us."

"It was the right thing to do," Garcia said.

"Tell that to the survivors on Sherman planet," Chakotay said.

Garcia closed the channel. He should have ended it the moment Chakotay refused to help, but perhaps he had hoped they could find a way to negotiate. He just wasn't a negotiator. Sure, he could blow up a planet, but settle a dispute peacefully? That was obviously one of the skills he needed to work on. Perhaps he had hoped Torres would intercede on his behalf. It was now clear, though, that he had lost Torres. From his perspective, she was going down a similar road that he was, only she was going willingly, where as he was being dragged, kicking and screaming. Destroy another planet, indeed! There has to be a better way.

"Let the water go where it will," Garcia mumbled.

"What's that?" McKnight asked.

"Something someone was trying to tell me," Garcia said, touching her shoulder.

"Undine, your ship."

Garcia returned to the Gateway and dialed up Yonada and crossed over. He had to walk awhile before he found Athena, and it was probably just fortune he found her as quickly as he did without computer assistance or calling out to her. He found her in a gym, practicing archery. She was destroying a punching bag. She eased back the tension of her bow, set it down, and greeted him eagerly, kissing him.

"I'm not use to being so alone," Athena said. "Thank you for coming to visit me."

"I can't stay. I just needed to talk to you for a moment," Garcia said.

Disappointment flashed across her face. "What can I do for you?"

"You, your kind, have the ability to take over technology," Garcia said. "How do you do this?"

"The same way you log into the wireless web via your neural implant," Athena said, retrieving her bottle of water. "Our manifestation orbs have wireless technology, but we can pretty much tap into any electrical system whether it's wireless or not, and if it's a computer, we can affect it at the molecular level, changing electrical pathways, shorting out circuits or creating new circuits, and rewriting software in real time. And, if there is a willing telepath, we can take control of their bodies just as easily as we can usurp technology."

"How close do your orbs need to be to the technology you wish to commandeer?" Garcia asked.

"It depends on the tech," Athena said.

"Apollo accessed Gorn replicator technology to create attack orbs," Garcia said.

"Every replicator in the building started mass producing these things."

“He probably accessed the computer net, sent the specifications on how to make the orbs, choosing the simplest thing to construct so as to create as many as possible,” Athena said. “What are you getting at?”

“If I got you close enough to a Kelvan ship, could you take over its systems and shut it down?” Garcia asked.

“Sure,” Athena said.

“Will you?” Garcia asked.

“I don’t think I should get involved,” Athena said.

“All I want you to do is turn it off, or program it to leave the system,” Garcia asked.

“What do I get out of this?” Athena asked.

Garcia sighed. “What do you want?”

“Company,” Athena said.

“I’m stretched pretty thin at the moment,” Garcia said.

“I help you end this little conflict, you spend time with me,” Athena said.

“Fine,” Garcia said. He handed her a comm. badge. “I’ll call you when I’m ready.”



Garcia returned to the Path Finder to find Captain Glor and Calar had just arrived. As per his instructions, she was blind folded before bringing her through the Gateway. Garcia removed the blind fold.

“Is all of this necessary?” Calar demanded.

“I’m afraid so,” Garcia said.

“I want to see my daughter,” Calar said.

“In a moment,” Garcia said. “You have a role to play.”

“It will take a while to arrive at Sherman’s Planet,” Calar said.

“Not really,” Garcia assured her. “You’re already here.”

“How can that be?” Calar asked.

“Are you ready to play, or what?” Garcia asked.

“Do you understand your role in all of this?” Calar asked.

“I’ve seen ‘the Quiet Man,’ a couple of times,” Garcia said. “I think I understand what I have to do.”

“The Quiet Man?” Calar asked.

“John Wayne. Never mind,” Garcia said, and mumbled: “What good is it being one of the most knowledgeable people in the Federation if no one understands me?”

“I understand you,” Losira offered. “But most people consider knowledge and trivia two different things. And many see what you know as useless knowledge sets.”

“The greater the knowledge, the greater the neural synapses, and the more likely you are to make meaningful connections...” Garcia told her.

“You hear that?” Losira asked. “That’s the sound of the choir you’re preaching to. But then, I’m bias. I have memory chips cram full of useless data. I mean, you should see some of the useless information some of your crew collect. Gossip magazines? Do people ever tire of hearing about who slept with who? Do you want to know what they’re writing about you?”

Garcia sighed, shaking his head “no.” He activated his comm. badge. “Captain to the Bridge. Trini, contact Gul Tormin, please, tell him I want to talk. Captain Glor, hold her menacingly, but step over there outside the camera line for now.”

“Aye,” Captain Glor agreed.

“Captain,” Trini returned, her image appearing on the large viewer in the Shuttle Bay. The Large Viewer was meant to be used for lectures and large audiences, but since he had no intentions of taking Calar on a tour of his ship, he decided this viewer was just as good as any, even if it did make Tormin seem more menacing, larger than life. “I have him on line.”

“Pipe it down here, please,” Garcia said. “Large Viewer.”

“Aye,” Trini said, and reached for a button.

Trini disappeared and was replaced with Gul Tormin.

“I want to negotiate a cease fire,” Garcia said. “You and me. In person.”

“Why would I agree to a cease fire?” Gul Tormin asked. “I have the upper hand. My troops have your troops surrounded, and my ships have you effectively blockaded in.”

“I’ve been authorized to negotiate a solution that would involve establishing a demilitarized zone, in which the Federation pledges to assist in suppressing the Maquis on our side of the zone, as well as protect your colonies within the zone,” Garcia said.

“I’m not negotiating any such thing with you,” Gul Tormin said.

“I didn’t think you would,” Garcia said. “Fortunately for you, I would like to skip all the affairs of the state and get right down to personal grievances. I want to negotiate with you personally for your daughter’s life.”

“That is not on the table, nor is it open for discussion,” Gul Tormin said.

“I believe it is on the table,” Garcia said. “I’m declaring a coup, and challenge you to a personal duel for what I have rightfully taken, in order to protect my heir.”

“You have no position from which to challenge me,” Gul Tormin said.

Garcia waved Captain Glor to step forwards into the frame of reference so that Tormin could see and understand. He yanked Calar into the scene, driving her to her knees and twisting her arm until she yelped in pain.

“Apparently, you can’t protect your House while you’re off fighting wars for the state,” Garcia said. “You will accept my challenge, or I will add a new trophy to my collection. And trust me, everyone of your peers on Cardassia knows what I have taken.”

Garcia took Calar by the hair and dragged her closer to the screen. He ripped her necklace off, tossed her to the floor and dangled the item. “Family heirloom, if I’m not mistaken? A symbol for your authority over the House which you gained through marriage, and which I intend to steal right from under you. All I wanted was for you to drop the bounty and allow your daughter and my child to live, but we’ll play by your rules.”

“I will kill you!” Gul Tormin said, exploding in rage and driving everything off his desk. He came around the desk, pointing with a dagger. The dagger he currently had was not as ornate as the one Garcia had taken from him previously. “We will meet in one hour!”

“There will be a cease fire until our meeting has been concluded,” Garcia said. “And don’t try any subterfuge, because I’m broadcasting this to all your troops and your

Starships. They understand what we are fighting for. My right to your daughter's life, and my child which she carries, and whatever dowry is rightfully hers."

"You are dead," Gul Tormin said. "And when I am through with you, I will carve the fetus out of Shuliette's body and feed it to your dead carcass."

"Oh, please," Garcia whined. "How cliché is that?! One hour. The park, three blocks from Club Bliss. Viewer off."

"Trini," Garcia said.

Trini appeared on the large viewer.

"Tell Simone there is a cease fire in effect," Garcia said. "Have them take their medical shuttle straight way to Club Bliss. Park on the Mesa top itself, or beside the hotel, whichever is most convenient for them. I'm going planet side."

Garcia hauled Calar to her feet and handed her the blind fold. "Put this on, please."

"I'm on your side," Calar said.

"Then put this on, or I'll put it on for you," Garcia said.

Calar complied, wondering if perhaps she had made a bad deal. Garcia pointed to the Gateway and Losira opened it.

"Thank you, Captain," Garcia said to Glor, and then he stepped through the Gateway, dragging Calar along side of him.

CHAPTER THIRTYSEVEN

“Mother?” Shuliette called out. She pulled free of her guard and rushed to Calar. “Oh mother.”

Calar removed her blindfold and embraced her daughter. “Oh, honey. Does she have to be handcuffed?!”

“What are you doing here?” Shuliette demanded. “Has he hurt you?”

“Yes, he is such a brute,” Calar said, commiserating with her daughter.

“Oh, please,” Garcia said, ignoring them in favor of Kitara who was reporting in. “So, what do you got for me?”

“I have one armored personnel carrier and one tank,” Kitara said. “Compliments of the local militia.”

“You got me a tank?” Garcia asked.

“It was the best I could do on short notice,” Kitara said, sounding doleful.

“No, I mean, that’s great,” Garcia said. “Hopefully a little over kill, but, eh, tanks are cool. Put Calar in cuffs and shackle her feet, and then put her and her daughter in the APC. I want to them well guarded. Jurak, Brock, you’re in the APC, too. I want a contingent of Gray Warrior types to walk alongside the APC and the tank, I’m going to lead the way, leisure stroll right down Main to the Park, where I will be meeting with Tormin.”

“Am I going, too, boss?” Jay asked.

Garcia turned to the Iotian who had been slowly approaching ever since he saw Garcia arrive. He actually felt comforted by Jay’s presence, as if he were a long time friend.

“I might very well be walking into an ambush,” Garcia said.

“That is exactly what I was about to point out,” Kitara said. “How do you know Calar is not part of some elaborate ploy to draw his daughter and you out into the open so he could shoot you both?”

“That’s why she’s riding in the armored personnel carrier, heavily guarded,” Garcia said. “I want a Blue Gray to go with us, too. Whatever happens is going to happen.”

“Do I really have to go?” Brock asked. “I could do my part remotely from here...”

“Get in,” Garcia ordered.

“Yes, Boss,” Brock said, reluctantly. He was almost comical in appearance, wearing his protective armor, which was more gear than any of the Klingon soldiers were wearing, plus a helmet designed to fit his Ferengi head. In addition to the armor, he had taken a lesson from Garcia and started wearing an Emergency Life belt on his outer most garments.

“Kitara, you and your squad take point,” Garcia said, nodding to Tatiana as she approached with a rolling tray. On the tray was his armor and weapons. She began assisting him into his gear. “As soon as the medical shuttle has landed, we’re walking.”

Tatiana handed him an ear piece with a short mic boom. Everyone was wearing them, in addition to their comm. badges because it enabled them to be contacted individually and privately. After Garcia was suited up, Tatiana started handing him his weapons from the tray. Tricorder and phaser went to his belt. So did the Gorn miniature rail gun. Individual daggers went into his boot, inside the cuff of his armor, and one on

his belt. He positioned the scabbard to his sword on his back. An Iotian weapon on the tray caught his attention, along with several clips of ammo.

“What’s this?” Garcia asked.

“We call them P90s,” Jay said, and showed them how they worked, such as safety, single shot, and how to replace the clips. “As nice as the phasers are, this is my weapon of choice. Thought you might like one.”

“Thank you,” Garcia said, slinging the weapon and adding some ammo cartridges to his belt. “Going to need some more pockets. Kitara, maybe we should have vests, too?”

“Aye,” Kitara agreed.

Four Gray Warriors approached the group and met with Garcia for the first time. Garcia was awestruck by their size and intimidating features. “Oh, wow.”

“That’s what I said,” Jay said, and added confidentially: “I’m glad they’re on our side.”

“Wow,” Garcia repeated. He lifted the two manifestation orbs, the last two items on the tray, and activated them. His girls, Duana and Ilona appeared.

“Can I get a couple of those?” Jay asked.

“I really don’t think you want them,” Garcia said.

“Really?” Jay asked, his eyes not leaving the girls. “Why?”

“For one, they get stuck in your head and keep you up all night talking,” Garcia said. “It’s like having a slumber party, only without the pillow fight, and it’s not sexy, it’s more like clipping toe nails and cleaning dishes... And there’s no privacy. They know everything I know, and it’s kind of like talking to yourself, only they don’t really listen, and they get these cravings for a particular taste and start nagging me to eat, and it’s amazing I’m not like twice my weight, and the constant singing in the back ground... You really don’t want them.”

“Ahh,” Duana said, touching Garcia’s face. “You’d miss us if we were to leave. Speaking of food, how about some fried chicken?”

“No,” Garcia said.

“Can I have a P90?” Ilona asked, collecting a weapon from a nearby Iotian.

“You haven’t eaten in like seven hours,” Duana protested.

“I’m not hungry,” Garcia said.

“I could carry a lot more ammo,” Ilona said. “Ooh, can I have your vest?!”

“Oh, yes you are!” Duana carried on. “You could at least just eat the skin. We could eat while we’re walking, right? Would someone please bring Garcia some fried chicken?”

“I’m not hungry,” Garcia said.

“Where are our Gorn weapons?” Ilona asked.

“You need to eat,” Duana said.

“It’ll get my hands greasy,” Garcia protested. To Jay he said, “Do you see what I mean. They’re like children.”

Kitara put a finger to her ear piece to focus on her message. “The medical shuttle has landed,” Kitara announced.

“Children?” Ilona and Duana both asked.

“Alright, let’s move out,” Garcia said. “Jay, your men have our six, and you can walk with me.”

Cleo rushed up to Garcia with a back pack containing food and drink. Garcia shook his head, but Duana accepted it on his behalf, slung it and pulled out some fried chicken.

“Duana,” Garcia said, warning her.

“Eat,” Duana demanded, pulling a piece off and shoving it in his mouth. “See, you don’t have to get your hands greasy, and, oh my, that’s good chicken. Chew... Thanks Cleo! I’m so glad we kept her on.”

“I think I could use to them,” Jay said.

Ilona accidentally fired her P90. Everyone in the group took defensive positions. “Um, sorry,” Ilona said. She tried smiling. “Safety was off. Ha!”

Garcia started to say something but Duana stuck more chicken in his mouth. Garcia waved, signaling the group to move forwards. He appeared to be leading the way, since Kitara and her group had already gotten a significant lead, staying in the shadows. The Tank followed him, with the came APC right behind. The four Gray warriors walked beside the APC, two on each side. He wondered if it was their eyes seeing, or Okuda’s eyes seeing, or both. Kitara contacted Garcia.

“Was that gun fire?” Kitara asked Garcia, just a voice in his ear.

“Don’t ask,” Garcia said, just audible enough for his mic to catch it.

♪♪▶

“Captain?”

Garcia gave the hold signal and his caravan came to a halt. He touched his ear piece to hold it firmly into his ear, even though it wasn’t necessary. “What you got?” Garcia asked Kitara.

“I would like you to take up position to the left of the tank,” Kitara said. “There’s a sniper on the bank’s roof top.”

“There’s a cease fire in effect,” Garcia said. Duana and Ilona moved in closer to Garcia as if to shield him from a sniper.

“I understand that, Sir,” Kitara told him. “It’s just a precaution.”

“Captain, this is Tuer,” Tuer kicked in on his frequency. “I have a sniper in place that can take out the bank sniper.”

“Um, hello, it’s a cease fire,” Garcia said.

“Just saying,” Tuer said. “Have a clean shot.”

“What’s going on?” Jay asked.

“Sniper,” Duana explain.

“I say take him out,” Ilona said.

“Has everyone forgotten what a cease fire means?” Garcia asked.

“I’m just saying, you could take out the entire top of the bank with the tank,” Ilona said.

“My sniper can hit him with a stun,” Tuer offered.

“Hold your fire,” Garcia said. “We’re almost at the park. I doubt the sniper is going to take me out.”

“Maybe he’s a rogue agent, doesn’t know there’s a cease fire,” Jay said.

“Oh, bloody hell,” Garcia said, and started walking. “Keep up, everyone. If he shoots, shoot back. But do not fire first.”

Jay kept up with Garcia. “Is everyone out to kill you?”

“Not everyone,” Garcia said. “A few ex wives, a few current wives, a mistress or two, maybe, but not everyone. I hope.”

“I’ve been meaning to ask you. You know Jay is just my initial, right? My name is Jack,” Jay said.

“Really?” Garcia asked, not totally surprised.

“I do know my name, though I didn’t use it while I was a mutant stuck in the space suit, but after your friend Doctor Crusher cured me, well, I went back to my name,” Jay said.

“Oh,” Garcia said. “I’ve come to think of you as Jay, but, Jack’s nice. Last name?”

“O’Neill,” Jay said.

“Two ‘L’s?” Garcia asked.

“Thank you!” Jay said.

“It’s not your real name,” Garcia said.

“You maintain your theory that I am part of an alien experiment, a cloned agent from old Earth, reprogrammed for some sinister purpose?” Jay asked.

“I never said sinister,” Garcia said.

“You said in my past life my name was McGyver?” Jay asked.

“I guess that’s one incarnation,” Garcia said. “I actually preferred Enerst Pratt, alias Nicodemus Legend.”

“That’s a mouthful,” Jay said.

“You know my full name is Tammas Parkin Arblaster-Garcia,” Garcia said.

“All that?” Jay asked.

“Tam?” Garcia offered.

“Better,” Jay said.

Kitara met Garcia as they arrived at the park, interrupting his conversation with Jay. The APC pulled up alongside the tank, and Garcia’s people spread out into a defensive position.

“This park has ducks!” Duana said. “I love ducks.”

“So do I,” Ilona said. “Roasted. Baked...”

“They’re here,” Kitara said.

Garcia had already seen them. Gul Tormin and what was obviously an entire platoon of Cardassian warriors marching up behind him arrived on the scene. The platoon began to spread out as Gul Tormin proceeded towards Garcia, but was stopped by a Cardassian that obviously out ranked him. This Cardassian made his way towards Garcia and his group. He was followed by Tormin’s second in command, and four lesser officers.

“We’re a bit outnumbered,” Jay pointed out.

“Yeah,” Garcia said. “Always seems to be that way. Everyone hold their positions. Jay, girls, follow me.”

“That is Legate Goris,” Kitara said, joining Garcia as they approached the Cardassian officers. “He’s a high ranking flag officer, very much a favorite of the current Cardassian High Command. He’s probably in charge of the Armada that’s here.”

“Probably,” Garcia agreed. “Everyone keep close and alert.”

Legate Goris stopped half way between his platoon and Garcia’s people and waited for Garcia to join them. Garcia went straight way to Legate Goris, ignoring Gul

Tormin altogether. Kitara stood beside him, with Duana and Ilona right behind him. Jay was staggered, but in ear shot, simply observing. He seemed bored, taking in the scenery. He removed his shades and cleaned them on his sleeve.

“Legate Goris,” Garcia said.

“Captain Garcia, I presume,” Legate Goris said. “You already know Gul Tormin, and his second, Glinn Camel.”

“Wrote any good songs lately?” Garcia asked Tormin’s second in command.

“Excuse me?” Camel asked.

“Never mind,” Garcia said, his efforts at humor wasted. “This is my First Officer, Lt. Commander Kitara, my two backup singers, Crimson and Clover.”

“Hey,” Duana protested. “I’m Clover.”

“And a friend of mine, just tagging along for the fun. You having fun?” Garcia continued, ignoring Duana.

“Have had more,” Jay admitted.

“I hear you. So, what brings you here, Goris?” Garcia asked.

“I want to hear Star Fleet’s proposal for a permanent solution to the Maquis,” Legate Goris said.

“Sorry, a little by-passing here. What I meant was, ‘what brought you here?’ You didn’t come in a shuttle and I know my ships didn’t let any of your ships near enough to Sherman’s planet to allow a transport,” Garcia said. “Is Gul Tormin in charge here, or you?”

“Gul Tormin is in charge of the occupation,” Legate Goris said. “I’m in charge of the Fleet in this sector. My Kelvan friends were kind enough to transport me down here in time for the meeting.”

Garcia chuckled. “I doubt seriously they’re your friends,” Garcia said. “What are they really doing here?”

“Balance of power,” Legate Goris said. “I hear you’re a Kelvan. It’s the only thing that makes sense. It fully explains how you were able to win so many space battles that were heavily weighed against you.”

“I suppose it didn’t occur to you that I might just be that good?” Garcia asked.

“Arrogance. A weakness of the young,” Legate Goris said.

“Or the very successful,” Garcia said.

“I suppose you want me to believe those shields on your ship are Federation standards?” Legate Goris said.

“No, you’re right. They’re Kelvan design,” Garcia lied. “For defensive purposes only.”

“You call ramming my ships with your shields defensive?” Legate Goris asked.

