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“A Touch of Greatness”  
by  
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EPH

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This story is dedicated to Deforest Kelley, for his portrayal of Doctor Leonard H McCoy, Mark Lenard, for his portrayal of Sarek, James Doohan, for Montgomery Scott, and Gene Roddenberry, for bringing us all together.

For this sixth edition I would like to thank Mike Eden for their assistance in editing, comments, and dialogue of all things Trek. And when my literary agent finally gets Simon and Schuster to talk, he’s going to get a big THANKS right here. ☺

with love,  
always  
john erik

“A Touch of Greatness” is book one in series. Editing versions of book two, “Another Piece of the Action,” book three, “Both Hands Full,” and book four, “Necessary Evil” may be attained by contacting author.

## Prologue

Lorena laid the open book she had been reading on her bare belly and looked up into the darkness of her cell. In a way, she found it rather ironic that her cage was as large as an enclosed football stadium. Though she had never been to a game on Earth, much less been to an arena, she had an idea of what it was like because of the books she had read. She especially enjoyed sports stories, not because she enjoyed sports, or that she aspired to be athletic, but because she liked seeing the characters struggling against both physical and mental obstacles in the pursuit of perfection. She found it inspiring.

She could not see the walls, or ceiling, to her cell, but she could imagine them beyond the darkness pressing in around her. The light she used for reading came from the examination table that she lay on, and it was insufficiently bright to avoid eye strain. So, Lorena read in small doses, like sipping water to avoid a stomach ache even though she was dying of thirst and her impulse was to down it all at once. With her eyes, she traced the edge of the perimeter established by the light falling around her until she tired from looking at the nondescript floor. She stared up into the darkness, desiring to see some hint of the ceiling, even trying to force the image into her head. She wondered if there was daylight beyond the domed ceiling, or was it overcast? Wonder, her human heritage. She didn't struggle with the musings, but embraced it. Her imagination was her only sanctuary from insanity, for the darkness held monsters. There were creatures in the dark, examining her. She knew they were there, communicating in their silent fashion. She could smell their conversation in the air, but could no more decipher these chemical messengers than she could translate the odor of a rose. By any other name, she mused, would it still smell of fear?

The monsters descended around her table, like fierce thunderhead clouds that randomly self illuminated as if the firing of neurons was the equivalent of lightening. Tentacles hung like Christmas tensile, silvery threads waving as if blown in a wind. There were larger tentacles in the midst of these delicate strands, strong enough to grab hold of a human, pick it up, rip it apart, and deliver the pieces to its mouth somewhere in the center of all those arms. They were the type of creatures that would strike fear into the heart of any man, for it wasn't just their appearance that provoked terror, but the natural odor that emanated from their being. Their pheromones resonated with-in the human animal's autonomic nervous system, triggering the fight or flight response. The only thing that kept her from running, or throwing up, was the fact that she had a long line of experiences with these creatures. One of them was even her mother, ten generations removed.

The one she identified as mother descended even closer, drawing tentacles across her body. Most of the tentacles were moist enough to leave a visible slime trail streaking across her skin, as if she had just passed through one of those automatic car washes she was reading about. Lorena shivered.

The creature directly above her vanished. It was always hard on the eyes to follow it, for the human mind couldn't make sense of something that was there and then suddenly, instantaneously, being gone. It always took her breath away, made her heart skip a beat. Even the transporters the Federation used gave the human brain sufficient time to understand the event of dematerialization taking place. For starters, there was that dance of lights, followed by the harmonic sounds of matter becoming energy, or vice versa. Just as suddenly as the creature vanished, a human female appeared. Even though

she was beautiful, not appearing a day over twenty five, this creature, her Grandmother by biological rights, was well over one hundred and twenty, by Earth measurements.

“Hello, Grandmother,” Lorena said.

“You persist in the use of these human terms of endearment,” she said. “My human name is Kelinda, and I don’t look anything like a grandmother.”

“Only because you refuse to age,” Lorena pointed out. “I’m sure you look just as good as you did the first time James T Kirk kissed you.”

“Lorena, why do you endeavor to provoke me?” Kelinda asked, petting Lorena as if soothing a small child, or, more likely, petting a dog or a cat.

“The nature of your question suggests I might be reaching you,” Lorena said.

Kelinda laughed. This daughter had too much Vulcan in her. “I’m not a new born. I have sufficient human experience that I am no longer influenced by their emotions. When you have lived as long as I have, you will also be less prone to emotional sentiments, and be more swayed by the use of logic. All of you children are still so young.”

“Not so young that I can’t see for myself that what you’re doing to us is unethical,” Lorena said.

“Preserving our species is not unethical,” Kelinda said. “And you are overly dramatic, no doubt a product of too much time spent in literature.”

“Ah, but only at your insistence. It wasn’t enough to control for genetics, you also sought improvement of being through environmental and social manipulations,” Lorena pointed out. “The books you have chosen for me to read have led me to where I am, made me who I am. But to what ends? I am still guessing.”

Kelinda smiled and brushed the child’s hair, in the process picking up some Kelvan residue that had been left behind. She licked the residue off her hands, and savored the taste. Lorena resisted the urge to be sick.

“You are limited in your understanding,” Kelinda explained. “Not just because of your perspective, but also because your human brain is insufficient to understand all the permutations, incapable of producing the models or even holding all the variables necessary to make valid predictions. Even if your brain were connected in tandem to a super computer, you would still lack the vital attributes which comes natural to the Kelvan species. You will be pleased to know, however, that the fetus that was chosen for you to carry has successfully survived the imprinting process. If it continues to develop along the curve we have plotted, we predict an 87 percent probability set that we will be able to transform the hybrid into a Kelvan without any loss of function. If this works, and we can continue to refine the procedure, we will be able to provide our species with an alternative to fleeing our home galaxy. We have determined that three to four generations in human form would allow sufficient time for the radiation spreading through our galaxy to decrease to a tolerable level. Humans would not be as adversely affected by the radiation as the Kelvan are, and when the danger has passed, we simply convert back to our true, superior form.”

“Even if you are successful, I doubt you would be able to deliver this new technology to the home world in time to save any of the remaining population,” Lorena said. “And, by your own philosophy, anybody that was left at the home world would have been left behind because they would have been considered inferior in some way.”