“I was blinded by all the battle light,” Garcia said. “Couldn’t see where I was going. Did you authorize the use of antimatter weapons on this planet?”

“Seems only fair,” Legate Goris said. “The Maquis used an antimatter weapon on Cardassian Prime, so we’re retaliating. But you wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

“Five to one?!” Garcia said. “And against civilian targets? These people had nothing to do with what happened on Cardassia.”

“You know that for sure, do you?” Legate Goris asked. “Either way, we have demonstrated that we will not tolerate further aggression. They will either cease and desist, or they will cease to exist.”

“If this is your new strategy, you will guarantee the wrath of the Klingon Empire, and the Federation will defend itself,” Garcia said.

“Then let’s hear your alternative,” Legate Goris said.

“I must protest,” Gul Tormin finally interrupted. “This meeting was supposed to be between me and Garcia.”

“You may have political sway over the High Command,” Legate Goris said. “But I will not allow your personal affairs to continue to get in the way of legit business.”

“He challenged me!” Gul Tormin said.

“Drop the bounty on your daughter’s head and I will consider the matter settled,” Garcia said.

“I will not allow you to adulterate my lineage with your mixed species, bastard child,” Gul Tormin said.

“Then I will fight you for what’s mine,” Garcia said. “Legate Goris, I will negotiate with you as soon as I’ve concluded my business with Tormin.”

“And if he kills you?” Legate Goris asked.

“I assure you, I will win this,” Garcia said. “But if this happens to be one of those time line tangents where I happen to lose, Kitara is authorized to negotiate the cease fire.”

“I will not negotiate with her,” Legate Goris said.

“I’d just assume kill you,” Kitara said.

Legate Goris laughed. “You? Kill me?” Legate Goris asked.

“You really don’t want to go there with her,” Garcia said. “Come along, Tormin, let’s get this shindig over with.”

“First, I want proof that you performed a coup and that this is not some elaborate trick,” Gul Tormin said.

Garcia activated his Comm. badge. “Jurak, bring Calar and Shuliette into the light,” Garcia said.

Calar and Shuliette were brought out and forced to kneel, surrounded by the Gray Warriors, and Jay’s men. Jay’s men were from a gangster planet, so they knew how to play the game well enough. The two officers behind Tormin and Camel raised their phaser rifles. Duana and Ilona drew their weapons. Tormin’s personal guard took a defensive posture, bringing a weapon to bear on Garcia. Jack brought his P90 up to bear on Tormin. Tatiana and Jay’s men spread out, raising their weapons. Kitara drew her disruptor and aimed at Goris. The Cardassian troops raised their weapons, and Garcia’s tank’s turret spun towards the platoon. This all happened at once and Garcia was surprised no one got shot.

“The cease fire is still on,” Garcia said. “This is between you and me, Tormin. Have your men stand down.”

“You have yours stand down first,” Tormin said.

“All of you stand down!” Legate Goris said, using his command voice. “The cease fire is still in effect and I will kill anyone that violates that cease fire before I rescind it.”

Tormin and Kitara were the only ones that didn’t lower their weapons.

“Tormin,” Legate Goris said.

“Kitara, lower your weapon, that’s an order,” Garcia said. “Tormin, the cease fire is still in effect, right?”

“It is,” Gul Tormin said, handing his disruptor to his second in command. He immediately began to strip out of his armor. He hesitated. “Well?”

“He expects you to remove your armor,” Kitara said, looking at him sideways, as if she were trying to tell him something without it being obvious she was instructing him.

Garcia looked at her as if she were crazy.

“You know how much time it takes getting this all on?” Garcia asked. Everyone just looked at him. “Fine. Girls?”

Garcia started dressing down, handing Duana and Ilona his gear and weapons. Gul Tormin handed his gear and weapons to his men.

“You’re not going to make this a long drawn out fight, are you?” Kitara asked, as she watched him dress down.

“Wasn’t planning on it. Why?” Garcia asked.

“Well, you know the final battles tend to be long drawn out affairs, and quite frankly, I’ve seen you up against better, so I’m just curious if you’re going entertain us by playing with him, or just get it over with so we can get back to work,” Kitara said.

“Face me, Garcia!” Tormin challenged. He stood there with a knife, battle stance ready.

Garcia gave him a hand gesture that suggested ‘give me a second.’ “I’m thinking the quicker the better,” Garcia said.

“Good,” Kitara said, offering Garcia a knife comparable to the one Gul Tormin was wielding.

Garcia refused the knife and motioned his people back. Legate Goris motioned Camel and Tormin’s men to step back. Between the two groups, a small circle had formed in which Tormin and Garcia stood, preparing themselves mentally. Tormin’s troops tightened their formation, coming closer to witness the event. Garcia’s people held their ground. Tormin’s troops all expected Garcia to die quickly, as he was without any weapons.

Tormin didn’t care that Garcia had chosen not to arm himself. In fact, it had exactly the affect that Garcia had predicted. Tormin charged with confidence. Tormin’s troops cheered. Garcia caught him by the arm wielding the knife, twisting the arm, and sweeping his feet. Tormin went down on his back, breaking his arm, and Garcia pushed the knife that Tormin was still holding directly into his chest. The knife started in slow. Tormin’s free hand came up to push up on Garcia’s arm, trying to prevent the knife from going in, but as it got closer to Tormin’s heart, and his strength began to recede, he began to panic. Garcia focused his weight to bear down on the knife. Tormin knew he was dead and surrendered to it. He gasped several times, like a fish suddenly out of water, and then was gone. There was no sound from the spectators, no cheers, no boos, just quiet. And warmth from the sun. In truth, it was all rather anticlimactic. Blood rolled down Tormin’s chest and settled into the grass. A light breeze brought with a smell that triggered his memory of a perfume, but in actuality it was probably honey, from a nearby bees nest. Ducks quietly laughed amongst themselves in the back ground.

Garcia stood up. He became aware of Shuliette’s crying in the back ground, but didn’t have time for her misery.

“Legate Goris,” Garcia said, accepting a PADD from Kitara. “Please confirm that the ritual has been executed according to tradition and all the criteria have been met.”

Legate Goris approached, took tricorder readings, and confirmed the death. Garcia held the PADD out to him, and he signed it with a thumb print. He repeated this procedure with Glinn Camel, Tormin’s second in command. When that was finished, he looked to Calar.

“Jurak! Bring Calar,” Garcia said.

Jurak escorted Calar over to witness for herself that the ritual was complete, that her husband was indeed dead. They were followed by Brock and several guards. Again Garcia became acutely aware of the brightness of the sun, the brutal clarity of the blue sky, and how it contradicted the mood he wanted to strike. The pond sparkled with gentle ripples. The combination of warm sun and cool breeze was extremely pleasant, which would have made this day perfect, except for the violence that he had perpetrated. It was a nice day for a stroll in the park, giving this ceremony a surreal feel to it. Ducks moved noisily away in the distance as they realized no one was going to feed them.

“He’s dead,” Calar said.

“Then I declare the bounty on Shuliette’s life void, and claim all rights to you and your property to make sure that it is not squandered before my heir has a chance to benefit from it,” Garcia said.

Calar signed the PADD with her thumb print and Garcia handed the PADD to Brock. “Jurak, take the body back to the APC.”

“You want the body?” Glinn Camel asked.

“It belongs to me,” Garcia said. “I have the right to dispose of it as I see fit.”

“You do have that right,” Legate Goris said. “I’m surprised you want it.”

“Just need to make sure it’s official,” Garcia said, nodding to Jurak. Jurak took Calar back to Shuliette and two guards picked up Tormin’s body and carried it back to the APC.

“Now, let’s talk,” Legate Goris said.

“Would you give me five more minutes?” Garcia asked.

Legate Goris gestured affirmative and Garcia walked over to Shuliette. She lay sobbing into the grass and wanted nothing to do with her mother’s attempt to console her.

“Stand up,” Garcia said.

Shuliette ignored him. Garcia lifted her up and stood her on her feet. He forced her head up to look at him. “The bounty on your head has been voided. You belong to me. Do you understand your role?”

She nodded.

“I asked you a question,” Garcia snapped her.

“I understand,” Shuliette managed. “I will do whatever you require of me.”

“I want you to live,” Garcia said. “Be healthy and happy.”

“I will live, but I will not be happy,” Shuliette said.

“Bring Calar,” Garcia said to one of his men, pulling Shuliette to the back of the APC.

Garcia departed Legate Goris’ line of sight and he looked to Garcia’s officers for an explanation. Kitara was quiet. Jay merely shrugged, not sure what Garcia was up to. Duana offered Ilona some water from her pack.

One of the Blue-Grays stepped away from Tormin's body and Jurak looked up as Garcia's shadow fell on him. "He's alive," Jurak said.

"You can't do this?!" Calar said.

"Can't do what?" Garcia asked.

Tormin sat up as if he were going to strike, but Jurak held him firm.

"This is not over," Tormin said.

"Oh, I think it is," Garcia said. "Brock?"

"It's done boss," Brock said.

"See, what happened was, I killed you, took control of your authority, and wiped the bounty from your daughter's head," Garcia said.

"I will just reissue another," Tormin said.

"I think you're going to find that a bit difficult," Garcia said, motioning Brock to show him the PADD. "Some Ferengi agents on Cardassia, associates of Brock, my accountant here, liquidated your estate, cashed in all your trusts and bank accounts, everything that gave you status, and transferred all of that wealth into my bank accounts. You're completely broke."

"What?!" Calar and Tormin both said.

"You wanted me to change your world, Calar, well, I did," Garcia said. "You are no longer a part of the elite. You are now just an average, broke citizen, with no wealth, no influence, and no authority. No one will ever fight for you again; no one will ever try to claim you or your wealth again, or threaten you, or manipulate you. You're just normal. Tormin, I think you will find that your political influence isn't as effective now that you have no wealth to throw about."

"I will kill you!" Tormin said.

"You've tried that. You failed," Garcia said.

"What I am to do?" Calar asked.

"You might try to get a job," Garcia said, shrugging indifferently. "Because as for working for me or your daughter, I simply don't trust you. Shuliette, I have a job opening for you if you want, but if you want to return to Cardassia with these two, you're free to go."

Shuliette looked amazed. "Really?" she asked.

"Really," Garcia assured her. "I think your job as a forest ranger compensates you well enough to take care of them, if that's what you want to do. Nothing like they're accustomed, but I think in time they'll learn some humility and appreciate what you have to offer."

"Are you kidding? I don't want them living with me. What job were you going to offer?" Shuliette asked.

"I was hoping to establish a forest reserve on Planet Bliss, to accommodate the animals in the zoo we couldn't relocate," Garcia said.

"I'll take it," Shuliette said, offering her hand to Garcia.

"You can't do that!" Tormin said. "You belong to me!"

"You were going to kill her!" Garcia reminded him.

"Actually, Dad, I think I can do whatever I want, now," Shuliette said. "You have no authority over me, you no longer have any money, your political career is probably finished, and I doubt you're going to win a war against Garcia if you continue along that path, but even if you don't continue the war, your military career is shot, and since no one

is going to align their House with you now that you're finished and bankrupt, since you really never had any real friends, there's no pressure for me to marry into any of these unions you would have preferred, and not for my benefit mind you, but only to take care of you and mom when you get old. Wow. I'm actually happy. For the first time in my life, I'm happy."

"You still belong to me!" Tormin said.

"No, I belong to Garcia," Shuliette said. "You were dead, everyone signed off on it, and I accepted."

"Can I go with you?" Calar asked.

"Are you kidding? Why do you think I went into forestry service to begin with?" Shuliette said. "I wanted some peace and quiet. There is way too much drama hovering around you."

"Jurak, keep Calar and Tormin here for now," Garcia said, handing Shuliette the necklace he had taken from her mom. "Souvenir if you want. If you'll excuse me now, I have to go negotiate a cease fire."

"I demand you let me go," Tormin said.

"Technically, by your own rules, both you and Calar still belong to me," Garcia said. "Just sit tight for a while. Jurak, if he gives you any troubles, sedate him."

As Garcia walked away, Shuliette chucked the necklace to the ground and followed him. She took his arm, trying to slow him. He stopped and gave her his attention.

"Tam. Thank you," Shuliette said.

"I am really sorry for what I have put you through," Garcia said. "All of it."

"To be honest," Shuliette said. "You've actually been much kinder to me than any of the males my father would have given me to."

"That's horrible," Garcia said.

"That's life," Shuliette said.

"No, that's not," Garcia said. "Let's try to do better."

CHAPTER THIRTYEIGHT

Kitara met Garcia as he was returning.

“Affairs in order?” Kitara asked.

“She’s actually happy with my solution,” Garcia said. “Can you believe that?”

“She has more sense than I gave her credit for,” Kitara said. “Legate Goris is growing impatient.”

“Let’s get this over with, then,” Garcia said, and accelerated his pace to rejoin the negotiations. “Thank you for your patience.” Garcia handed Legate Goris his PADD. “This is the plan President Fos of the Federation is recommending, which is intended to supplement the Armistice. We’ll establish a demilitarized zone. You may keep the colonies on the worlds already occupied, but you will withdraw all military platforms and personnel from the highlighted planets.”

“You would leave us completely defenseless?” Legate Goris asked.

“There are two ways to look at this particular star map,” Garcia said. “Either you’re preparing for an invasion of Federation space, or you’re preparing to invade Klingon space. Quite frankly, I doubt you’ll make a grab for Klingon space, because they will kick your ass all the way into next week and they won’t stop coming till they occupy your world of origin. So, I think you’re ambitions are for Federation planets, but that’s just me musing to myself out loud.”

“The Federation has expanded beyond reasonable borders,” Legate Goris said.

“The Federation is comprised of multinational groups and species, peacefully coexisting together,” Garcia said. “If you want that sort of deal, you’re going to have to show a more peaceful side, because quite frankly, the reason you have a growing Maquis problem is because the citizenry don’t trust you. And when we see how you treat the non-Cardassian citizenry on the world’s you occupy, we sympathize with their perspective.”

“I see what the Federation gets for brokering this deal, but what do we get?” Legate Goris said.

“We’re not leaving you defenseless, if that’s what you mean,” Garcia said. “Your ship can respond to emergencies in the demilitarized zone, and the Federation pledges to assist in emergencies as well. We’ll defend your colonies from foreign aggression, but mostly we both reaffirm our non aggression pact between our two Nations, and work together towards our mutual goal of coexistence.”

“And I suppose you will want me to withdraw my forces from Sherman’s Planet,” Legate Goris said.

“Just the majority of your Armada and allow Federation ships to respond with medical intervention to citizens of this planet,” Garcia said. “You may maintain your occupation of Alba province, with the exception of a three city block radius centered on Club Bliss, which will be considered neutral ground. Everything else on this planet remains the property of the local citizens.”

“You’ll let me stay,” Legate Goris said, rich in sarcasm.

“Had I wanted to, your people would already be gone,” Garcia said.

“Your Kelvan powers are being kept in check by my Kelvan friends,” Legate Goris said.

“Do you really want to test that theory?” Garcia asked.

“Tam!” Kitara said, drawing her bat’leth.

Garcia's eyes focused beyond Legate Goris and saw the hell cat demon things he had encountered on Pollux Five appearing out of thin air. They landed on the ground half way between Garcia and the Cardassian platoon. No sooner than their feet hit the ground, they were running. Some ran for the platoon, some were running towards Garcia and his men, and some were chasing the ducks. Kitara was running forwards to meet the swarm advancing on them. Duana tossed Garcia his Gorn weapon.

"We have a cease fire!" Legate Goris said.

"It's not us," Garcia said. "Have your men retreat."

Garcia raised his weapon and fired just over Legate Goris's shoulder. The demon cat dropped to the ground with a heavy sounding thud, crash rolling to a stop at their feet.

"What the devil is that?!" he asked, drawing a phaser and firing at the next closer one. The demon doubled in size and ferocity.

"No phasers!" Garcia yelled. All his people were now firing. He, Duana and Ilona fired their Gorn weapons into the larger demon. Most of the Cardassian platoon was discovering the hard way that phasers were ineffective. "Have your men retreat! My people, fall back to the tank. Everyone, fall back to the tank!"

Apollo stepped out of nowhere onto the battle field. Three other gods joined them, and a lightning storm ensued, as they advanced towards Garcia.

"What is this?!" Goris yelled over the din. "An ambush?"

Losira appeared before Garcia. "Captain! The Kelvan ship is advancing on the planet. Our shields are up. Instructions?"

"Keep those shields up!" Garcia said.

"Where are they coming from?" Duana asked. "I don't see a portal."

Apollo advanced on Garcia. Garcia raised his weapon, his backup singers echoing his move. Losira tried to intercept Apollo and was blasted. She vanished from the playing field.

"We have a truce!" Garcia reminded Apollo.

"The truce stipulates I won't kill you," Apollo said. "And there is a provision that I will not commandeer indigenous technologies, but there is no provision that says I can't utilize technology already under my control."

Garcia was struck by lightning and was thrown back into Legate Goris and they both went down. Duana and Ilona fired into Apollo with their weapons, but he clapped his hands and created an abrupt wind that swept away from him, knocking them to the ground. Garcia staggered to his feet raising his weapon, but a lightning bolt caught it and knocked it away. The branches of lightning grasped at his arm as the weapon was knocked away, licking his neck and face. He grabbed his arm, gritted his teeth, but did not back down as Apollo bared down on him, larger than life, pointing at him.

"Kneel before me and I will stop the attack," Apollo said.

"That's all I have to do?" Garcia asked.

"Worship me, and I will heal everyone on this planet," Apollo said.

"You're not a god," Garcia reminded him.

Apollo enveloped Garcia with lightning, driving him to his knees. He fell prostrate before Apollo, the smell of the grass strong in his nose. An unexpected silence enveloped him and for a slight moment he was concerned that his hearing had been damaged. As he looked up, he saw the entire battlefield frozen. Then he noticed, not everything was frozen. Duck feathers moved with the breeze. Leaves were rustling in

the wind. Duana and Ilona's skirts were pushed against them on one side, and flaring like a flag on the other. Even the hellcat demon things were frozen, except for their fur which bristled in different directions as the wind rotated over the park, stirred by the gods.

The gods were frozen.

And Garcia gradually realized why. Three Kelvan were hovering over the battle field, appraising the situation. One descended upon the god Garcia knew as Hades, its tentacles measuring the god, smelling, tasting, and poisoning. Abruptly the Kelvan and Hades were both gone from Garcia's field of vision, as if were ripped from reality. One of the other Kelvan blinked out of the sky but was back on the field in a different form. It was Kelinda. She circled the god Apollo, reaching up to admire his face, chuckling to herself.

Kelinda was suddenly frozen in space time. And this time, there was a deeper silence over the playing field, as even the wind seemed to have died down. Nothing stirred. A lone, white feather was stuck in mid air, the sun shining through it giving the illusion that had a golden aura.

Amanda Q appeared before Garcia, brandishing his Kelvan bracelet. Her face blocked the sun, giving her a halo. Garcia realized that she was radiant and beautiful in that instant and realized he hadn't time for such thoughts. He stood up to greet her, to thank her, but she spoke first.

"You're going to need this," Amanda Q said. She snapped her fingers and the Kelvan bracelet was suddenly on Garcia's left wrist. She leaned into him and kissed him. "Good luck."

Amanda disappeared from the battlefield.

"All too easy," Kelinda said, turning to face Garcia. She was surprised to see him on his feet.

Garcia and Kelinda both reached for their bracelets. Their fingers touched the silver simultaneously. The ring around the button illuminated, indicating work being done. Around Garcia and Kelinda a virtual war was being waged, a war no one could see, unless they too were plugged into a Kelvan computer. Measures and counter measures rained down around them like ash from a volcano, but melting like snow. Outside of that virtual world, action on the battle field commenced as Garcia freed everyone, hoping the chaos of the situation would cause Kelinda to make mistakes. Maybe he would get lucky and one of the hell cat demon things would eat her first. As it happened, two leaped for him but were instantly turned to polyhedra; they rolled across the grass like dice in a game.

More gods stepped out of nowhere and onto the playing field. They began to attack Apollo and his group with lightning of their own. Legate Goris picked up Garcia's P90 and started firing at the hell cats, emulating Jay. When the weapon was empty, he used the butt of the weapon to hit the remaining creature attacking him. Duana finished off one of her own and showed Goris how to reload a fresh clip. And though Garcia was aware of all of this going on around him; virtual information and tags on all the players indicating names, rank, abilities, current health was available to him, but his primary focus stayed with Kelinda, and so it seemed as if they were the only two on the battlefield. Several more times hell cats approached him and Kelinda both, their virtual signatures flashing red when they were the focus of their attention. In one instance Duana shot the demon cat that was approaching him. Kelinda took out the others.

Garcia felt hands on his shoulders and he was jerked to the left. Before he could react to the new threat, he found himself kneeling in an Iconian Gateway control room. The battlefield he had been on was nothing more than image in front of him, like media on a projection screen. The image changed. Garcia was immediately cut off from the Kelvan technology and he fell ill. He no longer had the strength to resist the hands holding him up.

“Come on,” his captor said. “We can’t stay here.”

She hauled him up to his feet and when the image of the scenery changed again, she carried him through it... Into it. They were now standing on a world in another galaxy, weathered by time, and surrounded by Greek ruins. She sat him down long enough to retrieve an item from her pocket. She touched it to his arm, injecting something into his system. He became instantly more alert.

“What was that you injected into me?” Garcia asked.

“Something to reduce the side effects to the Kelvan technology,” she said. “You should be able to stand now. Let’s go.”

“Where are we?” Garcia asked.

“It doesn’t matter,” she answered, leading him by the arm. “We don’t have much time.”

She led him up to the image on the Iconian Gateway, and when the image changed, she dragged him through to a new world. The Gateway was no longer visible to him. They were in the midst of ruins, but she didn’t give him the time to take it all in. She him led him straightway to a large circular object, very much like the Guardian of Time, which Kirk had gone through to meet Edith Keeler. She put her hand to the stone and the stone illuminated. Mist and images began cycling through the center of the object. She pulled him through before he could protest.

They arrived on another world, perhaps even in another time, and he was feeling overwhelmed with a sense of loss at how far he might actually be from his home and friends. She led him to another facility, the insides of which reminded him of the first Iconian Gateway control room he had been brought to from Sherman’s Planet. She activated the controls and new images appeared on the wall. She started to lead him, but he found the strength to resist.

“No,” Garcia said. “Who are you and where are you taking me?”

“My name is Harmonia,” she said. “I was sent to protect you and the truce. I’m taking you to meet Zeus.”

“Okay,” Garcia said. “Where are we?”

“Does it really matter? This place has long since been unoccupied, in a galaxy further than you might imagine, and it’s not like the name will mean anything to you. You don’t have to know every detail of every arrangement,” Harmonia said.

“This is an Iconian Gateway, isn’t it!?” Garcia said, recognizing one of the words. “But not like mine.”

“Yes, this is Iconian, and yes, it’s not like yours, which are lesser gateways, but more stable and they take less energy,” Harmonia said. “Please, we have to leave here.”

“I need to get back to Sherman’s Planet,” Garcia said.

“Your Kelvan Grand Mother just abducted Hades,” Harmonia said. “You go back now, you’re as good as dead.”

“How is that even possible?!” Garcia asked.

“I don’t know...” Harmonia snapped. “Apollo is here. We have to leave. Wait for it.”

The image changed and she led Garcia through the Gateway. They arrived on an occupied world, Egyptian in appearance. The Citizens fell to their knees at their arrival. Harmonia said something to them and led Garcia to a large Pyramid. They were greeted by thousands of cats as they entered the main chamber. While she operated the controls to another portal, Garcia pet one of the cats.

“Don’t encourage them,” Harmonia said, hauling Garcia through an open portal.

They arrived on a new planet, which Garcia deduced was quite likely really a moon, due to the presence of a gas giant in the night sky.

“How long is it going to take us to get there?” Garcia demanded.

In the middle of a garden, they approached a small, gold truncated pyramid. She touched the hand sized, tetrahedral styled key on one of the outer pyramid walls, and a diamond shaped doorway opened, slipping away as if it were quick silver sucked up by a straw. She led him inside the narrow inner room, and began touching glowing crystal on a pedestal. Images appeared on the far wall, but it was more challenging to gather many details due to the images cycling at a quicker rate than the previous Gateways.

“Can’t you make this slow down, or just show one?” Garcia asked.

“The cycle depends on the number of outbound options, and someone crammed this interface full of options, and I don’t have the access code to start eliminating them,” Harmonia said, rambling as she activated crystal sets. “Just wait a moment.”

Lightning sparked into the pyramid from outside and Harmonia blocked it from hitting Garcia using her body. She barely managed to close the door before Apollo was on them. She could hear him pounding on the door with energy bolts at point blank range.

“I’m not going to be able to hold this!” Harmonia said. “Go, I’ll catch up.”

“Are you sure?” Garcia asked.

“Just go!” Harmonia yelled, concentrating on the door.

Garcia leaped through an image and found himself on a strange world. He waited for what seemed like an hour before he decided it was probably best to start exploring his surroundings. On a normal day, the ancient, abandoned city would have made for a nice hike and exploration, but it just felt eerie, and every piece of relic reminded him he was a long ways from home and with no obvious way to return. Garcia drank from a fountain that was overflowing. It was a source of a stream that had been running for countless years, making the cobble stone streets slick with algae. After drinking he examined one of the buildings that seemed prominent, though it had seen better days. The walls were marked with planets and letters, each moving out from the representation of a star. Strangely enough, the letters under one of the planet formed a word that was vaguely familiar to him.

“Thasus?” Garcia asked himself. It didn’t take long for his mind to make a connection, going to a memory where he was reading the final logs of the USS Antares, which had rendezvoused with the USS Enterprise to drop off...

Garcia decided he needed to make a hasty exit, only to turn around suddenly to find a young man standing in the door way. The man rushed him and pushed him up against the wall.

“You smell like him,” the man said.

"I'm sorry, what?" Garcia asked.

"He sent you here, didn't he?" the young man rambled. "He sent you here for her. Well you can't have her back. She belongs to me. She belongs to me, do you hear me?!"

The man disappeared before Garcia's eyes. Had it been a ghost, or was he losing it, Garcia wondered. He decided to vacate the building. Back outside, he saw a woman standing near the fountain, as if trying to gain the courage to face the stranger. She was wearing a silk, pink robe, which she held closed in front of her.

"Are you real?" she asked, her voice almost cracking.

"Janice Rand?" Garcia asked.

The woman came closer, her eyes wide with fear. "Please tell me you came to rescue me," she said. "Tell me this nightmare is over."

"You are Janice Rand," Garcia said. "Yeoman Rand?!"

"Charles brought me here," Janice said. "Charles Evans has been holding me captive here. How long now? I've lost all track of time."

"That was Charlie Evans?" Garcia asked, pointing back to the room where he had met the mad man.

"The Thasians did something to him" Janice said. "He can't manifest himself in physical form for very long and control his powers. The more energy he spends, the less he can stay corporeal. If you have a ship, we need to leave now."

"I don't have a ship," Garcia said, and he had no idea where the Gateway was located.

Janice Rand began to sob. Garcia went to her and embraced her, and she embraced him crying on his shoulder. She kept mumbling, "Please, tell me you're real."

"Shh, I'm real," Garcia assured her.

Harmonia appeared out of thin air. "Finally! I told you to stay by the Gateway."

"You didn't tell me to stay by the Gateway," Garcia argued.

"How else would you expect me to find you if you're not in sight of the Gateway as I'm flipping through destinations?" Harmonia asked.

"I figured you implanted a tracking device on me when you abducted me," Garcia said. "How else do you keep track of your favorite victims? Either way, you didn't tell me to wait in a specific place. You just said go, you'd catch up."

"Well, we don't have time to argue about it now," Harmonia said. "Give me your hand. We can't stay here."

"Who is she?" Janice asked. "Is this another dream! Damn it, Charlie! Leave me alone. Please, god, just leave me alone."

"We have to go, Tam," Harmonia said. "This place is not safe and I'm violating a treaty being here."

"You're not going to leave me here, are you?" Janice asked, clinging tightly to Garcia.

"No. You're coming with us," Garcia said.

"No, she's not," Harmonia said. "She belongs here."

"I don't know what sort of temporal problems will be caused by us taking her, but we're not leaving her here," Garcia said, emphatically. "She belongs on the Enterprise. With Kirk and we're going to get her back there."

“You don’t understand,” Harmonia said. “Janice Rand was returned to the Enterprise by the Thasians.”

“That’s the way I remember it, too, but finding her here seems to contradict that information,” Garcia said.

“This is not the original Janice Rand,” Harmonia tried.

“What are you saying?” Janice asked. “I’m real!”

“You are a copy,” Harmonia said. “The Thasians made a copy of you to appease Charles Evans, to placate him and keep him on this planet for the duration of his life.”

“She’s a clone?” Garcia asked.

“No, she’s a copy, like a transporter copy, perfect in every detail to the original. The point of divergence comes at the point that Charlie made her go away. One of her came here and the original was sent to the Enterprise, arriving on the Bridge under the guidance of the Thasians. From this Rand’s perspective, she’s been a hostage here for six months,” Harmonia said.

“Has it been six months?” Janice asked.

“She has it pretty good here, Tammas,” Harmonia said. “She has food, shelter, and any material comfort that she could dream of. Her health is perfect, and as long as she stays with Charlie, she will never age. He will keep her body just the way he remembered it, when he first experienced his crush on her. And we expect that Charlie will live a good three hundred years.”

“Three hundred years?!” Janice said. “If you don’t take me, I’ll kill myself.”

“Please, Charlie won’t allow you to die,” Harmonia said. “You belong to him.”

“Either take me with you,” Janice said, holding Garcia’s hand imploringly. “Or kill me, but don’t leave me here alone with him.”

“I’m not leaving you,” Garcia assured her.

“If you stay, Charlie will kill you,” Harmonia said. “And I can’t allow that to happen. Janice has a good life here.”

“You just don’t get it, do you?” Garcia said. “Your kind have been studying us for maybe our entire existence and you still just don’t get it! No one wants to live forever if that means not having friends and family. No one wants to live forever if they don’t have options and freedom to choose one path over another, even if it’s the wrong path. And we definitely don’t want to live forever if that means we’re going to sit around on a bench twenty four seven and sing hymns and praises to some pompous deity want-to-be who would just assume squash us if we did anything contrary to what he or she wants!”

“If you’re going to be an advocate for free will, then Charlie has the right to exercise his ability to keep Janice here,” Harmonia said.

Janice began to cry.

“Screw that,” Garcia said. “I have the free will to interfere with Charlie’s wishes. We’re not leaving her here and that’s final. And I will not cooperate with your agenda further if you try to persuade me otherwise.”

Harmonia looked as if she might pull her own hair out. “I can’t authorize this. This would be a clear violation of the peace treaty we have with the Thasians.”

“I’ve seen how you keep peace treaties. Apollo just attacked me and you’ve been dragging me all over the damn Universe to get away from him and it’s your fault I’m here and now that I know about this Charlie fiasco, I am not leaving until we correct it,” Garcia said. “The Thasians had no right to do this to a human being, whether she is a

copy or clone or android. I will not stand by while some punk ass kid with god like abilities plays dress up with a human being as if she were nothing more than a toy doll.”

“You do this every day in the holodeck!” Harmonia pointed out. “What’s the difference? Matter and energy are all interchangeable. They created her. They created her for him using the original as a template. She belongs to Charlie.”

“Please, take me away from here,” Janice begged.

“Just because you saw her photos while perusing history tapes, and fell in love, doesn’t mean you are obligated to rescue her,” Harmonia said. “Forget about your crush and let’s get out of here before Apollo catches up with us.”

“It’s not a crush,” Garcia said, angry. “Well, alright, maybe it was a crush, but that’s not the point. Technically, thanks to the genetic tampering by my Kelvan parents, she’s related to me. But more than that, she is a human being, and is afforded certain rights under the Federation Charter, and I will say this again since you don’t seem to be getting it, those rights extend to clones, copies, androids, and even new species. She’s going with us.”

“Fine,” Harmonia said, stepping closer to Garcia and offering her hand. “But you’re really going to wish you hadn’t.”

Garcia put his hand in hers. Harmonia turned and started walking. Garcia pulled Janice closer to him, reassuringly. All three of them ended up in an Iconian Gateway Control room. It was a super control room with each of eight walls projecting images of worlds they could potentially visit. There were enough strange new worlds that he almost wished he was immortal so that he could visit all of them.

“Come,” she said, leading them towards the far wall. “Wait for it... Now.”

♪♪▶

Apollo stepped out of thin air on Thasus and was immediately attacked by Charlie Evans. Apollo put him down on the ground, as easily as he might a dog, pinching his neck and waiting for submission.

“You’ve taken her. I want her back!” Charlie demanded.

“I didn’t take her,” Apollo said. “But I know who has.”

“He smelled like Kirk,” Charlie said.

“Genetics,” Apollo said. “And if you want revenge on Kirk, and your woman back, then I am in a position to help you.”

“What must I do?” Charlie asked.

“Just give me your hand,” Apollo said.

Charlie got up off the ground and took Apollo’s hand. They stepped through a Gateway, stepping from Thasus to an Iconian Gateway Control Room on a planet trillions of miles away, as easily as stepping from the porch into the house. The planet Thasus was now thoroughly deserted and its image flipped away as the Gateway cycled through its other options.

♪♪▶

Duana and Ilona turned suddenly towards where Garcia had been when he was hauled through the Gateway. And when the Gateway jumped to the next destination in its option cycle, the telepathic connection between him and the orbs were severed. Duana and Ilona disappeared and the manifestation orbs fell to the ground. The hell cat demon things that had been attacking seemed confused by the sudden disappearance of their

prey, but their tiny brains couldn't deal with the curiosity of the matter and they turned to find new victims to quench their hunger.

Apollo and his fellow combatants retreated from the battle field, disappearing from the world in the same manner they had arrived. The other gods gave chase and were gone. Once the gods were gone, the Kelvan departed the scene, unable to regain control over the players due to something Garcia had done. This left only the hell cat demon things to defend against and with Garcia's group being the only one carrying projectile weapons, they were the ones doing the majority of the defending. When the last of the hell cat demon things fell, Kitara took inventory.

"Everyone check in," Kitara said. "Jurak, we have wounded! Where's Garcia?"

Legate Goris approached her and she watched him wearily, but he came closer in a non aggressive manner, so she maintained a relaxed hold on her bat'leh that could be twirled into an offensive action with ease. "They took Garcia," Goris said.

"Who took him?" Kitara demanded.

"The tall people with the lightening fingers," Legate Goris said. "Who were they?"

"Garcia's mortal enemy," Kitara said, scrutinizing the battle field. "Which group took him? The first group or the second group that aided us against the first?"

"The second, I think. A female," Legate Goris said. "She grabbed him and they both disappeared."

Kitara nodded, and then stepped in closer to Goris.

"Do you accept the terms laid out to you by Garcia?" Kitara demanded.

"Uh, what?" Legate Goris asked. "We nearly got our asses handed to us, and all you want to know about is whether I approve of this truce?"

"We nearly got our asses handed to us because you tried to align yourself with the Kelvan!" Kitara snapped. "They froze all of us."

"You're right," Legate Goris said. "And Garcia stopped them, using the Kelvan technology to combat them. He saved me several times from those things and again from the Kelvan. Kitara, what can I do to help you recover Garcia?"

"I don't want your help," Kitara said. "I want you and your ships out of this system."

"I accept the terms of the treaty as Garcia presented them," Legate Goris said. "I must present the treaty to the High Command, as I assume you must run this past the Federation President. As a show of good faith, however, my Armada will depart once I'm back on my ship, so you may immediately call for medical assistance. I would offer to stay and assist in this, but I doubt the survivors of the attack would respond well to more Cardassians on their planet."

"They would not," Kitara said, waving at two guards. "Guards, bring the prisoners."

The guards brought Calar and Tormin over to Legate Goris. "Take these two with you when you go," Kitara said. "They're not welcome on this planet."

Legate Goris opened his mouth to say something, feeling rather confused, but then he laughed heartily. "I am genuinely surprised," Goris said. "Garcia is a better man than I imagined."

Kitara stepped closer to Legate Goris, getting in his face. "And I expect you to sell this treaty to your people out of your new found respect for him," Kitara said. "If it doesn't go through, you and I will have issues."

"He has chosen his officers well," Goris said.

"I'm also his wife and his friend," Kitara said. "Do we have an understanding?"

"May all your battles be honorable," Goris said, bowing respectfully.

Kitara walked away from Goris and approached Tatiana. "Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," Tatiana said, her leg scratched and bloody, but she was limping around adequately. She held up the two manifestation orbs. "There's no trace of him."

"I doubt he's on the planet," Kitara said, looking up to the sky. "Make sure Shuliette gets back to Club Bliss safely, and then pass her through the Gateway to Planet Bliss, per Garcia's last instructions."

"Aye," Tatiana said.

Kitara touched her comm. badge. "Path Finder, beam me directly to the Bridge." Kitara arrived on the Bridge and turned immediately to Trini. "Lt. Sookanan, contact Star Fleet and the Federation President. Inform them that we have a tentative agreement on a cease fire with the Cardassians, brokered by Garcia, and it is pending the review of their High Command. As a show of good faith, the Armada is leaving. Request immediate assistance to deal with casualties of war. After that, contact Grilka's ships and tell them it's time, they're needed."

Undine reported that there had been no exchange of fire between them and the Kelvan ship and that it had gone immediately to warp after leaving the planet's orbit. Transporters had been repaired, obviously, but the warp drive was still out. There were Grays working on that even as they spoke. Her report was interrupted by one of the Cardassian ships hailing them.

"The Cardassian Flagship is requesting permission to approach within transporter range of Sherman's Planet," Trini said.

"Tell them to disarm their weapon systems and approach," Kitara said, watching the ship for any signs of treachery.

"Star Fleet is responding," Trini said. "They're sending ships. We're to continue to do the best we can until that help arrives."

"Very well," Kitara said. "The battle's over, so let's focus all our resources on search and rescue now that we can use transporters. Undine, I'm leaving the ship for about ten minutes. You're in charge till I get back. Losira, you're with me."

Kitara went to the turbo lift and waited for Losira to join her. "Deck Five," Kitara said, and then turned to Losira. "You have a telepathic bond with Garcia. Can you take us to him?"

"I'm fairly certain I can get us close," Losira said. "But until our number four engine nacelle has been repaired, we don't have access to transwarp drive."

"You can't take us to him using regular warp?" Kitara asked.

Losira shook her head. "It's not a conscious thing. I can't point and say, this is the coordinates for where he is. It is intuition and it is a factor of being in a transwarp state of mind, occupying all time space simultaneously. When I sense our mind overlapping, I bring us out of warp, and suspect we'll be fairly close, close being within one to ten light years from him."

They arrived on deck five and the doors to the lift opened. Kitara proceeded down the corridor directly to the Gateway on the hangar deck. She opened a portal between the Path Finder and Yonada and crossed over, followed by Losira.

“Where is she?” Kitara asked.

Losira looked up and to the left. “This way,” Losira said, leading the way.

Kitara found Athena staring out what appeared to be a large plate glass window. It wasn't actually a window, but rather it was a viewer that allowed her to see the planet below. It was the very planet that Garcia had spent several years of his youth, swimming with dolphins, and learning music. She turned at the sound of footsteps and the familiar scent of hell cat demon death that was all over Kitara. Kitara was on Athena suddenly, putting a knife to her throat.

“Where is he?!” Kitara demanded.

“If you kill me, he is as good as dead,” Athena said.

Kitara pushed her forcefully into the viewer, causing the image to flicker.

“Where?!”

“Our side has him,” Athena said. “They took him in for his protection.”

“You will take me to him, now,” Kitara said.

“I can't,” Athena said. “It is too dangerous for me in my current condition. But I assure you, Garcia will be returned, unharmed.”

“When?” Kitara asked.

“I don't have a precise moment of arrival,” Athena said. “I just know he will be back.”

“Then you should also know this,” Kitara said. “If he doesn't come back, or he is harmed, you and I will have issues.”

“I believe your sincerity,” Athena said.

Kitara sheathed her knife and stepped away from Athena.

“I'm not the enemy, you know,” Athena said, rubbing her neck.

Kitara simply walked away. Losira shrugged and disappeared.

CHAPTER THIRTYNINE

Janice Rand clung to Garcia as if he was a life raft and she was a Titanic survivor. She was shaking from fear, exhaustion, and possibly exposure, though she appeared to be in perfect health. He felt empathy for her, but he was hardly in a position to tell her everything was okay when he was hardly sure of his own footing. After passing through two Super Iconian Gateway Control Centers, Garcia, Harmonia, and Rand arrived near a Greek temple, at the top of a mountain. The view was immense, and on a normal day, Garcia might have stared at the rain forest for hours, counting the many different types of trees that swept various shades of green all the way down through the valley below. Individual rain clouds moved silently across the tree tops like sheep over a field.