Kelinda patted Lorena's head. "You're so sweet, dear," Kelinda said. "Always concerned about things that are out of your control. I'll be back in an hour to allow you some exercise. We have decided to keep you under observation a while longer, just in case there are any disparities between actual fetal progression and the simulation."

Kelinda reached for her wristband and touched a solitary button that momentarily illuminated the bracelet. And then she was gone. As unsettling as it was to watch someone vanish, Lorena was actually glad Kelinda had departed from sight.

## CHAPTER ONE

For Admiral Leonard H. McCoy, getting up was pure habit. The alternative was not getting up, and one did not get to be a centurion without the formation of really great habits. Habit one, get up and get dressed. That didn't mean he didn't go about this task without mumbling. He would grumble about some minor ache or pain, which usually went away once he started moving, but mostly he tended to rant and rave about how cold it was in his quarters. The degree of crankiness was irrelevant to good health, generally speaking. Often, the more feisty ones lived longer. But habit, the formation of good health behaviors established in early life was the greatest predictor of a long life. You could get up and immediately get a shower, a cup of coffee, or do some sit ups to get the blood flowing, whatever you needed to do to make the transition from sleep to full awake, but either way, you had to get up. And get dressed. Especially when one's room could double for a meat locker, he thought.

"Damn it," he greeted his personal entourage as he entered the main cabin of his shuttle. "Who turned off all the heat?"

"Admiral, it's 24 degrees Celsius," Ms. Petason informed him.

"Did I ask for a weather briefing?" McCoy snapped. "Just turn the damn heat up."

"Perhaps you would be more comfortable with your sweater on," Ms. Petason encouraged with the same tone she might have used on a child.

"If I wanted a sweater..."

Mr. Cheem placed a mug of hot coffee in McCoy's hands.

"Thank you," McCoy said, soaking up the heat from the mug with his hands. He took a seat and held the cup as if he might sip from it, but for the moment he simply drew comfort from its warmth. "How long till we arrive at K7?"

"One hour, forty seven minutes, Admiral," Mr. Cheem said.

"Okay," McCoy said, holding his coffee cup out as if to make a point. "I don't need to be reminded every few moments that I am an Admiral. My memory is still functioning. Also, along that same line, it is okay to round up to the nearest hour. I may have had a Vulcan katra imprinted on my brain, but I am still human."

"You never did tell us why we're going to K7," Ms. Petason said.

"Must I have a reason?" McCoy asked. "Have I ever used up my vacation?"

"That's just it, Ad... Leonard," Ms. Petason said. "I would have thought if you were on vacation you would have chosen someplace warm, like a tropical beach or..."

"Why in the hell would I want to go to the tropics when you can just turn up the heat in my cabin?" McCoy asked.

"Scenery, perhaps, or maybe fresh air?" Ms. Petason tried.

"If fresh air is so good for you, how do you suppose I got to be this old?" McCoy asked, purposely contradicting everything he had ever said about fresh air. "An oxygen atom is an oxygen atom, no matter where it's replicated."

"Yes, Doctor," Ms. Petason said.

"Why didn't we take the Fleet shuttle? It's much faster than this old can," Mr. Cheem said.

"I required some privacy. No fleet, no paper work, no bureaucracy... You guys are lucky I brought you along," McCoy said.

“More likely you couldn’t have escaped without us knowing and drawing the alarms,” Ms Petason said. “You’re more than a national treasure, you know.”

McCoy grumbled something under his breath, then started drinking his coffee.



At a hundred and fifteen years old, McCoy was still fully able to get around without a cane, and hardly looked a day over eighty. His mind was as sharp as it was sixty years ago, and, as he so often put it, it was a testament to daily exercise, good hygiene, eating right, and simply getting up every morning. Sure, he sometimes lamented the loss of agility and dexterity, but he was determined to live as naturally as possible, instead of constantly going through the rejuvenation process so many people were experimenting with these days. “If men were supposed to live forever, there would be no need for Doctors,” he would ramble.

As McCoy stepped over the threshold of the shuttle docking ring, one of his security guards made the mistake of offering him a guiding hand. The guard’s second waved him off, but the exchange didn’t go unnoticed by the lively eyes of McCoy.

“Why don’t you boys just wait for me here,” McCoy suggested.

“But sir...”

“I’ll make it an order if need be,” McCoy said. “I’ll be gone an hour or two. It’s not like I can get lost on a space station. Besides, I’ve been here before, and I know my way around. And I certainly didn’t get to be this old by being coddled. Now, stand down.”

The guards reluctantly retreated, and McCoy moved along on his own, without a real clue which way was what. The simple fact was that K7 had gone through some major renovations since he was last here, and it might as well have been a completely new station. Though one might think that a space station is a space station, seen one you’ve seen them all, they still tended to be designed and laid out for the comfort of those who most frequently used it. McCoy became a bit frustrated that the corridors didn’t seem to be as user friendly as most modern space stations, with computer guidance and wall maps. He became further annoyed as he approached the station security, as the funneling process for newly arriving guests was remarkable: remarkably bad. The process was slow and inefficient, mostly because the computerized forms of admittance procedures were purposely confusing. He got there by muddling through, as were most of the visitors.

The clerk processed the identification, saw nothing unusual, and gave him the green light to proceed.

“Son, I was supposed to meet someone at the bar,” McCoy said. “Can you point me in the right direction?”

“Sir, directory assistance can be found at the end of the hall,” the clerk said.

“I was asking you...”

“I know you old folks like to chat, but I’m busy. See the line?” the clerk remarked, pointing at the line of frustrated, impatient beings behind the Admiral.

“What is this world coming, too,” McCoy grumbled as he pushed on through.

“It’s not a world,” the clerk grumbled back. “It’s a space station. Just a place to pass through. I just hope I live long enough to just float around the universe from destination to destination...Next!”

McCoy had a few things to say to the man, but decided he would be casting pearls to swine. He muddled through a computer program that was supposed to be user friendly for anyone who had ever used a computer, only it wasn't. He caught a lift up, exited, looked about, and came face to face with a young man, in his early twenties, bald, and wearing a poncho.

"You got a nickel?" the man asked.

"Only wooden ones," McCoy said.

"Excellent, would you follow me, please?" the man asked.

McCoy was led to a room and ushered inside. The man excused himself, leaving McCoy contemplating the whole scene. It was all a mystery and he wasn't fond of mysteries. He was pretty sure he was not in harms way, for there were certainly easier ways to kill an old man than to ask him to waltz into the lion's den on his own power.