An old man descended from the Temple to greet Garcia. Before he could say anything, however, an angry swarm of manifestation orbs swept in and a number of gods appeared, each wanting the old man's immediate attention, each believing their issues carried more weight than any of the others. Over the din of the arguments and pleas, Garcia picked out two distinct voices:

"He wiped out my experiment on Earth," one of them said. "And destroyed a perfectly good asteroid deflector in the process."

"Oh, please, no one cares about the lizards, Mithras," another said. "Dinosaurs are so antiquated. Be happy with your Cardassian and Gorn species."

"Why does Athena get to be the carrier?" another asked, stamping her feet. "I want to be with Garcia."

"Silence!" the old man said. He proceeded to Garcia and took his hand in both of his, offering a sincere, warm greeting. "Tammias Parkin Arblaster-Garcia. Captain. Or is it Admiral. You have so many titles, it's hard to keep track. Either way, it is nice to meet you in person."

"You know me?" Garcia asked.

"I'm Aphrodite," the female who had stamped her feet interrupted, offering her hand, trying to wedge herself in front of the old man.

Garcia ignored her in favor of the old man, who was clearly in charge here.

"I know you," the old man said. "I've read your entire life as easily as you might read a book. I've read all the possible scenarios and outcomes, and all the alternative tangents your life might have taken had you chose one path over the other. I know all your thoughts, both your private musings and the ones you have actually written down. Yes, Tammias, I know you."

"I'm sorry, father," Harmonia said. "He insisted on bringing the Rand girl. I tried to warn him of the dangers."

"I know, dear," the old man said. "Be at peace. The universe is unfolding as it should."

"So, you don't condone the Theolsians abducting her," Garcia said.

"Technically, Charles Evans abducted Rand and the Thasians returned her to the Enterprise," the old man said. "This is a copy. But you fight for an esoteric quality that you believe pervades the human essence, whether it is a copy or not. Though I admire your fight for human dignity, I must tell you; your life would have been longer and qualitatively better had you left her behind."

"We don't leave people behind," Garcia said.

“Father!” one of the gods protested. “Why are you wasting time talking to this NPC?! He’s a program, a non avatar. We have more important issues to discuss.”

And another. “She’s right! The Kelvan Kelinda has kidnapped Hades.”

“I know,” the old man said.

“So, what are you going to do about it?” another demanded.

“The damage has been done,” the old man said. “Garcia might be our only hope for lessening the impact.”

“I don’t understand,” Garcia said. “What has Kelinda done?”

“She abducted Hades!” Mithras said.

“So what?” Garcia said. “It’s my understanding he’s been doing that to my kind for ages. All of you have. Maybe it’s time you had a taste of your own medicine.”

Mithras stepped forward aggressively and the old man blocked with a finger, causing Mithras to withdraw. The exchange somehow reminded Garcia of Michael Angelo’s ‘Creation of Adam.’

“Besides,” Garcia went on. “How is that even possible? Why can’t he just jumped to another manifestation orb.”

“Using various technologies at her disposal, Kelinda was able to lock Hades into the manifestation orb that he was utilizing,” Mithras said. “And it’s because of the truce we had with you that he was prevented from commandeering the technology to stop her.”

“I’m still not feeling much sympathy for him,” Garcia said. “And you still haven’t really answered my question.”

“It is actually much worse than any of them know,” the old man said. “Kelinda has actually transferred her consciousness into Hades body, for lack of a better word.”

There were quite a few gasps and a number of arguments ensued.

“How is that possible?” Garcia asked. “You consider us nothing more than programs in a computer. How can a computer program commandeer your body?”

“Yes, father,” Aphrodite said, still trying to win Garcia over with overt smiles.

“How is that possible?”

“Do you remember the time a Doctor Janice Lester switched consciousness with Captain Kirk?” the old man asked.

“Sure,” Garcia said. “Stardate 5928 point 5, while responding to a distress call to Camus Two, Kirk is led to believe Dr. Lester is gravely ill. Unfortunately, it was a ruse and she was able to utilize an alien device discovered in the ruins to switch her life energy with that of Kirk’s, so that she could be Captain.”

“Using that technology as a template, Kelinda has created a Kelvan version of the same technology and utilized it to switch her consciousness with Hades,” the old man said. “She is now among us, in our world outside the universe as you know it. She has access to all of Hades’ technology and resources. And she will be able to manipulate your reality and time line in the same manner that we have been doing for years, only she will not have the restraint that we exercise because she will not play by the rules that we have laid out for all those who might seek access to your universe. Her impulses will be completely ruled by her agenda, which is to conquer your Universe.”

“Is this even possible?” Garcia asked.

“The Kelvan species have sufficient brain power to occupy our bodies and thrive,” the old man said. “And, they also have the adaptability, the versatility, and the experience of changing their forms at will that give them an advantage in our world.”

“So, why don’t you just go and arrest her,” Garcia said.

“You’re thinking three dimensionally,” the old man said. “Our universe, which is really the wrong term for our world or existence but we speak in these analogies so that we might communicate effectively with you, isn’t like this. We can no more go and arrest someone or kill someone in our world, than you can remove Duana or Ilona from your own mind.”

“Well, the transference isn’t permanent,” Garcia said. “Unless you kill one of the bodies. Kelinda isn’t likely to kill her own body, even if she isn’t in it. She’s attached to it.”

“Reducing her body to its essential elements, minus the water, into the compact form of a polyhedra is the same as death,” the old man said. “She has stored her old body thus and can theoretically remain alive in Hades body for eternity, and access your universe through any one of Hades’ personal manifestation orbs at will, and can even generate her Kelvan form or the form you know as Kelinda. We’re not attached to our avatar bodies the way you are attached to yours. We can assume anything we wish, and those attributes will be manifested through the orbs. There are orbs scattered throughout your Universe, appearing to be everyday objects, merely waiting for one of our entity’s to activate it and use it.”

“I am surprised that the technology to switch bodies works on you,” Garcia said.

“Why,” the old man asked. “We helped create it.”

“You created it? Why would you create it?” Garcia asked.

“It was created in an effort to permanently transfer our consciousness into this reality,” the old man said. “Unfortunately, the technology was imperfect, and it only offered a temporary presence in this universe, and that is because we are immortal. There is no death in our universe, at least, not as you know death.”

“It’s rather ironic, then, that you invade our universe and keep trying to tweak it to make it more palatable for your kind, but instead, you make it possible for us to invade your universe, which we can make permanent because we’re mortal,” Garcia said.

“Sounds like poetic justice, if you ask me. For the first time, you’re facing death and uncertainty. With Kelvan technology and their mental superiority, we can now turn the tables and abduct you, switch places with you, kill you, and then we become the immortal masters of the Universe.”

“Choose your words carefully, mortal,” Mithras said. “Your truce won’t last forever.”

“I would be willing to extend it,” Aphrodite offered, her hand sliding up Garcia’s arm.

“Tammias, you’re absolutely right,” the old man said. “We did this to ourselves. We might as well have built the Garden of Eden and served you the forbidden fruit on a golden platter.”

“I don’t see what you’re worried about. By your own admission, it’s not like Kelinda can kill you,” Garcia said. “Unless she can convince more Kelvan to abduct more of you and trade places with you and store you.”

“She cannot kill us in the sense of the word as you use it, true. At least, not outright,” the old man said. “Think of us as a collection of personalities in a single mind. Some personalities fade, some are absorbed, some grow stronger. It’s all about an

exchange of energy. Nothing every goes away completely, but the voice can be so diminished that it doesn't occupy awareness.

"But again, that is only an analogy. We want to come into this universe because ours is dying. It is shrinking and our ability to move in our environment is becoming increasingly limited, and eventually we will only have awareness, with no means to exert control over ourselves or our environment. We will exist as pure energy. Kelinda can make our lives outside of this 'verse miserable by dominating our thought structures, repressing us, but more than that, she might ruin the only opportunity we have to escape to a new place to continue our existence, by being a distraction or by exerting dominance over the One Mind."

"The One Mind?" Garcia asked.

"God," the old man said, hoping that was sufficient clarification.

"God is a schizophrenic and you're his hallucinations?" Garcia asked.

The old one gave a slight shrug with upturned palms. "Analogy, metaphor, but accurate in some ways. And Kelinda has changed the balance of power."

"And who knows what damage she is unleashing?! She could be unraveling all our plans even as we speak," Mithras complained.

Garcia chuckled. "So, is it possible that only now you are learning what we feel when you manipulate us, abduct us to conduct experiments on us?"

"There are those of our kind who have disagreed with our methods," the old man said. "But you cannot deny that your species has benefited from the experiment. Because of us, you will not go extinct as a race. We have preserved you. Surely that is worth something? There are copies of you, for instance. You, Garcia, are an extremely valuable piece. We can't risk losing you from the playing field."

"What is it you want from me?" Garcia asked.

"I want you to find Kelinda's polyhedra, restore her body to living status so that she will eventually revert back to her own body, and Hades will return to his," the old man said.

Garcia laughed. "And what do I get out of this?"

"To live," Mithras said.

"He just got through saying that I'm too important a piece to let die, and you threaten my life?" Garcia asked.

"We kill you and then insert a more compliant copy," Mithras said.

"We will not kill you, Garcia," the old man assured him. "It is important that you, the original Garcia, live as long and uninterrupted life as possible, which increases the number of temporal intervals in which we can make copies of you, with each temporal interval having its own unique skill set and perspective. We require this multiplicity of the developed personality matrix in order to accomplish our goals."

"Which sort of explains the report I read concerning all the copies of McCoy you made and had in storage," Garcia said.

"That was a private collection, actually," Dionysos said, pouting. He took a drink from a glass of wine. "I doubt I will ever recoup the loss. Thanks to you."

"You mean my copy, but glad to hear it," Garcia said. "I don't approve of your abducting people and making copies against their will and holding the copies against their wills."

"We're Preservers," Dionysos said. "It's what we do."

“How good can you actually be at that? You couldn’t even preserve the truce that Athena assured me I had,” Garcia said.

“Treaty violation is a valid part of any game, Tam, but I am disappointed that it didn’t last longer. Some of my people have gone rogue,” the old man said. “We will try and minimize the disturbance to your life. Are you willing help us?”

“You mean more than I already have?” Garcia asked.

“If you’re referring to the child you and Athena have created, it has a role to play in uniting our two species,” the old man said.

“Sure, if you like cold, ice warrior children,” Aphrodite complained. “Tam and I could make beautiful grand babies for you, father.”

“And given both yours and his propensity for being sluts, that ought to make the world a kinder place,” Dionysos said, sarcastically.

“Exactly!” Aphrodite agreed, missing the slam completely.

“It’s in your best interest to stop Kelinda,” the old man said, ignoring his more vocal children. “If given the chance, she will destroy the Federation and recreate the Kelvan Empire in your galaxy. Most of the species in the alpha quadrant will become Kelvan slaves, including the humans.”

“If I do this, I want you out of our universe altogether,” Garcia said.

“That’s not going to happen,” the old man said. “We’re here to stay. We simply need to work on cohabiting peacefully. The alternative is we’re here and you’re not.”

“How do you expect us to co-exist when you keep abducting us and conducting experiments on us?” Garcia said.

“It is necessary for us to do this to in order to better preserve the species we’re interested in. You cannot be trusted to preserve life on your own,” the old man said. “Too many times have we witnessed your worlds self annihilate. We cannot allow such a promising species to become extinct. Just as you are too valuable a player to be allowed only one life.”

“Please,” Garcia said.

“Your modesty is nice, but trust me, Garcia. I know your worst thoughts and I know your best thoughts, and I also know your actions, past, present and future, and there are some universes where your alternate self is pure evil, but all together, you bring a stability to the whole multi-verse that makes you a necessary component of our plan. For better or worse, you are a pivotal point in a fulcrum that will either tip the odds in our favor, or destroy us all,” the old man said. “It is ultimately up to you. Think on it. And get back to me.”

The old man pointed a finger at Garcia. A wind began to stir, strengthening and growing into a cyclone that surrounded both Garcia and Yeoman Rand. Garcia embraced Rand protectively, holding her head to his chest. He was forced to close his eyes against the force of the gale. Garcia and Rand disappeared and the vortex of energy faded.

The old man turned to his children.

“I want you to find Apollo and bring him to me,” the old man said. “All of you out. Now. Except you, Mithras. Come here.”

♪♪▶

Vice Admiral Nechayev, Admiral McCoy and his entourage, Captain Jellico of the Federation Starship Cairo, were the most prominent members of Star Fleet at the conference table at Club Bliss. On the opposite side of the table was Legate Goris, Gul

Camel who was now in charge of occupied Alba, and his new officers. Captain Trolos, representing the Klingon Empire's interest was at far end of the table. Opposite of them was President Tanner of the Sherman's Planet and his staff.

"Neither the Klingon Empire nor the Federation have made claims on this system, and because it falls under either's jurisdiction, it has become a hotbed for criminal activity, including black market weapons. We are not leaving this here until the situation has been contained," Legate Goris said, speaking over Tanner. "This planet will allow us to monitor the coming and goings of Star Fleet, who we believe are complicit in aiding the Maquis, as well as determine the extent of any unacceptable contraband."

"We are not in league with the Maquis," Jellico snapped. "You created the Maquis problem by occupying worlds you have no business being on."

"Do you deny that this very Club is a front for illegal drugs and slave women?" Legate Goris asked. "Do you deny that its owner is a Star Fleet Officer?!"

"Garcia has put the biggest dent in slave trading since the Orion's started peddling their animal women," McCoy said.

"Garcia is a member of the Orion Crime Syndicate, sanctioned by the Rigel government," Legate Goris pointed out.

"I notice you're brave enough to make accusations against someone who isn't here to defend himself," Trolos said.

"Tell me he doesn't own his own slave," Legate Goris said.

"He doesn't own any slave women," Kitara said. "Ori is a patient that requires a specific treatment plan and Garcia is her Doctor."

"And is it customary for human doctors to impregnate their women patients?" Legate Goris asked.

Kitara drew her dagger. It was all Tuer and Jurak could do just to hold her back.

"Garcia saved your life on the battlefield two weeks ago," Kitara said, spitting with rage. "And you have the gall to knock him."

"I'm not ungrateful for that," Legate Goris said. "But you cannot hide the fact that the only reason he was able to save all our lives was because he is Kelvan and has access to technology that is far superior than anything the Federation, the Klingon Empire, or the Cardassian Union has. What did the Federation do? Buy him and tell him to spy on us?"

"Garcia is not a spy," Vice Admiral Nechayev said.

"Then what was he doing in orbit around Cardassia?" Legate Goris asked.

"What makes you think he was ever at Cardassia?" Captain Jellico asked.

"Kelvan technology leaves a very specific fingerprint," Legate Goris said. "The island that the Maquis recently attempted to blow up using an antimatter bomb has energy readings that suggest Kelvan technology was used to contain the blast."

"So, what you're saying is, Garcia minimized the damage to the island," Captain Jellico pointed out.

"Perhaps maybe even saved you're entire planet!" Kitara added. "What exactly were the Maquis trying to sabotage?"

"They struck a private resort where high class citizens retire for holidays," Legate Goris said.

"I doubt that," Captain Jellico said. "More likely it was military instillation."

“Are you accusing us of something specific, or fishing for information?” Legate Goris asked.

“All I am saying is that I doubt the Maquis would go through all that trouble, risk their lives, only to blow up a vacation spot,” Captain Jellico said. “And that perhaps you owe Garcia a little more gratitude than you’re admitting to.”

“Oh, I think the tables have been fairly balanced in that score,” Legate Goris said. “There are reports of several dozen miraculous pregnancies after the Garcia incident, bearing Kelvan technology signatures, and Garcia’s genetic code as evidence.”

“Perhaps you are unaware that Kelinda, who you solicited help from, has been conducting experiments on Garcia since he was conceived and that she might be the one responsible?” Admiral McCoy asked. “Her presence on your planet would also explain the Kelvan fingerprint.”

“We didn’t ask Kelinda for help until after the attack on our planet,” Legate Goris said.

“So, why don’t you ask her to help you with your Maquis problem?” Kitara asked.

“We did,” Legate Goris said. “They brought my troops to this planet.”

“And what did you offer them in return?” Captain Jellico asked, ever practical.

“None of your business,” Legate Goris said.

“Whatever the deal was, you agreed not to abort Garcia’s children!” Jurak said, totally guessing. And when Legate Goris non-verbally suggested Jurak had hit home, Jurak pushed the guess for a home run. “You’re participating in the Kelvan experiment. Kelinda set you up and you fell for it.”

“Hook, line and sinker,” Captain Jellico said.

“We have the right to defend ourselves!” Legate Goris said.

“By making deals with an enemy?!” Captain Jellico asked.

“Your enemy!” Legate Goris pointed out.

“Alright, this is not getting us anywhere,” Vice Admiral Nechayev agreed.

“We’ve been over this point a dozen times now. We agree that you have the right to defend yourself and even the right to solicit outside help. What we’re asking of you now is that you leave Sherman’s Planet and in exchange, we will assist you with the Maquis.”

“That was not part of the arrangement,” Legate Goris said. “I am agreeing to the terms laid out by Garcia, who was empowered to negotiate by President Fos.”

“Garcia has no authority over my planet!” President Tanner said. “He doesn’t speak for us.”

“You were getting your asses kicked,” Kitara said. “If it wasn’t for Garcia, you’d still be in a cell and you’d have no rescue operation in process.”

“I appreciate the fact that the Federation and the Klingon Empire have sent aid,” President Tanner said. “But it’s too little too late. There are still people dying out there that we haven’t been able to get to and my world is still occupied by an enemy.”

“You have much more of your world than what I would have preferred,” Legate Goris said. “Be grateful that Garcia intervened on your behalf.”

“Let’s try and stay focused,” Vice Admiral Nechayev said.

“Focused on them leaving,” President Tanner said.

“If the Cardassians are going to stay on Sherman’s Planet, you can bet Gowron will be sending some troops to occupy this planet as well,” Trolos said.

“Now, Trolos,” Admiral McCoy said. “We’re trying to avoid further hostilities.”

“Actually, I welcome his troops. I would also like Star Fleet to leave a task force on this planet, establishing a De-Militarized Zone around Alba Province, to help guarantee that there will not be more outbreaks of violence while we’re here.”

“You blast this planet from orbit and now you’re asking us to help you defend your occupation?” Captain Jellico asked, amazed at Goris’ audacity.

“Either you help us subdue this population, or my fleet will return and continue the bombardment until there is compliance,” Legate Goris said. “Or everyone is dead. You claim you want to help us with the Maquis problem, well, here’s your chance.”

“Star Fleet will leave a detachment here,” Admiral Nechayev agreed.

“And so will we,” Captain Trolos said.

“Now, just a damn minute!” Tanner said. “This is my planet! We’re not part of the Federation or the Klingon Empire, and we want to keep it that way.”

“Do you want to join the Cardassian Union?” Trolos asked.

Tanner was quiet.

“Then remain silent. The only reason your planet is occupied today is because a hundred years ago your citizen decided to declare independence from both the Federation and the Klingon Empire!” Trolos said. “And since we’re on the subject of redefining the boundaries of our three nations, Legate Goris, we would like to address Cardassian Fleet movement under Gul Lemec, in sectors...”

“No,” Legate Goris interrupted him. “We are not renegotiating the Federation Cardassian peace treaty, nor are we declaring new borders. We will continue to do what we want within our borders. What we’re here to discuss is the establishment of a De-Militarized Zone around the agreed upon systems, which will be an addendum to the already existing truce.”

“I think we should take a recess,” Admiral Nechayev said.

President Tanner pushed away from the table. He was frustrated that he wasn’t being heard and that he had lost all control. He was about to storm out when he felt a breeze against him that was growing in strength. Everyone at the table turned to the source of the wind, which was now visible, spinning like a tornado. The wind was made visible with the movement of glowing particles that were created and died in an instant, like sparks from a cutting torch, whirling around a vortex where two humans were being reconstructed. When the energy dissipated, Garcia and Rand were standing at the center of the storm. Garcia opened his eyes, orientating himself to his new environment, with Yeoman Rand still clinging to him tightly. President Tanner froze for just a second and then punched Garcia right in the face. There was little bit of confusion as Garcia chose to protect Rand from possible injury as opposed to fighting back, pulling her around behind him. Kitara jumped between Garcia and Tanner. Legate Goris and his men prepared to defend themselves. Trolos subdued Tanner.

“Everyone, just calm down!” Vice Admiral Nechayev ordered.