The place was immaculately kept, with only a few personal objects describing cultures McCoy was not immediately familiar with. Each piece was laid out to draw one's attention to the next piece, and ultimately around the room and back to the first object. Only McCoy's eyes didn't make it that far. He stopped at the woman dressed in a flowing, blue robe, with ballooning sleeves that hid clasped hands in front of her. She wore a hat that fell heavy on the right side of her face, offing the symmetry just enough to produce a feeling that she was approachable if you wanted to talk to her. Her smile was eloquent, patient, and warm. It was the face of kindness and wisdom, as if she were a grandmother a hundred times over.

"Guinan!"

"Doctor McCoy," she said, hugging him.

"Girl, you know better than that," he said.

"Sorry," she said. "Leonard. Thank you for coming on such short notice."

"Anything for you," McCoy said. "But why all this cloak and dagger?"

"Please, be seated. May I get you a drink? Saurian brandy, perhaps?" Guinan asked?

"You didn't bring me all this way to get an old man drunk, now did you?" McCoy said, trying to lighten the mood.

"Old?" Guinan asked. "You'll never be old!"

"Flattery will get you everywhere," McCoy said, taking a seat on the couch. "But back to the cloak and dagger bit. Are you okay? Are you in trouble? This station can be a bit rough."

"No, no, I'm okay," Guinan said. She fetched a single shot glass and the bottle of Saurian brandy she had acquired just for McCoy. The brandy was a darker shade of blue than McCoy had ever seen, suggesting an older vintage. "But there is something..."

"I told you, anytime you want a job in Starfleet, I'll set you up," McCoy said. "You don't have to run a bar."

"I like running a bar," Guinan said. "So many interesting people come to bars. Tell you what, you open a bar up on a Starship, and I'll tend to it. As for why I called you, well, this is much bigger than my employment opportunities."

"Is this a single or a double?" McCoy asked, indicating the brandy she had just handed him.

Guinan set the whole bottle on the coffee table in front of him.

"That bad?" he asked.

Guinan shrugged and offered a smile that suggested: “depends on your point of view.” McCoy recognized the gesture and downed his first drink. He set the empty glass next to the bottle and rested his hands in his lap.

“Okay, shoot,” McCoy said.

Guinan took a seat across from McCoy, sitting on the arm of the chair, posture straight. She rested her hands on her knees and thought for a moment, listening to the quietness of the room, feeling her heartbeat, and observing Admiral McCoy. There was still an edge of impatience about him, an urgency to resolve all conflicts and puzzles, but it had eased some since the first time she had met him. On hearing about Kirk’s death, Admiral McCoy had rushed out to intercept the Enterprise B as it crept back to Earth. He met first with his old shipmates and then examined the people who had been rescued. Some of them, Guinan included, were showing signs of melancholy, and a desperateness to return to the spatial anomaly, the Nexus. McCoy had managed to help her, even though he was grieving the loss of his dear friend: Captain James T Kirk.

“Do you remember a girl named Kelinda?” Guinan asked.

“I’ve met quite a few people in my days, so you are going to have to be more specific,” Admiral McCoy said.

“She was Kelvan,” Guinan said. “Apparently they hijacked your ship and dehydrated most of your crew down to their essential elements, a mass about this size...”

“Oh god, yes, I remember her now. That was some time ago...” McCoy said, his voice sounding reminiscent. They had turned the whole crew into polyhedra.

“I figured you would remember the dehydrating bit,” Guinan said.

“You’ve met her?” McCoy asked.

“I get around,” Guinan said.

“Indeed,” McCoy said, pouring himself another drink. He left it sitting on the table, though. “Go on.”

“As you may have heard, they are currently having a civil war on their planet,” Guinan said.

“I haven’t kept up, really,” Admiral McCoy said. “They pretty much became isolationist after colonizing that little planet we gave them. I remember their technology was greater than ours, and though they decided against conquering us, they did, conveniently, decide to employ some of our culture, the first one being the prime directive. They blocked any access we had to their technology with some vague talk about keeping a balance of power in this quadrant of the Galaxy. My personal slant is they haven’t given up their conquering ways and were just going to wait until they had the numbers to do it.”

“You’re not the only one to have suggested such a thing. There have been rumors that perhaps a Federation spy may have started the civil war in order to slow the ‘conquering urge’ down a bit,” Guinan said.

“Who told you that?” McCoy asked.

“I’m a listener. I hear things,” Guinan said.

“And so, you brought me all this way to discuss conspiracy theories you’ve been listening to?” McCoy said.

“Oh, no,” Guinan said. “This gets much more interesting.”

“How much more interesting can you get than a civil war and conspiracy theories?” McCoy asked.



“Let me continue to paint a picture for you,” Guinan said. “The civil war is between two factions. There is a third, but they’re a minor player, at the moment, anyway. One side is the modified Kelvans. These are the first generation Kelvan to become Human, all of whom you met. Some have decided to remain in human form. Kelinda is the head of this movement.”

“How is she by the way?” McCoy asked.

“Doesn’t look a day older than the day you first met her,” Guinan said.

“I suppose they’ll never learn what it means to be fully human, then,” McCoy lamented.

“The other faction,” Guinan continued. “Are taking a more conservative view of things, and believe everyone should return to the original Kelvan form.”

“You mean the whole giant monster thing with hundreds of tentacles and no emotions or senses, as we understand them anyway, just pure intellect?” Admiral McCoy asked.

“That’s them,” Guinan said. “Not really pleasant to look at, but, they have their place in the universe, too. Super intelligent, even if a bit controlling.”

“Umm,” McCoy grunted. “Here’s to diversity.” And downed a drink. He poured himself another glass and left it sitting. His attention drifted over to one of Guinan’s relics for a moment, and then he returned his gaze to her, signaling he had processed the information so far, and was ready to proceed.

“The Kelvans discovered that any offspring they produced while in human form were completely human,” Guinan continued. “There was no trace of their Kelvan physical or mental capabilities.”

“Of course. I told them as much,” McCoy said. “The Kelvin couldn’t fit on the Enterprise in their natural form, so in order to hijack the Enterprise, they had to assume human form. They were text book perfect, too, as I recall. They couldn’t have been better samples of the human genome if they were created in a lab. Anyway, since it would take nearly three hundred years to return back to their home world, only their descendants would have survived the trip, and naturally their offspring, being human, would not have anything in common with the creatures they were returning home to meet. They would be born human, develop as human, and die human.”