Kitara turned to Garcia, hugged him fiercely, and then stepped back and struck him even harder than Tanner had.

“Bloody hell!” Garcia said. “Has everyone lost their freaking minds?”

Kitara shoved at him with open palms. “What took you so long?”

“Nice to see you, too,” Garcia said. “What’s it been? Four hours?”

“Try two week,” Kitara said.

“Two weeks! That’s impos... Okay, never mind...” Garcia said.

Admiral McCoy had gotten up to come around the table. He touched Yeoman Rand on the shoulder. “Janice?” he asked.

There was a moment of confusion in Rand’s eyes, as she clearly recognized McCoy’s voice, but all too soon the realization dawned on her, then she embraced McCoy, and the flood gates to her tears opened. She rested her head on his shoulder and began to sob.

Kitara hit Garcia again. “What did you do to her?”

“Please! Technically, she’s like my great, great grandmother,” Garcia said.

“That’s disgusting! Even for you,” Kitara said. “How much lower can you get?”

“It’s not what you think,” Garcia growled.

“You’ve been alone with this woman for two weeks and she’s crying, what else am I to think?” Kitara demanded.

“Bloody hell, maybe I should have just stayed gone,” Garcia said.

Kitara hit again. “Just shut up,” she said.

“Tam, tell me you didn’t disrupt the time line by bringing Yeoman Rand to the future,” McCoy said.

“I didn’t break the continuity of the time line,” Garcia assured him. “But I did make a new enemy.”

“Everywhere you go,” Tatiana quipped.

“Explain yourself,” McCoy said.

“Apparently when the Thasians re-integrated your Yeoman Rand, they made a copy of her in order to appease Charlie Evans,” Garcia said. “She was being held prisoner on Thasis, when I arrived there via an Iconian Gateway. Wonderful technology, by the way. They don’t just travel from place to place, but from time to time, and I happened to arrive on Thasis six months after Yoeman Rand had been abducted by Charlie. I couldn’t very well leave her there, now could I? And since it’s been a quarantined planet ever since the Evans incident, I don’t see how bringing her back with me could cause any paradoxes. The only problem with bringing her here is that Charlie is probably going to come looking for her and in that event, I will have to confront him.”

Losira interrupted the meeting by beaming herself in. She went right to Garcia and hugged him. “Where have you been?” she said, almost crying with relief.

“Oh, just gallivanting all over the Universe and through time, in the company of pseudo gods,” Garcia said. “Look, I’m a bit confused about what’s all going on here. From my perspective I have been gone just a little over four hours. What’s the situation? Do you need another Doctor?”

“The situation is under control,” Kitara said. “We’re still finding survivors in the affected areas, but fewer and fewer as time goes on. Clean up will probably take years.”

“We’re trying to finish the negotiations that you started,” Trolos said.

“Great,” Garcia said. “How’s that going?”

“President Tanner hit you, how do you think?” Tatiana asked.

“That good, eh?” Garcia asked.

“Just don’t expect any parades,” Kitara said.

“Thank god,” Garcia said. “I don’t really like parades in my honor.”

Legate Goris approached Garcia. “I wanted to thank you for saving my life during the confrontation with the gods,” Goris said.

“You ass kissing, piece of...” Kitara said, shoving at him.

“At ease, Number One,” Garcia said.

Kitara looked at Garcia, complied, and glared at Legate Goris.

“In all my years, I never thought it possible,” Trolos said.

“Shut up,” Kitara snapped at her brother.

“My gratitude for saving my life is genuine, Garcia,” Legate Goris said.

“Yeah, well, let’s get this part straight; I only saved your ass because I was told to negotiate a cease fire and get that DMZ in place,” Garcia said. “If I had my way, I would have blasted you for the level of destruction you caused, and if we meet again on the war path, I’m taking you out of the game, if you know what I mean.”

“Garcia!” Admiral Nechayev said.

“It’s alright, Admiral,” Legate Goris said. “I appreciate Garcia’s candor. There are few people today who actually say what they think. Too much political correctness can destroy a society. Garcia, I hope we do meet again on the battlefield. I think you might just be a worthy adversary. Welcome home.”

Legate Goris departed Club Bliss, followed by his men.

“How you ever became Captain is beyond me,” Jellico said, as soon as the Cardassians were out of earshot. “Everywhere you go, you leave chaos in your wake.”

“Have we met?” Garcia asked Jellico.

“That’s enough,” Vice Admiral Nechayev said. “Captain Garcia, I want to see you on the USS Cairo in one hour for debriefing. Go get cleaned up. You smell like something died. McCoy, I would like you to be there, too. Take care of Miss Rand for now. Captain Jellico, come with me.”

“Is it that bad?” Garcia asked, sniffing and realizing he must have become immune to the smell of hell cat on him. He watched the Vice Admiral and Captain Jellico depart. McCoy took Rand to the bar and was seeing to it that she was fed and comfortable while they talked.

“Same as last time,” Kitara said. “Come on, let’s get you back to the Path Finder.”

Trolos approached. “It is good to see you, Brother. I would not be happy if you made my sister a widower so early in her life.”

“Me, too,” Garcia said. “Thanks for coming.”

Leeta approached Garcia and handed him a PADD.

“Excuse me, Trolos,” Garcia said, before turning his eyes back to Leeta. “I’m obviously behind on my paper work. Hello, Leeta,” Garcia said, accepting the PADD from her. He was genuinely enthusiastic to see her. He seemed to know intuitively that she had been assisting with first aid and patient care since the attack, but she was looking fairly good for a person who had no doubt gone without sufficient sleep for several days. He glanced at the PADD from her and his smile faded as he realized it was her resignation. “What’s this?”

“I can’t work for someone who would negotiate peace with the Cardassians,” Leeta said. “Especially given what they did to this planet, these people.”

“I understand,” Garcia said, pushing down on all his emotions and the potential responses. He wanted to tell her he was following orders. He wanted to try and win her approval and keep her with him. But perhaps her leaving was best. He wouldn’t be distracted by her. That wasn’t so. The moment she left, he would obsess even more

about her. Why was he always preoccupied with the girls he couldn't have? "If you need a recommendation..."

"If I need anything, I will get it from Brock," Leeta said, and walked away.

"I guess you can't win them all, Tam," Tatiana said.

"Should I hunt her down and kill her?" Kitara asked.

"No," Garcia said. They were both surprised that their black humor didn't get a rise out of him. It was almost as if he'd given up, which was something new for both of them. "But you weren't joking about 'no parades,' eh?"

"The population is divided against you," Kitara explained. "Some are happy for the effort you made to save their lives. Others are angry that you gave Alba province to the Cardassians. The only thing they all seem to agree on is that the Cardassians have to go, and so it looks like the Federation and the Klingon Empire are going to have to leave troops here to help maintain the peace."

"Oh, I just bet they're happy about that," Garcia said.

"The Klingons are," Kitara said. "We're still a bit sore at having lost Sherman's Planet to begin with. This situation will allow them to get a foot hold here. So far, it looks like the only good thing to come out of all of this is that Brock expects business to really pick up here at Club Bliss, with us being neutral territory and all."

"Wonderful," Garcia said. "And I suppose it will appear that I am profiting from all of this turmoil. Good times. Is the New Constitution here in orbit?"

"Aye," Kitara said. "The Path Finder is docked into the tandem position with the NC."

"Wonderful," Garcia said. "Losira, beam the us directly to the Path Finder's Infirmary."

"Are you ill?" Kitara asked. They were on the Path Finder before she finished asking the question.

"No, just got one thing left that I want to do," Garcia said.

"Doctor Jurak, do you have an artificial womb available?" Garcia asked.

"For Lt Kelly's baby?" Jurak said, nodding. He led Garcia over to the womb and activated it. "Kitara told me to anticipate this."

"I'll get your bracelet," Kitara said.

"No need," Garcia said, revealing he already had one up his sleeve.

Kitara and Jurak both gave him an angry look, wondering how long he had been hiding that up his sleeve.

"Tam, are you sure you're up to this?" Tatiana asked. "You said you have only been gone four hours. If I'm not mistaken, you were in combat with that thing."

"I need to fix this and it might as well be now, while I'm still feeling fairly confident and comfortable," Garcia said. He didn't bother to mention the fact that the gods had medicated him to help him through his previous episode with Kelvan tech.

"It should take you two seconds to reconstitute the child inside the artificial womb, and maybe an additional second to make sure it is connected and secure," Kitara said. "At five, I will have Losira disconnect you."

"If you give me a few more seconds, I could review the reports I've missed over the last two weeks to get caught up to speed," Garcia said. "And possibly rescue survivors."

“You have five seconds,” Kitara said. “Losira, enable the Kelvan computer for Garcia. Give him a five second window.”

“Aye,” Losira said.

Garcia touched the bracelet and pressed the button. It was over that quickly, but he stayed in contact with the Kelvan tech for his full five seconds. Losira disabled the Kelvan computer, cutting Garcia off from his ‘fix.’ His knees buckled and he nearly went to the floor. Kitara and Tatiana each grabbed an arm and supported him. Jurak would have let him hit the floor, and simply rolled his eyes at the girls assisting him.

“I’m fine,” Garcia said, brushing them off. He started to resist when he noticed Kitara removing the bracelet, but he saw the determination in her eyes and surrendered.

Jurak finished scrutinizing the data display on the womb and finally revealed his contentment. “It is alive and well. Good job, Captain.”

“You also cleaned yourself,” Kitara said, wondering if even five seconds of Kelvan computer time was too much for him. “What else did you do?”

“I rescued some injured citizens that the standard sensors failed to detect,” Garcia said. “I beamed them to various facilities around the planet. I healed a few of the most serious burn victims. And I came up with a new formula for the antidote that should enable me to visit with Tama Orleans more frequently, without the side effects.”

“Is that all?” Tatiana asked.

“I believe so, yes,” Garcia said. “And now, if you’ll excuse me, I would like to go grab a bite to eat before I go and visit with the Vice Admiral.”

CHAPTER FORTY

Vice Admiral Nechayev was taking a moment of silence as she read over Garcia's report for a third time, digesting it, trying to understand the full ramifications of what was going down. McCoy was browsing it more than reading, preferring to hear the story of Garcia's report in audible fashion, from Garcia himself. Garcia sat in front of them, waiting for more questions.

"So you believe Charlie is going to come after Janice Rand?" McCoy asked.

"The Preservers seem to think so," Garcia said.

"Why wouldn't he just go after the original Rand, in Kirk's time period?" Vice Admiral Nechayev asked.

"If he had, we would know about it, right? There would be some historical reference to Charlie coming after her," Garcia speculated out loud. "But again, I'm not really worried about Charlie Evans. The Thasians have changed him, so he may not be as powerful as he was when Kirk confronted him."

"We don't have a defense against someone like Charlie," Vice Admiral Nechayev said. "He killed everyone on the Antares and would have killed everyone on the Enterprise had the Thasians not intervened."

"I can handle him," Garcia said. "I am confident that my Kelvan technology will offer me a defense against him. And, I intend to counsel with Athena who may have other options."

"That means Rand will have to stay with you on the Path Finder," McCoy said. "At least until this situation has been rectified."

"She's still a Yeoman," Garcia said. "Isn't she?"

"She's not the real Rand," Vice Admiral Nechayev said.

"So? I think there's like two or three incidents of transporter malfunctions that created copies of Star Fleet personnel and they kept their ranks and perks."

"She's a hundred years out of touch," Vice Admiral Nechayev said.

"I'll catch her up to speed," Garcia said.

"You have a solution for everything, don't you?" Vice Admiral Nechayev asked.

"No," Garcia said. "Just for this."

"What's this about Janice Lester?" McCoy asked.

"Ah, so you do remember that alien device that transferred Kirk's mind into the body of a Doctor Janice Lester," Garcia asked.

"Of course," McCoy said. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"The Preservers created that," Garcia explained.

"This is getting confusing," Vice Admiral Nechayev said. "Your reports say that the gods created the Guardian of Time, the Iconian Gateways, and are responsible for abducting humans and doing experiments on them in order to make them immortal, and are trying to infiltrate our Universe from somewhere outside."

"Yes," Garcia said.

"Why would they create mind transfer machines?" McCoy asked.

"To facilitate moving their minds into this universe on a permanent basis," Garcia said.

"But that machine wasn't capable of establishing a permanent transfer," McCoy pointed out.

“Well, the machine is flawed, yes,” Garcia agreed. “But the Preservers created it. The goal was that after they created immortality in this Universe, they would then transfer their consciousness into their host vessels, and live happily ever after. It really makes sense when you consider the worlds that Kirk discovered where people had achieved immortality, in some sense of the word.”

“You still maintain that Miri’s planet was just such an experiment,” Vice Admiral Nechayev asked.

“Please, how else would you explain an exact copy of planet Earth, a perfect physical similar evolution right down to the same continental drift. You couldn’t turn an hour glass twice and get the same exact positioning of every grain of sand. And then for there also to be a human population and all the cities matching that of twentieth century Earth. The inhabitants speaking English? It’s just not a coincidence,” Garcia said. “It may have looked like they destroyed themselves, but in truth, it was the preservers looking for the perfect host vessel.”

“What does this have to with the Kelvan?” McCoy asked.

“Kelinda used that mind transfer technology to switch places with one of the gods she captured on Sherman’s Planet,” Garcia said. “She now has full access to all Preserver technology.”

“Dear God,” McCoy said.

“But its temporary,” Vice Admiral Nechayev pointed out. “After a time, she will just wind up right back in her body. Right?”

“Yes, unless one of the bodies is killed,” Garcia explained. “After the transfer was complete, Kelinda used Kelvan technology to reduce her original body to its essential elements, a brick about so big, which I suspect she’s storing it, just in case she ever decided she wants her old body back. The chief Preserver, Zeus if I’m not mistaken, has requested that I go after that brick and reconstitute it to its original living form so that Kelinda will revert back to her old body and the Preserver can go back to his own.”

“I doubt seriously that anyone is going to trust you with another mission,” Vice Admiral Nechayev said. “Do you realize just how much chaos you’ve caused over the last couple of weeks?”

“It wasn’t my fault,” Garcia wanted to protest. He kept quiet.

“He is the only one with the slightest possibility of accomplishing such a mission,” McCoy pointed out. “There are no other Kelvans in Star Fleet.”

“He’s a menace,” Admiral Nechayev said. “Every time he plugs into the Kelvan device, something bad happens, or someone gets pregnant.”

“We’ve put safeguards in place in an attempt to minimize...” Garcia began.

“The evil you do?” Vice Admiral Nechayev said.

“He’s not evil,” McCoy objected.

“What else would you call it?” Vice Admiral Nechayev said.

“He’s a victim of a Kelvan experiment,” McCoy said.

“His fault, Kelvan’s fault, or no one’s fault, we don’t put people capable of such abuses in positions of power or authority,” Vice Admiral Nechayev said. “If my hand wasn’t being stayed by my superiors, influenced by recommendations from President Fos and even the recommendations of T’Pau of Vulcan, I would have court marshaled you the moment you blew in. Even with all that, I am still inclined to simply throw you out on your ear, except for the fact you also have the Klingon Empire’s support, and Star

Fleet doesn't want to risk losing any influence over you or the Path Finder. Not when so many enemies abound that apparently, and most conveniently, you seem to be the only one equipped to deal with. It goes against every fiber of my being to leave you in Command. So get this straight, Captain Garcia. Your performance better start improving, or by god, you will wish that Apollo was your only adversary. You're dismissed."

Garcia stood, saluted, and departed. As soon as the door closed, Vice Admiral Nechayev turned to McCoy. "I realize that he is your son through a technicality, but you better make sure that my message to him sinks in. I will not tolerate any more incidents or screw ups. Do you understand me? No more excuses, McCoy. That Pon Farr excuse you tried will only work every seven years, so don't push it."

McCoy looked at her. "I think considering the circumstances, Garcia has performed fairly well."

"You've had an incredibly long, wonderful career, Admiral McCoy. Don't let this pet project of yours bring you down," Vice Admiral Nechayev said. "I've known you too long and have too much respect for you to allow you to just throw everything away on a foolish bet like Garcia."

"If it's boiling down to bets, I think you should throw your wagers down on my side," McCoy said. "I have inside information."

"I really hope you know what you're doing," Vice Admiral Nechayev said. She took his hand. "You know how much I care for you."

McCoy closed her hand in his, leaned over and kissed her. "I know. You're too kind to this old man."

"Shall we have dinner together?" Nechayev asked.

"That would be nice," McCoy said.



Garcia's first dinner back was with the 'commune' at the Captain's table on the New Constitution. He was mostly quiet and observant, listening to stories of what happened during his absence. Ori was reluctant to leave his side when the meal finished, but Rivian coaxed to her into leaving with her. When it was all said and done, only Sonny Clemmons and Garcia remained, except for Karsat who was cleaning off the table with some help. Sonny broke out two cigars and handed one to Garcia. Karsat returned to gather the last of the items from the table and paused to light them. Garcia had his first smoke, while sipping on red wine. Garcia dimmed the lights and he and Sonny stared out into space their feet up on the inside window ledge. They stared out into space, their current view offering only a sliver of Sherman's Planet.

"So," Sonny said. "What's next?"

"Take you back in time," Garcia said.

"Um, I suppose it is about time," Sonny said. "And, each time it gets a little better. This has been the best variation so far."

"Butterfly effect," Garcia said. "One flap of the wings changes everything."

"Yep," Sonny said. "I'm gonna kill that damn butterfly one of these days."

Garcia attempted to blow a smoke ring. He got it on the second try and then sipped some of his wine. He could feel its affect, a slight tingle of warmth.

"What exactly is a pit wolfie?" Garcia asked.

Sonny laughed. "You've been too long off the stage."

“Is it something like a coyote date?” Garcia asked.

“Where you chew your arm off to avoid waking her?” Sonny asked, laughing. He took a sip of his brandy. “No, pit wolfies are usually much more attractive. Kind a like the howlers, jumpers, and screamers, always trying to touch you when you’re at the front of the stage. Building memories are so much fun.”

“Umph,” Garcia only slightly protested. “Don’t think I can afford that kind of fun anymore.”

The door opened and Lt. Kelly entered. She hesitated when Sonny glanced back at her. “I’m sorry. Am I interrupting?”

Garcia looked over his shoulder at her. “No, Lt. I’m just sitting here talking to myself. Come on over.”

Lt. Kelly approached, humbly, her hands at her side. Garcia knocked the ashes off his cigar into the tray between him and Sonny.

“Would you like something to eat or drink?” Garcia asked.

“Uh? Oh, no, Captain. Thank you. I just wanted to say...” Lt. Kelly said.

“Stop,” Garcia said, interrupting her, locking his eyes with her. “Don’t apologize.”

“I...” she tried.

“Lt.? That will be all,” Garcia said, not quite command voice.

“Aye, Captain,” Lt. Kelly said. She remained standing.

“It might be nice, my son having an older brother?” Garcia said, turning his eyes back towards the stars.

“Technically, ours will be born first,” Lt. Kelly said. Garcia looked up at her, realizing she was acknowledging their son.

“Measuring by conception and completion of term, yes, technically,” Garcia said. “Anything else?”

“No, Captain,” Lt. Kelly said.

“Have a good evening,” Garcia said.

“Thank you,” Lt. Kelly said.

There was a long silence after Lt. Kelly departed. Sonny broke it. “She stabbed you in the back, too.”

“Yeah,” Garcia said.

“Some things don’t change,” Sonny said.

“Good night, Sonny,” Garcia said, extinguishing his cigar.

Garcia left Sonny to finish his cigar and brandy on his own. He stopped by medical and asked Jurak to shoot him with the new antidote. Jurak was reluctant, but he didn’t say so verbally. He tagged Garcia’s arm with the hypo, injecting the purple medicine directly into his system. They both waited for some noticeable side effect.

“Better,” Garcia said, turning to leave. He changed his mind and went towards the nearest lavatory to be sick.

Jurak followed with a tricorder. Satisfied that Garcia wasn’t in immediate danger, he placed a monitoring device on Garcia’s right temple. “Wear that for the next six hours so I can collect some data.”

“Fine,” Garcia said. He washed his face, stood for a moment to make sure that was all of the illness, and called Losira. He noted the patients in Sickbay under Jurak’s

care, and decided the Doctor had everything under control here. So, he went to see his daughter.

Garcia arrived outside his first love's quarters and rang. Persis met him at the door, hesitated, and then hugged him as if she hadn't seen him in years.

"I heard you were back," Persis said, almost a whisper in his ear.

"Are you doing okay?" Garcia asked.

"Yes," Persis said, letting him go so he could enter.

"And Tama Orleans?" Garcia asked.

"She's doing better," Persis said. "I think she's still awake, if you want to see her."

"Thank you," Garcia said. He walked over to Tama's room and knocked. The door slid open and he saw Tama Orleans, sitting in bed, reading. She looked away when she saw him, putting the book down on the bed, face down and opened. He went to her side and sat next to her on the bed. He turned her head gently back to him, asking her to look at him. Tears began to form. "What's this?"

"I'm sorry I am such a disappointment to you," Tama said.

Garcia pulled her into an embrace. "You're not a disappointment," Garcia said. "Would you believe I would be disappointed with you if you had caught a virus?"

"No," Tama Orleans said, looking at him strangely.

"What you're experiencing isn't a virus, but it is an illness," Garcia said. "I experienced a version of it. I even still struggle with it. It can be controlled, and it gets easier, but we have a lot of work ahead of us. Our road ahead is going to require strength, diligence, and more stark honesty than you might imagine. There are going to be setbacks, strong emotions, but together we can beat this."

"I promise I won't..."

"No," Garcia said. "No promises. No resolutions. No guarantees. What we're going to do has absolutely nothing to do with will power. Will power waxes and wanes, leaving us weak at some moments, and strong at others, and that makes us victims to external events. What we're going to do is build habits, the same way an athlete builds muscles, starting with baby steps and working our way up to the hard stuff. You will not do this alone. You're probably going to hate that part the most, at first. Before this is all over, you're going to discover that you have a bigger family than you know what to do with, because we're all in this together. In addition to that, you're going to realize that you are a lot stronger and smarter than you have ever given yourself credit for. I think you are a beautiful, young woman, overflowing with potential. Your mom needs you. I need you. Your family needs you. Starting tomorrow, 0600 hours, you and I are going jogging before breakfast, and then we're going to work on a contract, our obligations to each other. You're going to be put on a work detail program. You're going to be visiting a counselor on a weekly basis, the same as your mom, the same as me, and some of that will be us in counseling together. You're going to learn bio feedback, neural feedback, martial arts, and we're going to start your college basics, so you should start considering a field you want to study. You're going to be very busy. That's part of the deal for staying on board, staying with me. Are you on board with this so far?"

Tama nodded, wiping her eyes with her sleeve.

Garcia touched the book she was reading, so that he could read the title. It was titled 'Escape,' volume seven. "This is nice, but I want you to start reading some classic sci fi, so we can discuss them."

"Like what?" Tama Orleans asked, sniffing.

"You've probably seen the list of my favorite books," Garcia said. "I know, it's a lot. The Mote In God's Eye, by Larry Niven. The first in the River World series, 'To Your Scattered Bodies Go.' 'Enemy Mine,' the trilogy. Oh, I know. 'Water Ship Down.' Not Sci Fi, but start with that."

"That's a lot of reading," Tama said.

"One page at a time," Garcia said. "You best get some rest. I'll see you tomorrow, bright and early, holodeck two. If you're late, I'm sending security to get you."

Tama laughed.

"I'm quite serious," Garcia said.

"I love you," Tama Orleans said.

Garcia hugged her. "I love you, too. Goodnight, Tama," Garcia said.

Persis was waiting for him when he exited Tama Orleans' room. "I listened in. I hope you don't mind."

"No worries," Garcia said, crossing over to her. He pulled her into him, kissed her lightly. He noticed tension running through her whole body and stopped. "It's okay. You won't make me sick."

"It's not that," Persis said. "It's just, well, Sendak and I formalized a relationship. We bonded."

Garcia gave Persis a little space.

"Please, don't be angry," Persis said.

"I'm not angry," Garcia said. "I want you to be happy."

Persis started to cry. "You were gone so long. I was overwhelmed, scared, lonely. I needed..."

"Shh, stop this," Garcia said. "You don't owe me an explanation. I've always just wanted you to be happy. Well, not true. I have wanted some selfish things, but there is no fault in this..."

"Once his cycle stabilizes, there might be times when we could..." Persis said.

"No," Garcia said. He was extremely tempted, wanting desperately to say yes to anything she wanted, but this was a boundary he would not be able to cross. "I know you and Sendak too well. You can't go the road I've taken. Hell, even I can't tolerate it as well as I should. You remember our human psychology classes. Very few humans are secure enough in themselves, open and honest enough with every facet of their lives, to go the road I'm on and maintain sanity and not have hurt feelings. That, and every seven years Sendak and I would try to kill each other. Hell, he and I have already fought over you once. No, Persis. No. I think you and I are going to be good friends."

"Casa Blanca?" Persis asked.

"Uh?" Garcia asked.

"That's the end line from Casa Blanca?" Persis asked.

Garcia chuckled. "Close enough, I suppose," Garcia said. "Goodnight, Persis. Sleep well."

Garcia departed Persis' quarters and was immediately met by Sendak.

“Captain,” Sendak said. There was just a hint of anger, or perhaps jealousy on his face.

“Lt.,” Garcia said.

“What are you doing here?” Sendak asked.

“Tucking in my daughter,” Garcia said.

Sendak seemed to be measuring the statement.

“Persis told me about the two of you,” Garcia said, trying to alleviate tension.

“Which suggests to me that you did more than tuck in your daughter,” Sendak said. “You hit on Persis?”

“I did,” Garcia said.

“I will not share my woman with you,” Sendak said. “Captain or not, you will respect this boundaries or suffer consequences.”

Garcia stepped closer to Sendak. “Tell me that again in a few days, when you’re in a more logical frame of mind.”

Sendak went to hit Garcia but Garcia blocked, and it was a stalemate. Klingons in the corridor paused to witness a potential fight.

“Stand down,” Garcia said, tight control over his emotions.

Sendak lowered his arms and circled Garcia to be between him and the door leading to Persis’ quarters. Garcia backed off, turned his back to Sendak, and departed. The Klingons went about their business.

It took a bit of walking for Garcia to eliminate the energy of the near confrontation with his friend. He walked the corridors of the New Constitution, performing an impromptu inspection to distract himself from his many and varied thoughts. As he walked, he heard Duana and Ilona begin to sing, “You can’t always get what you want,” as originally performed by the Rolling Stones. Rogue Troi and Lal joined him in the tour. He couldn’t resist joining in on part of the chorus, singing out loud, “But if you try sometimes, you might just find, you get what you need.”

The music eased his troubled brain.

EPILOGUE

When the last visitor had left the president's office, Sylvia Fos sat down and leaned back in her chair, glad that the meeting was over and done with. She hadn't expected to hear from Hades for another couple of days, so she was surprised when his manifestation orb rose from the Vase behind her desk. Hades appeared, looming just a little larger than normal, as if he were trying to be purposely intimidating.

"I did as you asked," Fos said, her anxiety going up. "I was able to protect Garcia from another potential court martial. He is still in command of the Path Finder project."

"Excellent," Hades said. "I want you to give Garcia orders. There is a special mission that only he can complete."

"Of course," Fos said, standing. She put her arms around him. "Whatever you want. But don't you think it would be best if I just have someone kill him?"

"You will continue to do everything in your power to keep him alive," Hades said. "I would be even happier if you were to promote him to Admiral, and give him greater authority than he has now. That is, if he survives the mission I intend to have you send him on."

"Tell me what you want and I will do it," Fos said, kissing on his neck.

Hades pushed Fos into her desk, taking pleasure in roughing her up, tearing her dress in the process. When he was satisfied, he let her slide down the side of the desk to the floor. He sat down in her chair, apparently amused.

"I want you to order Garcia to take the Path Finder to Pyrus Seven," Hades said.

Fos oriented towards Hades, kneeling before him. "I am not familiar with..."

Hades put his foot on her shoulder and shoved her, causing her to fall back on her butt. She was bewildered. "What have I done to displease you?"

"I want you to send Garcia to Pyrus Seven," Hades said.

"Okay," Fos said. "Is that all?"

"Tell him that when he arrives, he will discover alien invaders from another galaxy," Hades continued. "They are setting up a base of operation, establishing a foothold in this Galaxy. He is to capture all of the aliens, neutralizing them with the Kelvan technology on board the Path Finder. His primary objective, though, is to acquire their technology, specifically an item referred to as a transmuter. Once he has a functioning transmuter in his possession, he is to bring it straight to you. You will notify me when you have this in your possession. Are we clear?"

Fos shook her head. "Yes, I will do it. I will do it right now."

"No, not just this moment. First, I would like you to fetch me a woman," Hades said.

"I don't understand," Fos said. "Are you unhappy with me?"

"You amuse me," Hades said. "But I want a specific woman. Her name is Arlene. I want you to go and fetch her and bring her to me, right now. She is Admiral Madison's granddaughter."

"It might take a while," Fos said.

Hades stood up quickly, grabbed Fos, picked her up and carried her to the far wall of her office so quickly that she barely understood what was happening. He shoved her against the wall and held her there. "I want her and I want her here now."

"Okay," Fos said. "Okay. I will go and get her."

Fos almost departed her office at a dead run, but she paused at the door, and attempted to remain somewhat dignified as she exited, even going as far as being polite to her secretary. “Sheila, why don’t you take the rest of the day off. I’ll close up. I’m just going down the hall to the ladies room. I’ll be back.”

“Are you sure, Madam President?” Sheila asked.

“Oh, yeah. Have a nice evening,” President Fos said.

“Okay,” Sheila said, and started to gather her things.

Inside the President’s Office, Hades transformed into a female, a female that President Fos would have recognized as Kelinda. Kelinda sat down at the President’s desk, touched her finger to the electronic display desktop, and started rummaging through all the documents and files. Information whizzed by in a blur, but it was all downloaded directly into Kelinda’s avatar, the Preserver Manifestation Orb. Star Fleet ship movement, names of important people, and all the business of the state was laid bare before her. Taking over the Milky Way Galaxy was going to be easier than any Kelvan had ever thought possible. It was even going to be possible to bring the remaining Kelvan from the Andromeda Galaxy to the Milky Way much faster than previously thought possible. Hades had a manifestation orb in Andromeda and she had already been in contact with her superiors... She had killed them and taken command. She was now Queen of the Kelvan. Even as Kelinda perused the files before her, the Kelvan were amassing a fleet of ships in Andromeda that would come through the wormhole to the Milky Way, the very wormhole that Garcia had helped create with alien technology. The very technology seeded all across the Universe by the Preservers that she now had full access to, thanks to the many Hades manifestation orbs that he had strategically placed throughout the Universe to run his part of the ‘kingdom.’ Perhaps, she thought, had Hades been a better tactician, he would be running the entire Universe, not Zeus. That would soon change. She knew just what had to be done, but first, the Milky Way Galaxy had to be hers, and then the Andromeda galaxy, and then the Pegasus Galaxy, and then, only then, everything else!

Kelinda knew Fos was returning before she even neared the door. Kelinda reverted back to the Hades avatar. She really didn’t like the Hades avatar, because it was too distracting being ‘male.’ She hadn’t expected how exciting and pleasurable it was to experience ‘maleness’ and though she had managed to satiate her needs at several opportunities, she really couldn’t ever get enough. She was going to have to relearn the lesson Kirk had taught her so well so long ago. Don’t let the body distract you from your goals; just kiss the girls and let them go. There was time enough for distractions once your position of authority and power were in place. Though the real Hades wasn’t male or female in his original form, while in the manifestation orb, his avatar responded to stimuli exactly the same as any normal human would respond. So when Fos brought Amanda before her, she felt the stirring of lust and emotions that any man would feel, even though Arlene was with child. Garcia’s child, her grandchild. She understood Garcia so much better now. He had chosen his mates well. But then, Kelinda could take the credit for that, too, seeing how she programmed him, picking out all the right coupling of genes that would increase his drive, and make him susceptible to sex addiction.

Fos closed the door and locked it.

“I brought her, just like you told me,” Fos said.

“Who’s this?” Arlene asked, not realizing just how much danger she was in. Hades touched the Kelvan bracelet on ‘his’ arm and Arlene disappeared. Fos cried out in alarm.

“What have you done with her?” Fos said.

“I have teleported her to a cloaked ship in orbit around Earth,” Hades said.

“You can’t take her,” Fos said. “People will know that she’s gone. They will ask questions. They will know she was in my office...”

“Deny it,” Hades said.

“I can’t...” Fos said.

Hades grabbed her up to him and kissed her hard and then dropped her to the floor. “I think you better, but do as you will. Perhaps the next President will be more compliant with my wishes. I think you have a subspace call to make.”

Hades touched the bracelet again and he disappeared, beaming himself up to the cloaked Kelvan ship. President Fos collapsed to the floor, mentally exhausted, and in physical pain from being treated so rough. She started to sob.

Author's thoughts:

OMG, I may have over reached in this one. What was I trying to do? I'm not sure. I wanted chaos, and got chaos, but even in that, there is a theme emerging, and patterns falling together that seem to fit. A recurring theme in Garcia's life is that there seems to be no quick resolutions to problems. Which, is typical for most normal people. Car breaks down, you need money, but you don't stumble over a pot of gold; instead you save, sacrifice a meal here or there, and you stretch yourself to the next pay day and then fix the problem. All the while, you're panicking, afraid the whole world might collapse, your heart rate increases as your anxiety goes up and you feel trapped... Welcome to Garcia's life. It's not all fun and games, or nearly as easy as Kirk made it seem. At least Picard had moments of weakness. Not near as many as Garcia. Another theme might be that the more power he controls the less control he powers...

Deciding to do the unsolicited pregnancies was a tough call. Border line serious breach of what it means to be Star Trek, but it does allow a serious moral dilemma to be explored, raises what if questions about the nature of life and where it starts, which we are struggling with even today as a society, so three hundred years from now, assuming technology continues advancing along the current bell curve and we have Star Trek technology, what is the moral obligation to embryos? Mothers and fathers could be removed from the equation with artificial wombs. And if life begins only at conception, when sperm meets eggs, does that mean there is no obligation to the individual egg or sperm, when it could certainly be frozen for future potential use? If we could save all of them, should we? And even more important, if we develop technology that allows us to manifest our every wish or thought instantaneously, will chaos ensue? And that's dealing with conscious thought. Unconscious thought opens up a whole other arena? If wishes and thoughts were made manifest, but only the wishes from the subconscious were actualized, what chaos would ensue? And would a person be held liable for his unconscious thoughts? If you have a dream that you have hurt someone or killed someone, have you committed a crime? Are you evil? Or can we only be held accountable for lucid, conscious thoughts? Or, are we only responsible for our actual behaviors, and our thoughts are completely irrelevant? (This is actually a theme that has recurred in Star Trek, most noticeably when Q made Riker a Q to see how he would handle being a god. I know Riker had more control than I might have had, and if I had a holodeck, I doubt I would ever leave, which seems to be a sentiment I hear a lot from my male friends. I think that's what makes Garcia's dilemma so real. His inner thoughts were realized and people suffered the consequences of those thoughts, which in turns influences his him, and it cycles and grows more complicated and more painful, and there seems to be no end to the depravity and self loathing. And he has to live with the knowledge that he has no inner secrets left. His soul is laid bare for everyone around him to judge.)

The life/death issue over the unborn seemed like a nice way to balance the Klingon's sociological and religious admiration of honor through death. A warrior dying is honorable, but a child dying is not, because it didn't have the choice or the ability to defend itself. This seems consistent with the Klingon ethos, but something we rarely see. We only see them fighting for the right to kill, wanting to die in battle, but not necessarily

do we see them as the champions of life, which ultimately is what all the fighting is about. Isn't it? Freedom, honor, growth through ritualistic challenges?

It was also nice to finally resolve the story arc of Garcia clone from "Another Piece of the Action." Perhaps it needs to be a story on its own, separate from this, but I think it gives a breather from the nonstop action, and there is some meshing of plots that helps explain the present chaos in Garcia's life. This is the rough draft, still, so I have no doubt that there is some work still to do.

What else should I ramble on about? There is so much going on in this story that even I am still at a lost to fully understand the ramifications and where this can go. It's big. There is a lot of connections to TOS. Oh, and there is no hiding that I worked SG1 into the story. I figure, SG1 had lots of Star Trek references in their show, poking fun at Trek, and the Wizard of Oz, so they could have a little fun poked at them, too. After all, there are lots of Star Trek actors and actresses in the SG1 Universe. Shall we list them by Star Trek names: Lt. Barclay, Counselor Troi, Captain Jellico, Q, Doctor Phlox from Enterprise, T'Pol from Enterprise, the Engineer from Enterprise (SG Atlantis,) the Emergency Medical Hologram from Voyager... Did I miss anyone?

References for A Necessary Evil

"The Man Trap," episode 6, written by George Clayton Johnson. Wrigley's Pleasure planet is mentioned by Darnell, the first person to die in that episode. And he was wearing a blue shirt! Believe it or not, statistically speaking, the red shirts were not the most likely to die.

"Mudd's Women," episode 4, written by Stephen Kandel. The Venus drug does work. Interestingly, Kirk isn't interested in arresting the women for taking it, but he's more than happy to arrest Mudd for peddling it. Does that mean that in the future we don't arrest people for being addicts? Instead we fix them and arrest the distributors?

"Turnabout Intruder," episode 79, the last episode, by Arthur H Singer. Ahhh, refreshing, not all the ladies like Kirk. They just want to be him. Janice Lester has discovered technology that would allow her to switch minds with Kirk.

"Who Mourns for Adonais?" TOS episode #33 written by Gilbert Ralston Stardate 3468.1 Enterprise visits planet Pollux V in the Beta Geminorum system, Starbase 12 the closest Starbase. Apollo is waiting for them, demanding to be worshipped and loved.

"Catspaw," episode 30, written by Robert Bloch. First episode with Pavel Chekov in it.

"The Q and the Grey" VGR episode 53, written by Kenneth Biller. After a war breaks out amongst the traditional Q and the Q freedom fighters, Picard's Q contemplates having a Q child in an attempt to establish peace. The choices he considered, in order of preference, apparently, was a targ, the Romulan Empress, and Captain Katherine Janeway. How a targ compares to the other two options, only Q knows, but when the

Empress and the Captain both reject his offer, and we can assume the targ did, too, he chooses a female Q with which to procreate, saving the Q-verse for all eternity. Or so we're led to believe.

"Facets" DS9 episode 71, written by Kenneth Biller. Leeta is recognized as an amateur sociologist, which no doubt helps her read people that might be tempted to spend money at the dabo tables, and using that skill, as well as her looks, to influence whether people will actually spend money at a dabo table, make her invaluable to Club Bliss. Just adds to her history before she goes off to Quark's place.

"The Next Phase" episode 124, written by Ronald D Moore. This episode, Trek time Stardate 45892.4 reveals that the Federation has suspected the Klingons have been working on an interphase cloak, capable of hiding ships inside of planets, as well making them practically immune to modern weaponry. It is sufficiently vague on when and how the Klingons were developing it, or what their issues might be, so it fits nicely with the development of the Starburst project. It also reveals that the Romulans were also working on interphase cloaks. The most curious thing that this episode fails to explore is how it is that while Geordi and Ro are interphase cloaked, meaning they can't be seen and they pass through objects, how is it they don't sink through the floor, much less how can they walk at all since walking requires friction, and you don't have friction when you pass through all matter. If they got in a lift, they should stay in place and the lift go through them. If they're on the shuttle, the shuttle should accelerate leaving them behind. Also, how can they breathe? Normal matter, which constitutes air, would pass right through them. Sigh.

"the Neutral Zone" TNG episode 26, by Maurice Hurley, adapted from a story by Deborah McIntyre & Mona Glee. Obvious this episode is about the Borg and the Romulans, but the side story here concerns the cryogenic orbital space module and people from twentieth century earth frozen that are revived. Problem is, the episode itself doesn't really try to explain the mystery of how a non warp capable space module got transported all the way to the Neutral Zone. Further, it doesn't answer some of the oddities in the episode, like Riker getting up to answer Picard by using the terminal interface, as opposed to using his communicator badge, or the strange way in which Data and Clemmons interact. The short story, "Revisiting the Neutral Zone" offers you the alternative explanation, which also gives more depth to the Clemmons character in this book. Though, it is not as cleverly constructed as "the Other Log of Fineas Fog," by Philip Jose Farmer, who provides an alternative explanation to "Around the World in Eighty Days," it is my first attempt to emulate Farmer.