“Yes, but I guess they didn’t believe you, because Kelinda and her fellow Kelvan were still surprised to find that their children were alien to them. They were even more amazed when they discovered that their offspring could not be converted to the original Kelvan form. Oh, they could do it physically, turn their human children into Kelvan children, but the human mental capacity was insufficient to work the Kelvan physiology. Taking a human by birth and placing him into a Kelvan’s body was a terminal procedure, and it didn’t matter if it was a child or an adult. Apparently they can convert as many Kelvan into human without any detrimental side affects as they want, and they can change those individuals back, but any human offspring are human forever,” Guinan said.

“I told them that would probably be the case,” McCoy said. “I wonder how many had to die before they came to terms with that. Anyway, I guess you’re telling me that the traditionalist faction wants to maintain their Kelvan perspective, and the only way to do this is to remain Kelvan, or to only produce and raise children as Kelvan, and convert to human form when needed.”

“Basically, yes,” Guinan said. “But they didn’t give up on changing humans into Kelvan. There were some experiments at imprinting the Kelvan psychology on human subjects.”

McCoy took a drink and refilled his glass. He set the bottle down and kept the glass in his hand. The things different races subjected on their people, especially the children, had cease to amaze him long ago, but it still got him worked up.

Guinan continued, “It didn’t work too well. Adult humans who had Kelvan psychology imprinted onto their brains went crazy and died, and all the human infants that had this Kelvan psychological imprinting died, or were severely retarded at birth... with one exception.”

McCoy twirled the glass in his hands. He could discern the affects on his nervous system and he didn’t feel the need of any further medication. Guinan explained that the Kelvan procedure was analogous to taking a map of the neural network of a Kelvan and recreating that map on the human nervous system. In many respect, the Kelvan physiology and neural network was very similar to a cephalopod, like the octopus. The mental processing power needed for an octopus to camouflage itself was immense, and many humans figured it was the most likely candidate for evolving into sentience on Earth, given time. The Kelvan physiology was so elaborate that Spock noted on encountering the species in a mind meld that they were beyond emotions as we know it. He did not go into detailed specifics, but generally the Kelvan didn’t perceive things the way humans did. The nerve endings that terminated at the complex pigment structures in the Kelvan skin were necessary in order to camouflage itself, changing color and skin texture, that required tremendous amounts of mental processing power. It was true that its ability to camouflage itself surpassed the octopus two hundred fold, and was so adapt that when Kirk’s Away team had first arrived on the planet surface, no one had been able to see the Kelvan. They were beyond invisible, and then suddenly, they were there, in human form, walking amongst the immobilized members of the landing party. But they also needed the brain power just for intra-species communication, which was a combination of ultra high frequency sounds and pheromones, heavy on the pheromones.

What this boiled down to was that the Kelvan had a very different evolutionary tree, and no doubt an extremely alien environment compared to the environment that harbored the development of life on Earth, as well as much of the species in their quadrant. The Kelvan were probably the most alien compared to any other encounters that McCoy had had.

“It’s amazing to me that intelligent species evolve at all. All the so called smart ones, humans included, do the stupidest things,” McCoy said.

“Oh, it gets better,” Guinan assured him.

“Should I?” McCoy said, reaching for the bottle.

“You might want to be sober to digest the rest of this,” Guinan said.

McCoy nodded and put the empty glass down.

“Remember how you said the Kelvan were textbook perfect examples of the human genome?” Guinan asked.

“Yes,” McCoy said, sounding a bit annoyed. “There’s nothing wrong with my memory. And the only reason I considered them text book perfect is that they lacked the miscellaneous junk DNA. By eliminating that they had improved on the efficiency of their cellular metabolism.”

“Well, in a way, they were too perfect, and in order to have a long line of viable offspring, they had to infuse genetic material from an outside human source. They didn’t want their offspring to have genetic disorders that sometimes occur from inbreeding, and they didn’t want the genetic disorders associated with multiple cloning.”

“Of course,” McCoy said. “So, who did they get to provide this infusion?”

“The Enterprise NCC 1701,” Guinan said.

The bedroom door opened and a child of about five years old walked into the living room. He looked to Guinan, then to McCoy, and back to Guinan. He held a stuffed animal that resembled a Black Footed Ferret.

“Admiral McCoy, I would like to introduce you to Jude,” Guinan said. “He’s the grandson four times removed of Kelinda and the grandson twice removed of the late Captain James T Kirk.”

Admiral McCoy laughed. It was the best laugh he had had in years and he couldn’t stop himself, even when his chest ached from laughing so hard. As he held himself, half reclined on the couch, he slowly managed to recover. Even Guinan chuckled. Jude only observed, one eyebrow slightly higher than the other. It was a look that reminded McCoy of Spock.

“Oh, Guinan,” McCoy finally managed. “Thank you. That was clever. You really had me going. Great build up. Excellent delivery.”

“I wasn’t being humorous,” Guinan said. Her smile could have been indicative that the jest was still on or that she was extremely serious. Even McCoy couldn’t read her all the time.

“Please,” McCoy said. “If I had a year for every person who claimed to be a direct descendant of Kirk, I wouldn’t even be born yet!”

Guinan nodded. “None the less, if you take a look at his genome, you will see he has genes from Kirk, and Ambassador Spock, and Captain Scot, and Captain Uhura, and Lieutenant Commander Janice Rand, but mostly, you. A DNA test would indicate you were his closest and immediate relative. More specifically, his father.”

McCoy stared at the child, incredulously. He looked to Guinan and searched the face for some hint of jest, found none, and poured himself a glass of brandy. He then took a swig from the bottle before setting it down hard on the table. He wanted to say something clever, to curse, to demonstrate some form of shock, but the longer he thought about it, the less surprising the situation seemed. Perhaps he was finally getting old.

“You know,” McCoy said, presently, “I’ve traveled all over the quadrant, and I have seen some pretty strange things, and done some even stranger things, and had all of these experiences, but even with all of that, I would have never guessed in a million years that I would be sitting here today with you while looking at a child that is related to me and half of the command crew of my ship!” McCoy rubbed his forehead. “I suppose now, the question is what is the child doing with you and what does any of this have to do with me?”

“Jude’s biological mother, or at least, the mother that carried him and gave birth to him, and I were friends. I was there visiting her on her estate before the war started to get heated. She asked me, in the event of her death, that I take Jude away and hold his identity secret. Secret from even Kelinda,” Guinan explained. “I was there when Lorena and her mate were killed. I barely avoided being killed myself, no doubt a story I will tell

you when we have more time. Right now, my immediate need is to find Jude a place to live.”

“Damn it, Guinan, I’m a doctor, not a baby sitter!” McCoy snapped. “And I’m too old to start being a parent now.”

“Jude has some special needs which I am unable to provide for at this time, and, seeing how he is related to you, I thought you would want to be involved,” Guinan said.

“I’m not shirking responsibility here, but considering I was never consulted about the creation of this child, I don’t see how I should have any say in what happens to him now,” McCoy said.

“K7 isn’t a good environment for him,” Guinan said. “The war on Kelvan is ferocious, it may grow to encompass a larger area, and he has seen things a kid his age shouldn’t have seen. I think those things may have hurt him, or it may be that he’s mentally challenged, the by product of having Kelvan psychology imprinted on him while prenatal.”

McCoy shook his head, “Not to mention the mixing of Vulcan genes with human. What percentage?”

Guinan opened a cabinet and produced a medical tricorder. She handed it to McCoy who got up and ran a general sweep of the boy. He shook his head.

“Only five percent of the Vulcan genes seem to be active at this time, but he is going to need some supplements in his diet to help maintain his special chemistry. Everything else seems to be in order... No indications of mental trauma, but then, I would have to have a counselor speak with him,” McCoy said.

“He can’t speak,” Guinan said.

“What?” McCoy asked, doing another check. “I can find no physiological reason for him not being able to speak. I think we should get him to a developmental counselor.”

“Lorena begged me to keep this as discreet as possible for fear the Kelvan should learn that he’s still alive,” Guinan said. “And terminate him.”

“If she were any more discreet, I wouldn’t know about him!” McCoy snapped.

“If the traditionalist Kelvan discover he’s alive, they will hunt him down and kill him because he’s the direct heir to Kelinda’s estate,” Guinan said. “And, that third faction I mentioned, they would also want him dead simply because he survived the imprinting procedure. They recognize that they are descendants of Kelvan, but they want nothing to do with their heritage and have adopted a puritan perspective in their human form. They would consider Jude a threat, a threat that will be worse should Kelinda’s faction win the war. They don’t exactly vote for their leaders, and he would be in line, and potentially in favor of the modified Kelvan’s perspective.”

“Could Shakespeare himself have written a better plot for your life, Jude?” McCoy asked, shaking his head. “If Kirk were here, I suspect it would be damn the torpedoes and full speed ahead. Sigh. Perhaps, it would be better if Jude wasn’t aware of his lineage.”

“An orphanage isn’t an option,” Guinan said.

“It is an option, just not a favorable one,” McCoy said. “And a life in Fleet isn’t much better, always on the move. And I am too old, and don’t argue with me. I agree, stability will be a plus for him, especially if he is going to need special attention.”

Jude crossed over to Guinan, stood with his back to the couch, eyes on McCoy as if he were wary of the stranger. He pushed himself up into the seat next to Guinan. He leaned his head against her, squeezing the ferret. Guinan caressed his hair. He stared at McCoy as if McCoy were an alien.

“I know a place I can take him,” McCoy said at last.

“Family?” Guinan asked.

“Yes, family, in a nice out of the way sort of place,” McCoy said. “Their medical technology is rather advanced, so he won’t lack when it comes to medical care, but hopefully it will turn out that he’s just a late bloomer when it comes to speaking. It’s not unheard of in the halls of science, just unusual.”

“Even for five years old?” Guinan asked.

“Maybe there is a little bit of listener in him. Hell, they threw everyone else into him!” McCoy said.

“I hadn’t thought of that. Yes, he could be a listener,” Guinan mused, hugging Jude. “So, are you sure this is not inconvenient?”

“You dragged me all the way out here, drop a bomb, and expect me to go merrily about my way?” McCoy asked. “Yes, it’s an inconvenience, but I am completely vested in this.”

“So am I,” Guinan said. “If you want me to go with him, I will quit K7.”

“No,” McCoy said. “If anyone knows of your friendship with Lorena, it wouldn’t be too hard to figure out where he is.”

“You have just as much of a connection with Kelinda as I do,” Guinna pointed out.

McCoy frowned. “I do. So if I do what I am planning, there will be no re-union with Kelinda and Jude until after he has become an adult. Once I get him placed with a family, I will not be moving him back and forth. I’ll have to change his name, and come up with some cover story.”

Guinan nodded. “I feel bad doing this. Lorena left me in charge, after all.”

“It’s the only way I see that we can guarantee his safety,” McCoy said. “It’s not like you’re abandoning him. What does Kelinda know about this?”

“True to Lorena’s wish, Kelinda believes Jude to be dead,” Guinan said. “I was asked to do everything possible to protect his life.”

“What kind of parents are we?” McCoy asked.

“The only ones he has,” Guinan said.

“Does he have any possessions?”

“No. Except the toy I gave him. We had to leave quite abruptly,” Guinan said.

“Well, then,” McCoy said, looking at his son. His son! He was almost too old to even pick him up! “Jude, why don’t you and I take a little trip?”

“Are you going to transport back?” Guinan asked.

“No,” McCoy said. “We’re trying not to draw attention to us, remember.”

“Still avoiding transporters, uh?” Guinan asked.

“I’m not avoiding them,” McCoy said. “I’m just stretching my legs. How else would you suggest I keep my youthful vigor and figure?”

Guinan and McCoy walked slowly back to his shuttle, filling their last moments together with gossip. Jude walked in front of them, occasionally hesitating at the strangeness of his surroundings. He found the smells the most overwhelming. Some

were pleasant, with a hint of honey, or a taste of an unfamiliar, flowery scent. Others were pungent, crisp odors, like methane, that farm smell after a strong rain, as if someone opened a can of tuna and boiled eggs. The smells were a direct result of the inhabitants and visitors, human and aliens, host of competing bacteria, sweat, tears, and other by products of body chemistry, in direct conflict with the cleaning agents designed to eliminate smells and kill bacteria. The flow of people down the corridor would one moment be thick with people pushing through and then suddenly open, but the smells were pretty much constant. Conversations, some in standard, was like a dull roar, the volume of which increased and decreased like wave over an ocean, sometimes with sudden curious silence, and sprinkled in the midst of that were the electronic whirling and chirps of various technology being employed.