"Lower Decks" episode 167. This is where Jaxa is killed on a secret mission. According to the episode, she has been on the Enterprise for 7 months, after three years at the academy, after the accident that got Joshua Alberts killed. In an effort to assure she got a fair break, Picard requested that she be assigned to the Enterprise, and she talks about how bad it was finishing the Academy after lying about the above accident. Joret Dal is a Cardassian and a Federation agent who is picked up near the Argaya system and has to be returned to Cardassian space in a manner that complements his cover story. Jaxa is the

ruse. (And could this to be a tipping point for Garcia in a future story, to go pure Klingon on an enemy? (No, didn't see that coming! Did you?))

“the perfect mate” episode 121, by Rene Echevarria and Gary Perconte. Stardate 45761.3 Can't let Picard have the perfect woman all to himself. Just kidding. This episode sneaks in the fact that there are dolphins on board the Enterprise. Geordi LaForge offers to take the Ferengi trade emissary Par Lenor, to visit with the dolphins to get him out of Ambassador Briam's and Picard's hair, so to speak. (You may recognize Briam, portrayed by Tim O'Connor, as being from Buck Rodgers. His character here is not five hundred years old, but nearly.) With this one exception, I don't think I have ever heard of dolphins ever being mentioned in any of the other episodes, or even seeing dolphins in an episode, and given my bias that dolphins are sentient, (a recent scientific studies seems to confirm that they have names for each other,) well, why don't they have a larger presence in the Federation? And this episode falls just about the right time, so I am able to maintain the continuity. Fairly close, anyway. (And wasn't the name Alrik the name chosen by the Knight in the Knight's Tale. Sir Alrik Von Lichtenstein? ☺)

book

“the Klingon Dictionary” by Marc Okrand. It's not bad little book, introducing Klingon to those who only speak English, and really adds a nice cultural component. Language affects culture and culture affects language, and one of the surprising things I found in the book was that the Klingon elite, the wealthy, officers, royalty, senators, etc, actually learn English as a means to distinguish themselves from the average and below average people. A captain might even break into English to keep the lower ranked officers in the dark on certain plans. And when you consider that the English use to learn Latin or French as a way proving they were educated, it kind of makes sense.

The following was intended to be a short story that was to explain some questions I had with the episode, “The Neutral Zone,” with an special interest in answering Geordi's question at the opening, “How did it get out here” in reference to the space module, something not meant for interstellar travel. This is only one draft, as I intended to edit it down to fit Simon and Schuster's submission guidelines for Trek short stories, but given the context of the previous Garcia Novels, it seems to fit here quite nicely. Enjoy.

“Re-establishing the Neutral Zone”
by John Erik Ege

The guest arrived on the transporter pad in a flourish of lights and harmonic tones pleasant to the human ear. She had an aura of peace emanating from her that was as strong as any radiant light surrounding a star. Her hands clasped together, hidden by sleeves, a hat heavy on the right, breaking the symmetry, she offered a smile that suggested grandmother, understanding, patience, and love. Captain Garcia extended a hand in greeting. She hugged him, instead. He had not expected the kindness.

“Guinan,” Garcia said. “It’s good to see you.”

“Thank you for coming,” Guinan said. “Can we speak somewhere in private?”

Garcia led her to his quarters where she took a moment to examine his living space. The only personal effect was the guitar cradled in a stand. She ran her fingers across the strings, noting it had gone a bit flat. “Haven’t played in a while?”

“Sort of lost the muse,” Garcia said, his voice monotone, devoid of emotions. This was not because he was a quarter Vulcan. Guinan had seen more emotions from him, but his eyes seemed tired, and the frown line had grown more prominent. “Tea?”

“Yes, please,” Guinan said.

Garcia ordered the tea, and the point to point replicator placed two cups on the coffee table between them. Guinan picked her cup up, brought it to her mouth but didn’t drink it. She scrutinized Garcia over the mug, noting a hint of vanilla rising from her drink. He stared beyond her, out into space. As a listener, she had the ability to elicit a conversation without speaking a word, but she did not want to wait for Garcia to finish his tea, and he hadn’t even reached for his cup yet. Typically he would have used it as a prop, something to fiddle with in order to avoid a heartfelt conversation.

“It’s time,” Guinan said.

“Excuse me?” Garcia asked.

“You wanted to know more about my temporal sense,” Guinan said. “How I seem to know when the continuity of the time line has been altered. I’m ready to tell you my secret.”

“You mean to tell me you interrupted my schedule to have a cozy little chat about temporal mechanics?” Garcia asked. “We’re at war, Guinan!”

“Please, the war is over, thanks to you,” Guinan said, lowering her mug. “It was over the moment you destroyed Romulus. All the battles now are just minor skirmishes, the last ditch efforts of a dying empire to exact revenge. You know what they’re calling you?”

“The destroyer of worlds,” Garcia said. “I acted on orders from Admiral Pressman.”

“I don’t care who gave the orders or who revitalized the Genesis Device and made it into a weapon,” Guinan said. “I didn’t mind when you used the Genesis weapon to destroy the Borg at Wolf 359, that was self defense, but to use it against the Romulan home world is tantamount to genocide. How many billions of innocents died there?”

Garcia ignored the rhetorical question. He reached for his tea with his left hand, revealing a gold bracelet. The most significant feature of the bracelet was the large silver button, identifying it as Kelvan technology. Garcia was a Kelvan human hybrid.

“How many?” Guinan demanded.

“Less than would be lost if the war were to rage for years,” Garcia answered.

“Are you sure?” Guinan asked.

“Is this where your temporal lecture is going?” Garcia asked.

“Did you know Spock was on Romulus?” Guinan asked.

Garcia froze. “How do you know this?”

“I know,” Guinan said.

“I was following orders,” Garcia said, trying to convince himself that he wasn’t responsible.

“Tam, this is not how the Universe is supposed to be,” Guinan said.

“It is what it is,” Garcia said, putting his cup down. He walked to the window.

“No. It’s wrong,” Guinan said. “And I know when and where it went wrong. You have to help me. It’s the only way you can bring your soul back into balance.”

“Oh please,” Garcia said, waving his hand. “I don’t have time for your esoteric beliefs on metaphysics.”

“Then make time,” Guinan said. “Because the further we allow this divergent universe to go, the harder it is to correct. Do you know anything about Gary Seven?”

Garcia rubbed his forehead. “Yes,” Garcia said. “He was a human recruited by an alien species to be a spy. Conspiracy theories are divergent on Gary’s real mission. Some say he was fighting aliens known as the Omegans. Some say Gary’s benefactors had their own agenda and Gary was a pawn in a temporal war. The Federation of Planets sent Kirk back to Earth 1968 where he met Gary Seven, supposedly by accident, but some are speculating that the Federation was trying to gather intel on the Benefactors. It was only through intense research that they knew where and when Gary was to be on Earth. They knew Kirk would take care of things, other wise they wouldn’t have risked time travel with 23rd century technology. Some say the Benefactors are the Preservers, who have seeded the human race through out the Galaxy in effort to ‘preserve’ us. It seems more likely they are conducting experiments on us, which explains how Miri’s planet met a similar fate as Omega Four, the planet that had a duplicate social development as Earth, producing a second U.S. Constitution.”

“What I’m about to tell you has to remain confidential,” Guinan said.

Garcia nodded.

“I was an agent of the Benefactors, like Gary Seven,” Guinan said. “In addition to working to resolve temporal anomalies with my own planet, I have, on several occasions, visited Earth of the past.”

“And this is where you gained your temporal sense?” Garcia asked.

“Partly,” Guinan said. “Some of it is comes from being a Listener, but some of it is training, and the rest experience and intuition. I am not often able to point to a specific

place, time, or event and say this is where it fell apart, but in this instance, I know exactly where time unraveled.”

“Tell me,” Garcia said.

“Stardate 41986.0,” Guinan said.

“You mean the day the Romulans destroyed the Enterprise?” Garcia asked.

“The Enterprise shouldn’t have been destroyed,” Guinan said.

“Of course it shouldn’t have been,” Garcia said. “The explanation Star Fleet provided was that Romulans believed us responsible for the destruction of their outposts.”

“You believed that?” Guinan asked.

“Of course not,” Garcia said. “The Romulans are many things, but not stupid.”

“We have to go back in time and correct the anomaly,” Guinan said.

“Star Fleet isn’t going to condone that,” Garcia said.

“I wasn’t thinking of asking them,” Guinan said. “Our assignment is to reestablish the Neutral Zone.”

“Why me?” Garcia asked.

“I’m not allowed to divulge that information,” Guinan said. “And there are several other caveats to this mission. There can be no evidence that anyone has tampered with the time line. You’re known by those on the Enterprise, so you’re going to have to disguise yourself.”

“Why don’t we disguise you?” Garcia asked.

“Because if I were to encounter myself I might unduly influence the happenings,” Guinan said. “It has to be you.”

“I can’t believe I’m discussing this,” Garcia said. “This is treason.”

“Do you want to go the rest of your life as the destroyer of worlds?” Guinan asked.

“Even if I went along with this craziness, how am I supposed to get on the Enterprise unnoticed?” Garcia asked.

“You will use your Kelvan technology,” Guinan said.

“You said several caveats. What’s the other?” Garcia asked.

“If you’re successful at patching the universe together, all of this goes away. You will be the only thing remaining of that time line. To make sure your patch work doesn’t unravel, you will have to duplicate your actions in your new future.”

“I hate paradoxes,” Garcia cringed. “So, if I go back in time and save the Universe, I will have to find the means to go back in time and save the Universe again, which means I’m effectively stuck in a temporal loop?”

“Yes,” Guinan said.

“That sounds like hell!” Garcia said.

Guinan didn’t try to soften it.

Garcia’s comm. badge rang. “Captain, Romulan ships have broken through the detection grid at Sherman’s planet. A number of matter-anti matter explosions have been reported on the planet’s surface. We’re unable to raise the capital city to verify.”

“This shouldn’t be,” Guinan said.

“Your orders, Captain?” Kitara asked.

“Best speed to Sherman’s planet,” Garcia said. “Guinan, if you’ll excuse me.”

Garcia arrived on the Bridge and took his seat center stage. Going from K7 to Sherman's planet using their transwarp drive was almost instantaneous. They arrived at Sherman's planet, cloaked, ready for battle. Two Romulan warships were pulverizing the planet with antimatter bombs, but even that was minuscule in comparison to what Garcia had done to Romulus. The modified Genesis device had terminated all life. Six months after the device had been deployed, the planet exploded, leaving nothing but dust that spread out in concentric rings.

"Targeting locks acquired," Losira informed the Captain.

Garcia looked at the computer interface, a striking woman, wearing the Kalandan Commander's Uniform which was part of her core programming, a program that was necessary for Star Fleet to utilize the technology the Kalandan's had left behind. Garcia turned to his Klingon First Officer, Kitara. She confirmed Losira's report.

"Fire quantum torpedoes," Garcia ordered.

The torpedoes launched. The Romulans immediately began returning fire, tracing the torpedoes back to the source. Anti-photon torpedoes automatically launched to intercept the Romulan's torpedoes. The space surrounding the three ships filled with energy, their shield fluorescing in an attempt to dissipate that energy. Swells of reds, magentas, blues and yellows filled the view screen. It cleared. Only debris remained of the Romulan ships.

"The destroyer of worlds," Garcia said breathlessly. Then, a little louder. "Command staff, conference room, now."

Guinan was one of the few people who had survived the destruction of the Enterprise at Tarod Nine. After reviewing the Enterprise logs, Garcia's senior officers were in agreement with what had gone wrong. The Romulans had baited the Enterprise into arming their weapon systems, and when that happened, the Romulans felt justified in responding with force. If Garcia could get on the Enterprise and somehow convince Picard not to arm his weapons, there might not be a battle.

"Given the nature of the Enterprise's mission, all ship's activities were being recorded," Lt. Undine said. "Even if we got you on the ship, anything you might say or do to change history would be on record at Starfleet. Eventually someone in records keeping will notice you, flag the records, and prompt an investigation from temporal police."

"I will be disguised," Garcia said.

"We can't disguise your DNA," Kitara said.

"Yes, we can," Garcia said. "I will use the Kelvan transporter to change my entire physical presence, all the way down to my genetic code. That is how the Kelvan originally took human form."

"We still have the problem of getting you on the Enterprise," Doctor Jurak said.

"We know that at Stardate 41986.0, the Enterprise is waiting for Captain Picard to return from an emergency conference at Starbase 7-1-8. We will make that the insertion point," Garcia explained.

"We could put you on a shuttle and arrange for it to have mechanical problems in their vicinity," Undine said.

"Too cliché. We need something out of the ordinary. Something so peculiar that the Enterprise won't be able to resist, but it will slip under Star Fleet's radar." Garcia

said. He leaned forward, his eyes meeting Guinan's eyes. "Kitara, prepare the ship for a time warp."

"You're joking, right?" Kitara asked.

He was not, but he kept his intentions to himself, keeping his ultimate destination a secret. Using Sherman's star to slingshot themselves through time, they arrived 370 years in the past. From there, they proceeded to Earth, arriving almost instantaneously.

"Why Earth? Why this century?" Kitara demanded.

"Cloak and dagger," Garcia said. "Undine, scan for a spaceship with hibernation chambers, the kind that Kahn had. There should be a sleeper ship available within scanning range."

"A sleeper ship?" Losira asked. "Why would you want such a primitive ship?"

"I detect no ships of this sort. However, I have detected several space capsules, each housing cryogenic chambers, the same that would be utilized on a sleeper ship" Undine said.

"That will have to do," Garcia said. "Prepare to capture one with a tractor beam."

Kitara came around her console to stare the Captain down. "You're insane," Kitara said.

Garcia looked at her. "You have a better idea?"

"Tell me you're not thinking of having yourself frozen in this capsule in hopes that the Enterprise might discover you, bring you on board, and thaw you out."

"That's exactly my plan," Garcia said.

"We have one in tow," Undine announced.

"Great," Garcia said. "Best speed to the Kazis binary system. 100 light years out, drop from warp and establish the trajectory necessary to make sure that in 370 plus years from this date this capsule will float directly across the bow of the Enterprise. The Enterprise will find it and Lieutenant Commander Will Riker will want some sort of explanation for how this Earth capsule left Sol. He will lead an away team to investigate and when he finds the people stored in cryogenics, he will be compelled by personal ethics to thaw us out. It's the perfect plan."

"Unless Worf decides to blast it for target practice," Kitara said.

"Or the solar panels fail to capture enough light to sustain the operating systems," Undine said.

"Or the cryogenic chambers fail during the passage of time," Losira said. "Those computer systems are insufficient to maintain a stasis field."

"Dead is dead," Garcia said. "I just need to stay frozen. Doctor Crusher can fix that. Number one, you have the Bridge."

Garcia took the lift down to the crew quarters and proceeded to Guinan's room to inform her of his plan.

"That might work," Guinan said. "You understand, your only mission objective will be to keep the Enterprise from being destroyed. Not to inform them as to who or what is capturing the outposts. They must discover the Borg footprint on their own, in the proper time. We don't want to start a second tangent that could further disrupt the evolution of the Universe."

"I will only divulge what is necessary to prevent the Enterprise from making untoward posturing," Garcia promised. "Paradoxes bring headaches. I would rather just blow something up."

“I think you’ve blown enough things up,” Guinan said. “Have you considered your disguise?”

Garcia touched the button on the Kelvan bracelet. Just the touch was enough to link his mind with the Kelvan computer onboard the Path Finder. A list of virtual options branched out across his inner vision. The only thing that kept his every thought from becoming reality was the fail safe. In order to make his thoughts manifest, he had to depress the silver button he was holding. He pushed the button. The Kelvan transporter whisked him away and when he returned, he no longer looked like Garcia. Guinan was instantly at his side, preventing him from falling.

“I’m okay,” Garcia said. “A little vertigo. I’m fine.”

“I guess now it’s time for phase two,” Guinan said.

Guinan accompanied Garcia to Sickbay where his Doctor and Kitara were waiting to kill him and store him in a cryogenic chamber.

“Are you sure you don’t want to reconsider?” Jurak asked.

“I won’t reconsider,” Garcia said, trying out a new accent. “After you drop me off, ya’ll shoot forwards to Stardate 41986.0 and dog the Enterprise, cloaked, witness everything. If I fail in my mission, ya’ll come back in time, revive me, tell me what went wrong, and you kill me again. Clear?”

“Crystal,” Kitara said. “What’s with the funny accent?”

“New identity. I will be assuming the role of a famous musician, heavy on the drugs and alcohol. He would be someone wealthy enough to purchase this cryogenic procedure,” Garcia said.

“It’s a bit cliché, don’t you think?” Kitara asked.

“Perhaps, but I already created the character profile while in tandem with the Kelvan computer, and I served it up quite pretty to Losira,” Garcia said. “Make sure the profile information gets put in the data banks on the capsule.”

Dr. Jurak injected something into Garcia’s arm. “Ouch! What was that?”

“Something to give you liver damage,” Jurak said. “Improving your cover story.”

“Well, warn a fella, will ya?” Garcia asked.

“Certainly,” Jurak said. “Are you ready?”

“Proceed,” Garcia said, knowing this was now a one way ticket to the rest of his life.

Jurak injected Garcia with a substance that killed him instantly. The next thing Garcia was aware of was that someone was speaking.

“Much of his file we could not retrieve,” came a familiar voice. Garcia recognized it for the voice of Lt. Commander Data. “His name is L Q Sonny Clemonds. Apparently, his occupation has something to do with music.”

Crusher sighed. “There was marked deterioration in every system of his body. Probably from massive chemical abuse. Unbelievable.”

“Sounds like someone who hated life,” Captain Picard said. “Yet he had himself frozen, presumably so he could go through it all again.”

“Too afraid to live, too scared to die,” Crusher remarked.

“Well, doctor, this seems to be a situation more suited for your talents. I’ll leave it with you,” Captain Picard said. “I’ll be on the Bridge.”

With Data’s help, Crusher got them all up and walking and took them to the guest lounge where they would be more comfortable. Lt. Riker joined them. Garcia was quite

annoyed by the antics of one of his fellow cryogenic survivors. He was a little heavy on the demanding side, especially for someone who should be grateful to just be alive.

"I know this is all very confusing," Riker said. "So I'll attempt to explain. You are on the starship USS Enterprise."

"American?" the annoying one asked. His name was Ralph Offenhouse, an important business man, at least in his own mind.

"No," Riker said. "It's a vessel of the United Federation of Planets and Earth is a member."

"Um, what year is this?" Ralph asked.

"By your calendar, 2364," Data answered.

"What?" Ralph asked.

"My heart... Is it?" Ralph stammered.

"It's perfectly fine," Crusher said, giving Riker a break. She could see his patience was running a bit thin with the 'guest.' "In fact, all of you are now in excellent health."

Ralph seemed insufferably pleased with himself. "It worked. I made it."

Garcia decided to chime in. "What is that?" Garcia asked, pointing at Data.

Data looked behind him, curious as to what 'Sonny' was pointing at.

"An android," Riker answered, amused.

"You mean a robot?" Garcia asked, playing dumb.

"Actually, there is a distinct difference between an android and a robot," Data began.

"And him, the one I saw before with the head?" Clare asked.

"She means Worf," Crusher explained to Riker.

"He's a Klingon," Riker answered.

"Now, listen guys," Garcia said. "I paid some idiot a lot of money to freeze me when I died and I just got to hear the words. Am I alive?"

"Oh, yes, absolutely," Riker said.

"And the liver that was about to explode in my face?" Garcia asked.

"Perfectly sound," Crusher assured him.

"Excuse me," Clare interrupted. "Could someone please tell me what's going on here?"

"About 370 years ago, you died of a massive embolism," Crusher said.

"I don't remember anything about that," Clare protested.

"You and the others were frozen," Crusher said.

"Cryonics," Garcia said. "It's freeze you now and heal you later."

"Yeah," Clare said. "I've heard of it. I just never gave it much thought. How did we get here?"

"You were in a space module," Data explained.

"The whacko that sold me this scam said that by putting us in orbit there wasn't going to be no chance of a brownout," Garcia said.

"Yes, several cryonics companies fell into disrepute because of their power failures which adversely affected their refrigeration system," Ralph explained. "Their stocks were severely depressed."

“The whole deal was a long shot but I figured what the hell, might as well give them the dough instead of leaving it to my ex-wives.” Garcia laughed, almost relishing the role he was playing. “But, you know, son, I just figured it was all a bunch of hooley.”

“Hooley?” Data asked. “Ah, as in hogwash, malarkey, jive, an intentional fabrication...”

“There you go,” Garcia said, pointing at Data. Come on, Data, figure this out. “Now you got it.”

“Now, if you didn’t contract for this, who did?” Riker asked.

“It must have been my husband, Donald,” Clare said. “If it was new and foolish, he would have popped for it. Well, I’ll say this for it: it’s the first thing he ever bought into that worked.”

“I for one never had a doubt,” Ralph said. “My stock in this company must have split at least a dozen times by now.”

“Actually, the process of cryonics was never more than a fad and did not continue beyond the mid 21’s century,” Data said.

“Uh-huh,” Ralph said, not buying it. “I need to make a phone call as soon as possible.”

“A phone call?” Riker asked.

“Yes,” Ralph said. “I have provided for myself. I have a substantial portfolio. It’s critical that I check on it. Let the bank know that I’m alive and well.”

“That’s going to be a little difficult right at the moment,” Riker said.

“Well, do you at least have a copy of the wall street journal?” Ralph asked.

“I think we should take the doctor’s advice,” Riker said. “Take this very slowly until we’ve all adjusted. And then we’ll talk to the Captain.”

Garcia closed his eyes. He needed to get his message to the Captain and blinking Morse code at Data didn’t seem to be working. He tried to reach out with his mind to see if he could sense Deana Troi.

“Tam?” Troi asked, nearly stumbling.

“Don’t trip or give me away. The ship is in danger,” Garcia thought.

“How so?” she asked. “Where are you?”

“Long story, little time. You will be encountering a Romulan vessel soon and posturing will escalate into a fight. The Enterprise will be destroyed,” Garcia explained. “You must impress on Picard that any posturing will be considered taunting by the Romulans. If we fail in this, the resulting war will lead to immeasurable losses on both sides.”

“I’m about to speak to him now,” Troi said. Indeed, she was on the Bridge, and it was all she could track him down and query him on how he managed to get on the ship without lighting up every sensor and alarm.

Picard observed that Troi seemed distracted. “Counselor? Have you found something for me?” he asked.

“As you know, sir, there is very little available on the Romulans,” Troi said.

“Counselor,” Picard said. “Anything would be helpful.”

“Tell him this,” Garcia thought, giving her details.

“They seem to be creatures of extremes,” Troi said, sifting through the information Garcia was making available to her. It was good stuff. It almost seemed as if he had an intimate knowledge of the Romulans, as if he had recently been in battle with

them. “One moment violent beyond description, the next, tender. They are related to the Vulcans, but as each race developed their differences grew wider. They’re intensely curious. Their belief in their own superiority is beyond arrogance. For some reason, they have exhibited a fascination with humans and it is that fascination, more than anything else that has kept the peace. One other thing, they will not initiate anything. They will wait for you to commit yourself.”

“Counterpunches,” Picard said, nodding. He wondered what she had read to make such insightful assessments. “Thank you, Counselor. That’s quite valuable.”

“Most people don’t consume alcohol, Mr. Offenhouse,” Data was saying. “Sonny, if you will come here, I will instruct you in the operation of the replicator.”

Sonny approached the replicator, watching as Data touched a button. “Talk,” Data said.

“Umm,” Garcia thought. “I’d like me a thick Kansas City steak and some country fried potatoes and a mess of greens.” Then he thought a drink might be more in character. “Oh, hell, just forget all that and give me a martini straight up with two olives... for the vitamins.”

Data nodded as if he understood.

“Whoop,” Garcia sang, shaking off the drink’s punch.

“Is something wrong?” Data asked.

“Wrong? Well, only that your computer here fixed about the best martini I ever had. Why, I might just get to like this place. Let’s see if the Braves are on. How do you cut on this TV?” Garcia asked.

“TV?” Riker asked.

“Yeah,” Garcia said. “The boob tube. I’d like to see how the Braves are doing after all this time. Probably still finding ways to lose.”

“I believe he means television, sir,” Data said to Riker. “That particular form of entertainment did not last much beyond the year 2040.”

“Well, what do you guys do?” Garcia asked, enjoying the game he was playing. “I mean, you don’t drink and you aint got no TV. Must be kind of boring, aint it?”

“Number one,” Picard’s voice interrupted the conversation.

Riker got up and walked over to the com panel, which Garcia thought quite odd. Why hadn’t he just used his com badge? “Riker here,” Riker said.

“Would you and Mr. Data report to the Bridge,” Picard requested.

“At once, Sir,” Riker said.

“Uh, with whom were you speaking?” Ralph asked.

“The Captain,” Riker answered.

“Would you tell him that I would like to see him as soon as it’s convenient?” Ralph asked.

“What’s going to happen to us?” Clare asked. “Do we stay here with you? Do we go back to Earth?”

“That will all be up to the Captain,” Riker said.

“Well get him in here,” Ralph said. “I have to phone Geneva right away about my accounts. Why the interest alone could be enough to buy this ship.”

“The Yankee’s right,” Garcia said. “Let’s get the big boy in here.”

“I’ll pass along your request,” Riker said. “If you’ll excuse us.”

Garcia placed a hand on Data's chest, causing him to pause. "Duty calls, hey, I understand. Why don't you come back later on, and you and me will find us a couple of low mileage pit wolfies and help them build a memory."

Data tried to be courteous but he was at a loss, and out of time. He and Riker departed, leaving Garcia alone with the two 21st century people. The first hour was almost unbearable. Ralph was intolerable and Clare was pretty much inconsolable. Garcia finally talked her into a drink and brought it to her.

"This might help," Garcia told her. "True, the man said you won't get drunk, but it tastes nice, and might help distract you."

"Is that all you can think of?!" Ralph asked. "Distractions? Musicians are all alike."

"You're about as uptight as a ferret in a badger hole," Garcia said. "I suggest we sit and share some memories."

"I can't just sit here," Ralph protested.

"Now I know how you got a heart condition," Garcia said.

Fuming, Ralph stormed over to the replicator and pushed the blue button that Riker had touched earlier. "Captain Picard?"

Captain Picard answered. "This is Captain Picard. To whom am I speaking?"

"Ralph Offenhouse," Ralph answered. "I need to talk to you."

"What is going on here, Number One? Did you give him permission to contact me?" Picard asked.

"Of course not," Riker said. "He must have seen me use the com panel."

"Ah, listen, Mr., um, Offenhouse," Picard said. "We're in a very important conference right now."

"I'm sick and tired of being put off by you and your staff. This is the worst run ship I have ever been on. You should take some lessons from the Q E 2. Now that's an efficient operation."

"Data, identify," Picard instructed. "What is a Q E 2?"

"It was a passenger liner which mostly traveled the Earth's Atlantic Ocean during the late 20th and early 21st centuries," Data explained.

"He's comparing the Enterprise to a cruise ship?" Captain Picard asked.

"Captain Picard," Ralph said. "I demand that you see me! I think I've been very, very patient. I demand a phone or a radio or whatever else you have but frankly, enough is enough. Especially under the circumstances and considering what I paid for this procedure. I must make contact with my law..."

The door opened and Picard entered. "I'm Captain Picard," Picard said.

"Excellent," Ralph said. "Now maybe we'll be able to get some things straightened out."

"We may indeed," Picard agreed. "Those com panels are for official ship business."

"Well, if they're so important why don't they need an executive key?" Ralph asked.

Garcia sipped his martini, trying to be inconspicuous.

"Aboard a starship vessel, that is not necessary," Picard said. "We are all capable of exercising self-discipline. Now, you will refrain from using them."

"Now, just a minute," Ralph said.

“We are in a very serious and potentially dangerous situation,” Picard said.

“I’m sure whatever it is seems very important to you but my situation is far more critical,” Ralph said.

“I don’t think you’re aware of your situation or of how much time has passed,” Picard said.

“Believe me,” Ralph said. “I am fully cognizant of where I am and when. It is simply that I have more to protect than a man in your position could possibly imagine. No offense meant, but a military career has never been considered to be upwardly mobile. I must contact my lawyer.”

“Your lawyer has been dead for centuries,” Picard said, wondering if the man was an idiot.

“Yes, of course,” Ralph said, thinking the Captain was an idiot. “I know that but he was a full partner in a very important firm. Rest assured, that firm is still operating.”

“That’s what this all about?” Picard asked. “A lot has changed in the past 300 years. People are no longer obsessed with the accumulation of things. We’ve eliminated hunger, want, the need for possessions. We’ve grown out of our infancy.”

“You got it all wrong,” Ralph said. “It was never been about possessions. It’s about power.”

“Power to do what?” Picard asked.

“To control your life, your destiny!” Ralph said.

“That kind of control is an illusion,” Picard said.

“Really? I’m here, aren’t I? I should be dead but I’m not,” Ralph said. He even sounded like a child. A petulant little prince child, with his chest and lips puffed out.

Clare began to cry.

“What is it?” Picard asked, shifting his focus to her. He all but ignored Sonny.

“I don’t know,” Clare said. “It just started and it won’t stop. I keep thinking about my boys.”

Picard activated his com badge. “Counselor Troi,” Picard said. “Will you report to the guest lounge?”

“Captain,” the Bridge called. “We’re approaching science station Delta Zero Five.”

“Slow to half impulse,” Picard said. “I’m on my way.”

“Captain,” Garcia asked. “I need to see that pretty little doctor of yours.”

“I’ll inform her,” Picard said, sounding as if he had lost all patience with Sonny.

“What did I do?” Garcia wondered. Could he possibly know? Had Troi informed him?

“Captain,” Ralph said. “I didn’t mean to come on so strong. It’s just that I built my whole life on knowing what’s going on and for the first time, I feel completely out of touch. It’s, uh, making me crazy. You can understand that?”

“That’s the first thing you’ve said I do understand,” Picard said. “I’ll see what I can do. And, please, stay off the com panels.” As he passed Troi, he told her: “Counselor, will you get those people under control. We cannot afford this continuing distraction.”

“Yes, Sir,” Troi said.

Troi entered the guest lounge.

“I don’t need a counselor,” Ralph snapped. “I need a lawyer.”

“Most people are mature enough to handle their own problems,” Troi said. “And when they can’t negotiate, they find a mediator.”

“Yeah, so, I woke up in Utopia, is that it?” Ralph asked.

“Hardly,” Troi said, she gave Garcia the eye. “We all have our issues.”

Garcia wondered about the look she gave him. “The little lady really needs you. Would you mind if I were to wander down to the sickbay?”

Counselor Troi nodded and went to speak with Clare.

“I don’t suppose you could give me any prescriptions?” Garcia asked.

“You suppose right,” Crusher said.

“Well, I just got to have a little something to jump-start the morning and a little something else to shut down the night,” Garcia said.

“You have no medical need,” Crusher said.

“Well, it aint a matter of need, darling. It’s a matter of survival,” Garcia said.

“Sorry,” Crusher said.

“Not to worry. Ol’ Wade Toss’ll scuffle along the best way he can. How do I get hold of that fella with the strange-looking face?” Garcia asked.

“I beg your pardon?” Crusher asked.

“What’s his name, that, uh, the android fella,” Garcia asked.

“You mean Lieutenant Commander Data?” Crusher asked.

“That’s the one,” Garcia said.

“I’ll let him know you’re looking for him,” Crusher said.

“Much obliged. You know, you’re just about the prettiest little ol’ doctor I ever seen,” Garcia said, patting her on the butt. On seeing her reaction, he made a hasty departure.

It was sometime later that Data found Garcia in the quest quarters, rubbing his hands together nervously, pacing back and forth.

“You asked to see me?” Data asked.

“Hey, look, I’m about to go out of my mind for something to do,” Garcia said. “I mean, sitting here alone just don’t get it. Now, what say you and I put together a little party?”

“A celebration?” Data asked.

“No, nothing that fancy,” Garcia said, blinking Morse Code. “Just some folks, some suds, and some sounds. Why, hell, it aint nothing but something to do.”

“I will speak to the Captain,” Data said.

Sonny grabbed Data enthusiastically. “Great, you do that.”

“Inquiry,” Data said. “You do not seem to be having as much difficulty adjusting to your current circumstances as the others.”

“You mean being here on this tub 400 years from where I started? Oh, heck, it’s the same dance. It’s just a different tune. You think anybody here’s got a guitar I could borrow?”

“No,” Data said. “But the computer can replicate such an instrument.”

“I was kind of hoping to get one while I still remember the chords,” Garcia said.

“Commander Data,” Riker interrupted. “We are approaching the Neutral Zone. Report to the bridge”

“I must leave now,” Data said.

“What’s this neutral zone?” Garcia asked.

“It is a buffer between the Romulan Empire and the Federation,” Data explained.

“Why does that make me nervous?” Garcia asked.

“I do not know,” Data said.

“Well, we won’t be inviting these Romulans to our party, will we?” Garcia asked.

“No,” Data said. “That would not be... appropriate.”

Data departed, paused outside the door, and returned to find Garcia still standing in the same place. “Follow me,” Data said, urgently.

Garcia followed Data to another room where he used the pattern replicator to create a guitar. Garcia picked it up and strummed it. It was in perfect tune. He played the dramatic chords.

“That sounds familiar,” Data said. “I must go. We will visit later.”

Garcia returned to the quest lounge, set the guitar down, and made himself a drink. Clare came in as he was sitting down. A moment later, Ralph entered from the corridor.

“I have spent my entire career being able to tell when the other guy’s mouth is dry,” Ralph said. “There is something going on here. Something serious. The tension level on this ship has jumped up.”

“Well, even if you’re right, what can we do about it?” Garcia asked. “And besides, these ol’ boys here don’t need us tellin’ ‘em where the bear sits. Look here what that young fella made for me.”

“How did he do that?” Clare asked.

“He called it a pattern replication,” Garcia said. “It plays real good, too.”

“I’m trying to tell you that there is a situation developing on this vessel that directly affects us,” Ralph insisted. “And all you can talk about is that stupid guitar.”

“Hey,” Garcia said. “Now these folks don’t need us swimming in their soup. So, why don’t you just relax and let them do their jobs?”

“Well, that may be all right for you but I am not willing to allow my fate to be decided by others,” Ralph said. “I, at least, want to know what’s going on.”

Exasperated, Ralph departed. Garcia got up to follow.

“Please,” Clare said, reaching out to him. “Would you stay with me?”

Garcia sat down next to her. If Ralph messed things up, she was going to need his assistance to make it to an escape pod. And, he had to practice what he preached, allowing the Enterprise Crew to do their jobs. He had done all he could for them, short of coming straight out and telling them what’s up.

It was surprisingly easy for Ralph to find his way to the Bridge. He arrived to witness the height of the game.

“They were trying to determine our intent,” Picard explained, trying to keep his crew calm. “They wanted to see if we would fire.”

“Who the hell are they?” Ralph asked.

Everyone turned their attention to Ralph.

“Get that man off the Bridge, now,” Riker said.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Ralph resisted.

“Captain! They’re back,” Worf announced, as the Romulan’s cloak faded and the Warbird became prominent on the screen.

“Amazing,” Riker said. “I never thought I’d see a Romulan vessel. Not this close.”

“The last time we encountered them was decades ago. It cost thousands of lives,” Geordi said.

“I can believe that,” Ralph said, recognizing the alien and menacing design of the Romulan ship, and the awe it inspired.

“Stay calm, everyone,” Picard said. “Open hailing frequencies.”

“Captain, these are Romulans,” Worf said, as if Captain Picard hadn’t already figured that part out. “They are without honor. They killed my parents in an attack on Khitomer when they were supposed to be our allies. They believe humans and Klingons are a waste of skin.”

“Lt., control your emotions,” Picard ordered. “Please, open hailing frequencies.”

Riker glared at Worf, nonverbally telling him to comply or face the consequences.

“Hailing frequencies open,” Worf said.

“Romulan vessel,” Picard said. “This is Captain Jean Luc Picard of the USS Enterprise.”

“Sensors indicate all of their systems are armed, sir,” Data announced.

“But they have not fired,” Picard pointed out.

The main viewer switched from displaying the Romulan Warbird, to an interior shot with two Romulans sitting side by side. “I’m commander Tebok,” the one on the left said.

“Commander,” Picard said. “You have crossed the Neutral Zone. This is Federation territory.”

“It was necessary,” the unidentified Romulan said.

“It might be viewed as an act of aggression,” Picard said.

“If our intent were aggression you would not be here now,” the other Romulan said.

“If we go to war let us be sure it is for the right reasons,” Commander Tebok said. “We are here because our outposts which border on the neutral zone were also attacked. Destroyed in the exact same manner as your own.”

“Even so, what gives you the right to enter Federation Space?” Worf asked.

“Silence your dog, Captain,” Tebok said.

“Lt. Worf’s question is valid,” Picard said.

“To even ask such a question implies that we need permission,” the other Romulan said. “We do not.”

“Do you think that we attacked your outposts?” Picard asked.

“Once we realized the level of destruction we knew it could not have been you,” Tebok said.

“Who is responsible?” Picard asked.

There was a slight pause, a hesitancy on the Romulan’s part.

“They haven’t got a clue,” Ralph stated the obvious. “They’re hoping you know but they’re too arrogant to ask.”

“You’re out of line, mister,” Riker snapped.

“Yes,” Picard agreed with his First Officer. “But it’s a correct assessment.”

“We do not know who is responsible,” Tebok verified. “Or why entire outposts on both sides have been carried off.”

“I would like to offer a proposal,” Picard offered.

“An alliance?” the unnamed Romulan asked. “Between the Romulans and the Federations?”

“Nothing so grandiose,” Picard said. “Just this. Cooperation. There was an intent here. Whoever or whatever did this is more powerful than either of us. Let’s collaborate. Let’s share whatever we learn about what has happened here.”

“Agreed on this one issue and only if it is convenient and appropriate at the time,” the Romulan said.

“Captain Picard,” Tebok said. “Because your actions are those of a thoughtful man I’ll tell you this. Matters more urgent caused our absence. Now, witness the result. Outposts are destroyed, expansion of the Federation everywhere. Yes, we have indeed been negligent, Captain, but no more.”

“Commander,” Picard said. “We have made some progress here. Let’s not ruin it with unnecessary posturing.”

“Your presence is not wanted,” Tebok said. “Do you understand my meaning, Captain? We are back.”

The screen went dark and the exterior, forward view with the Romulan ship centered on the screen returned. The ship rotated around its vertical axis and powered away.

“I think our lives just got a lot more complicated,” Picard said, and then turned to Riker. “Get him off my Bridge.”

Guinan entered the guest lounge and found Clare sleeping on the couch and Garcia playing a Spanish melody.

“We were successful,” Guinan said. “The Benefactors notified me that all is normal.”

Obviously the ship status had returned to normal and the crew could expect more privacy, otherwise Guinan wouldn’t have been so bold or revealing.

“Thank you,” Guinan said. “You sacrificed a lot.”

“I sacrificed nothing” Garcia said. “You are fully aware that I carry the memories of what I have done. Not memories of what I might have done, or had considered doing, but what I have actually done. My slate hasn’t been wiped clean. And my job has only begun. A year or so from now I must find a way to go back in time and do this all again.”

“The Garcia in this time line will have a clean slate,” Guinan said.

“Hopefully you’re right and the other Garcia, untarnished by war, without the oppressive weight of the dead, will prosper. It would be ironic if he gets command of a starship and is assigned to take me back in time.”

Guinan nodded. “You could stay here. Maybe the Enterprise is the one that returns you to the beginning of the loop.”

“One Garcia in Fleet is sufficient,” Garcia said. “My name is Sonny Clemonds. Entertainer.”

Two guards escorted Ralph back into the room. He seemed out of sorts and was literally shaking with anger at being man handled. “You’re shaking like a dolphin caught in a tuna net,” Garcia observed.

“Very funny,” Ralph snapped.

“You know,” Garcia said. “This looks like the beginning of a beautiful friendship.”

“Casa Blanca?” Guinan asked.

“Paraphrased, of course,” Garcia said. “Now, if I weren’t mistaken, little lady, you were saying that you have a drink that will help my friend Ralph and I forget all our worries? If it aint too much trouble, I wouldn’t mind if you stirred us up a couple.”

“I would be happy to,” Guinan said.

“What you say, Ralph?” Garcia asked him. “You in with me?”

“Yeah,” Ralph said. “I think I could use a drink about now.”

“There you go,” Garcia said. “Little miss, if things go as plan, that Data fella and I are throwing a little shindig later. I would be mighty happy if you were to join us.”

“Well, I don’t know,” Guinan said, throwing on an accent of her own. “It’s been a mighty while since I been to a shindig and I don’t know if I have the proper boots to be kickin’ it.”

“Well, I bet that Data can pattern replicate you a pair,” Garcia said. “And while he’s at it, ask if him he might pattern replicate a couple of banjos and we can have ourselves a feud.”

Guinan laughed. “I’ll ask him,” she said, retrieving two drinks from the replicator. “Now, you boys try this and tell me if it’s not the best little drink you ever had.”