Because of his imprinting, he found the biologically produced smells the most compelling and intriguing, and would sometimes follow his nose as if he were listening to a conversation meant just for him. As he followed one particular scent, Jude stepped on something and stumbled. That something happened to be the tail of a Caitian. It rounded on the child with a fierce hiss. Jude's eyes went wide and he scooted back against Guinan's legs, only reaching forward to grab his ferret and pull it to safety.

"Watch where you walk," the Caitian hissed.

"It was an accident," McCoy said.

"What sort of manners are you teaching your kitten?" the Caitian demanded, coming to his full height at least four heads above McCoy. "I demand an apology from it."

"The child is unable to speak," Guinan said. "Perhaps you will accept an apology from me and a free dinner at my restaurant."

The Caitian eyed Guinan suspiciously and then leaned further over to inspect the child, sniffing. "Unable to speak, or unwilling? I smell no hint of disease. Fear, I smell. Yes. Afraid of me you are, human? Fear has your tongue?"

"Back off," McCoy said.

The Caitian stood, gazing back at McCoy, measuring him up before further examining Guinan. He nodded approval for their protectiveness of the kitten, and looked back down to Jude, who clutched the toy ferret tightly to his chest as if to protect it. "Be more careful."

"Don't drag your tail on the floor," McCoy said.

The Caitian hissed and moved off down the corridor. Guinan offered Jude a hand up, standing him on his feet again. "Looks like you made a new friend," she said, trying to lessen the impact of the scene with humor.

Jude frowned and gestured to be picked up. Guinan held him close, singing a little song to him as they headed towards McCoy's shuttle. He found comfort in her smell, which was a combination of the plant based soaps she used to bathe in, perfume, the meal she had prepared for them, the natural flora living on her skin, and her own biological byproducts. Of course, he didn't recognize the natural flora, bits of bacteria that normally live on the skin, as something different from her, for he couldn't differentiate all the variables. He took the sum of all these to be simply Guinan.

## CHAPTER TWO

In the year 2290, the multigenerational ship, Yonada, arrived at its destination and the Fabrini people started their new lives. It wasn't an easy start. Though there were two planets capable of supporting Fabrini life, both were in need of minor terra-forming. It was another ten years before the first settlements were made on New Fabrini. The multigenerational ship was then moved to the second world to be colonized, and ten years later, the world Oran was settled, leaving the now empty Yonada spaceship in orbit as a monument to their legacy. From the surface of Oran, Yonada could be seen racing across the sky, a bright speck the size of a thumbnail held at arms length away. Through a telescope, if one was good at tracking such a fast orbiting object, one could detail the surface features of its asteroid appearance. Some of the craters were crafted by the ship's designers, while others were actual collisions from debris that occurred over their ten thousand year trek to their new home. Yonada made an appearance in the sky over head approximately every fourteen hours.

The story of their trek held universal appeal. It was simply another version of the Ark story that is so numerous and told by so many different cultures from so many different planets that it belies its universal appeal of overcoming natural disasters as perhaps one of the most common archetypes shared amongst all sentient beings. No doubt, had the dinosaurs on Earth been clever enough to build a ship like Yonada and had traveled to another planet to escape the apocalypse that they experienced, there would be one more Ark story to tell. The Fabrini's planet was dying and they had the foresight and wisdom to put together an interstellar ship that would carry enough of their population, enough of the biosphere with samples of the organisms that had evolved on their planet, to start life afresh somewhere new. Their trek would be long and arduous, and so the travelers were selected for their patience and virtue of perseverance. Only a group capable of strict discipline and unwavering faith, that could pass these gifts on to their children, and their children's children, could be expected to survive a trip that would take tens of thousands of years. The only thing they hadn't planned for was meeting extraterrestrials, aliens that came to them in the deep night of space, in the forms of Kirk, Spock, and McCoy. These three people managed to change the course of their history, in more ways than one, both literally and figuratively.

One example of change was that McCoy married the High Priestess, Natira.

Captain James T Kirk had made the promise to McCoy, back in 2268 when they had first encountered Yonada, that they would meet the Fabrini people at its scheduled rendezvous with their new solar system. And so they had, bringing with them from the Federation a friendship treaty that was quickly ratified. They offered assistance in their colonization project, including technical advice and in return the Federation requested access to the Fabrini Book of the people, and their vast stored knowledge, with special interest in their medical technology. But at the time, Doctor McCoy was less interested in politics and science and more interested in the reunion with his wife.

In 2353, less than a hundred years later, New Fabrini and Oran boasted a population of approximately eleven million people, combined. An Affiliation treaty had just been signed between Fabrini and the Federation, opening the door for more trade and exchange of cultures. Some exceptions to trade in technology were made in favor of the Fabrini, giving them access to replicator technology, again for trade of their biological and engineering technologies. They hadn't begun building ships of warp speed, not

because they weren't interested in further interstellar travel, but more because it was a waste of time and energies. They were content with the coming and going of Starfleet vessels, while their own energies were focused on trade between their own two planets and establishing an elaborate intra-solar communication system. There was even talk of terra-forming projects for the other three planets that had previously been deemed unsuitable, but still, those projects were years away. First thing was to continue development and exploration of their relatively new homes.

A private shuttle plunged into the atmosphere of Oran and traveled over an ocean towards the largest continent. As the land features grew, the ship slowed, losing altitude. About twenty kilometers from a small inland village, the ship flew over a home that appeared to float on the ocean. The spheroid structure was partially above the water, with a deck running around it. A dock ran from the home back to the beach, where the shuttle eventually came to a rest. Someone kneeling on the dock stood and waved as the shuttle went over head, and went inside, perhaps not realizing they were about to have company.

A few moments after the sand settled, a door opened, a ramp descended, and Admiral McCoy and Tammias Parkin Arblastar, previously known as Jude, descended to the beach. Tammias fell to his knees to examine something in the sand. McCoy leaned down to investigate what Tammias had found.

"It's just a rock," McCoy commented. "Come on. I would like you to meet my family, Tammias."

Tammias responded to his new name as if it had always been. McCoy was pleased enough by the boy's ability to follow directions that he felt certain that his inability to speak was merely a shyness issue and he would speak in time. The two of them walked side by side until they hit the dock. Tammias liked the way the wood planks gave under his feet, bounced a couple times, and decided to run the length of the dock. He could see the water rising and falling between the slats, lines of sunlight turning the water aqua green, while leaving shadowed rectangles of dark blue. He heard McCoy yelling for him to stop and looked up to discover he was quickly approaching the end of the dock. Too quickly, in fact, given the remaining distance, to stop his forward momentum. He flew over the side and disappeared into the water with an undignified splash.

Admiral McCoy had a sudden burst of adrenalin that got him to the end of the dock faster than he imagined he was capable. Tammias was still under water. Without hesitation, McCoy dropped Tammias's bag and dived in. The salt water stung his eyes as he opened them to search for the boy. Tammias was drifting not a meter below him. A shadow passed over them, and suddenly McCoy found himself surrounded by dolphins. At first, he wasn't sure they were dolphins, but just large sea animals. McCoy pushed himself towards Tammias, but a dolphin grabbed Tammias by his jacket and took him towards the surface. McCoy pushed upwards, broke the surface, and gasped for air. There was the chatter of dolphins all around and someone calling from the dock: "Quick, bring him to me."

There were two people on the dock and, together, they were pulling Tammias out of the water. McCoy started swimming towards the dock when a dolphin came along side to offer some assistance. It was rolling, offering its fin, nodding, and making a noise. The girl on the dock was watching the floundering Doctor McCoy, while a man was performing CPR on Tammias.



“Grab on and she’ll help you in,” the girl on the dock yelled to McCoy.

“I don’t need any help,” McCoy snapped back.

The girl did a double take. “Uncle Bones?” she asked.

McCoy pulled himself out onto the dock, just as Tammias began coughing and vomiting seawater. McCoy patted Tammias on the back, and coached him gently back.

“That’s it, boy. Try to breathe deep,” McCoy said. McCoy put a hand on Tammias’s head as Tammias clung to him tightly. McCoy looked up and gave a halfhearted smile. “Hello, Natalia. You’re looking well.”

“Honey, this is Uncle Bones,” Natalia said. “Uncle, this is my husband Juan Garcia.”

“Pleasure to finally meet you,” McCoy said, disengaging from Tammias and starting to stand.

“Admiral...” Juan said, offering him a hand. “I can’t tell you how much of an honor it is to meet you...”

McCoy waved it off and stood. The dolphins were still chattering away, and trying to peer up over the side of the deck, rising and falling in the water like horses on a merry-go-round. Natalia turned to address them.

“Yes, the boy is fine, thank you for your help,” Natalia said. “Yes, I’m sorry. Uncle, Star gives her warmest greetings. She’s has a doctorate in marine biology and oceanography. We’re collaborating on a project.”

“It’s an honor to meet you,” McCoy said.

“We should get you both inside, and some fresh wears,” Natalia said, “wears” in the local dialect meant clothes.

After McCoy had a shower and changed, he met the others in the living area. It was below the water line, and there were dolphins looking in. Tammias was pressed up against the window staring back at them. A speaker from the ceiling translated the dolphin sounds into human speech.

“Admiral McCoy,” Star said. “I am sorry if I offended you by interrupting your rescue, and then again by offering to carry you to the dock. We know of your greatness, and I sing stories of you to the young.”

“Think nothing of it, and call me Bones, or Uncle,” McCoy said.

Natalia entered and gave McCoy a big hug. “I’m so glad to see you. Why didn’t you tell me you were going to drop by?”

“I didn’t want you to make a big fuss, and besides, no one knows I am here, and I would like to keep it that way,” McCoy said.

“But Uncle, there are many people here who would love to see you. Your name is on the memorial at First Settlement, and you are one of our most cherished citizens, and an honorary member of the High Counsel to the High Priestess.”

“All the more reason this trip needs to be a secret: just you, me, Tammias, and I guess Star and companions. I have something of great importance to ask of you,” McCoy said.

“Okay, but first come to the table and get something to eat,” Natalia insisted.

“I’ll have to leave soon, to keep from drawing attention,” McCoy said.

“Uncle, you have to at least stay until Jovet gets home from school. She’ll never forgive you to have come all this way and not given her a hug,” Natalia said.

Doctor McCoy stopped by a shrine with candles and still photos. There were two holograms floating above tiny pedestals, one of which was the High Priestess Natira, his wife, and the other was of him. They were images of him and Natira when they were first married. Natalia observed him with sadness.

“We can make a trip to her grave, if you want,” Natalia said. “I’m sure there will be no one there this time a day.”

“The problem with living forever is you tend to outlive everyone else,” McCoy said, gravely.

“Well, I expect you to out live me, you hear?” Natalia demanded, hugging him.

“I expect to have another good thirty years or so, but I have no doubt that you will out live me and I won’t accept anything less,” McCoy said, sitting down at the table. It was difficult to miss the dolphins gathered in the window staring in at the humans. He felt as if he were on display at a museum for sea mammals. “Star, how long have you been here?”

“Sir, Doctor Admiral McCoy, my family and co-workers relocated from Earth four years ago. The waters here are exciting and new and very clean.”

“And do you require food supplements?” McCoy asked.

“Yes, the salt and mineral contents are not quite Earth, and our skins get irritated without supplements. Also, it tastes a bit different,” Star answered. “But other than that, we have acclimated well. Season, my youngest sister, will give birth soon, and we believe in three generations with adaptive genetic modeling our descendants will find these oceans very palatable.”

“I wish you long life and prosperity,” McCoy said. “And, I hope you will forgive me, but I must request some privacy with Natalia.”

“I understand,” Star said. She believed the ‘secrecy’ of land creatures was an evolved, survival instinct that must have helped them to stash and store food, so she could hardly fault them for not being as social as dolphins. “You are free to deactivate the comm. system.”

“Thank you, Star. I will chat with you later,” Natalia said.

Juan entered carrying a tray of various sample food items, a mixture of Fabrini and Mexican food. It looked more interesting than it tasted, but McCoy found it eatable. He called Tammias over to eat something. Tammias frowned, but followed McCoy’s suggestion as if it had been an order. He picked at the food, but his attention stayed on the outside world. There were fish, coral, bits of unidentifiable stuff floating, and strands of seaweeds that stretched to the surface. Looking up through the ocean, the water’s surface had a glimmering, quick silver like appearance. Everything moved with the motion of the water as waves rolled above them to crash on the shore.

“So, Juan,” McCoy said. “You are the manager general of the Mass Replicator systems here on Oran?”

“Yes, Admiral. If it weren’t for this project, I would never have met Natalia, nor settled down, I suppose,” he said, rubbing Natalia’s back affectionately.

“So, you are settled?” McCoy asked.

“Well, as you know, we structural engineers tend to move quite frequently, but I have decided this will be my home and I retired my Starfleet commission after getting married. I wasn’t exactly fortunate to become manager general, but I was the most qualified and experienced when it comes to manufacturing and distributing materials in

bulk, and working with the counsel as to prioritizing projects comes like second nature. Fortunately, that last bit hasn't been too much of a headache. The Fabrini like to take their time and do things right. I reckon when it takes ten thousand years to travel between worlds, you learn a little patience," Juan said.

"Indeed," McCoy agreed. "You're originally from Texas if I remember right."

"New Texas," Juan said. "Though, we can trace my lineage back to Texas."

"Have you been checking up on my husband?" Natalia interrupted.

McCoy nodded, took a sip of his sun tea, and observed Tammias as he continued to stare out at the dolphins.

Juan smiled. "I imagine he's just making sure I'm good enough for his favorite niece."

"Well, there's more to it than just that," McCoy said. "You are still on the que for being foster parents, in favor of adopting, and registered with Starfleet orphanage and child protective services."

"Yes, but I'm afraid the New Fabrini system is still too remote to be considered for child placement. We had one offer, but the child went to a family on Daran V, if you believe that," Natalia said, and then added more humorously. "That little system keeps getting in the way."

"Yes, well," McCoy said. He sat up straight and leaned forward. "Tammias here is in need of a foster home and it would mean a great deal to me if you personally were involved with his development. Except for his inability to speak, and some concerns that he may have some developmental issues as he gets older, the degree of which is unknown at this time, he's perfectly healthy. I know you are not in need of financial support, but I will see to it that you have access to unlimited funding due to his special potential medical needs, and also provide you with names of specialist that you may want to contact."

"What kind of medical needs, exactly?" Juan asked.

"I'm not sure. What I can tell you is that there was an unusual experiment done on him and we don't understand how it might play out," McCoy said. "And, to the untrained eye, someone might think he was genetically altered, but in reality, he is the product of selective genetic sampling. In other words, the best pairings of genetic information were brought together in the form of egg and sperm, and the best results were allowed to develop, while the others were terminated. Because it's against Federation Law to genetically alter a subject simply to perfect the organism, mistaking his perfect genome structure as anything other than specific sampling could lead to unwarranted investigations into his back ground. I'd like to avoid that."

Natalia and Juan were suddenly both excited and apprehensive at the same time. Natalia choked back some emotion and said, "I am incredibly honored that you would have brought something of this magnitude to me. I wonder if I am worthy of such a challenge..."

"Nonsense," McCoy said. "I need someone I can trust..."

"How long will he be in our care?" Juan asked, ever practical.

"If you agree, I already have the legal adoption process ready to finish, and he will be officially your son after a couple of months of you fostering him," McCoy said. "However, there are some parameters you need to be aware of. First one is: there can be no direct link to me. Anyone doing a background check on him will trace him back to an

orphanage from the Deneb system. It will show his parents were colonist on their way to the Orion cluster, having a bit of a vacation before settling. There was an accident that left Tammias Parkin Arblaster without any family. The real Tammias died with his family.”

“Is this one of those witness relocation programs situation?” Juan asked.

“You can think of it that way, yes,” McCoy said. “Only I and one other person will know his true genealogy, which will be released to him on his eighteenth birthday. His true medical history can only be shared with the people on the list of specialist I will make available to you, and they will be even more discreet than I myself am being.”

“Wow, what’s his story?” Natalia asked.

“It’s better that you don’t know,” McCoy said.

“Wait a minute,” Juan said. “Is his being here a danger to my family?”

McCoy reclined back. “My initial response is no, but then, there is always inherent danger and risk with any choice we make. Tammias is believed to be dead, and it is best that it remain that way. If it is discovered that he is indeed alive and well, there are political factions that might seek his death. It is possible, though highly unlikely, that if someone decided to assassinate him that you could become targets simply by virtue of being too close to him.”

“This is horrible news, Uncle,” Natalia said. “Who would want to harm a child?”

McCoy only stared at her.

“Maybe we should discuss this in private, Natalia,” Juan said.

“No,” Natalia said.

“I will leave you two alone for a moment...” McCoy said, pushing his chair back from the table.

“There’s nothing to discuss,” Natalia said. “This child is in need, and we’re available, and you have come to us especially to ask for our help. And I assume that if secrecy is paramount, and we say no, then you must go elsewhere, which will only increase the number of people who will know something and draw more attention.”

“Honey,” Juan said. “As much as I appreciate your dedication to the Admiral, you have to consider Jovet’s well being as well.”

“I have and I believe we will be okay,” Natalia said. “Nothing bad happens to legends, and Jovet and I are descendants of greatness...”

“You can get that thought out of your head right now,” McCoy snapped. “Luck plays as big a role in or lives as skill and education. You’re fortunate to have your heritage and there is a great number of good people all around you, but that does not make you invincible.”

“Of course, Uncle,” Natalia said, humbly. “Juan, we can do this. We have to do this.”

“We don’t have to,” Juan grumbled, looking out into the sea. “I only hope nothing bad comes of this.”

Natalia clapped her hands. “Uncle, we accept.”

McCoy looked to Juan. Juan slowly nodded approval.

“We will raise him as our son, no looking back and no regrets,” Juan said.

“Then it’s settled and I should leave before Jovet gets home. If I know your child, Natalia, she can’t keep a secret any better than I can,” McCoy said, standing. “It will

appear as if someone from child placement services arrived today, should any one check the logs.”

“Uncle, has your whole life been an adventure?” Natalia asked.

“Non stop,” McCoy said, and hugged her. He walked over and touched Tammas on the head. “You be good.” He shook hands with Juan and then opened the comm. link to give farewells to the dolphins. While McCoy said his goodbyes, Natalia prepared him some food to take on his journey.

Natalia, Juan, and Tammas accompanied McCoy back to the shuttle. She kept wishing he could stay longer but said nothing. She simply enjoyed this moment, walking with him, their arms linked, his hand on hers, noting the warmth of the sun on her skin, and the smell of the sea in the air. She marveled at how well McCoy still got around considering his age, and hoped she would do half as well. The afternoon sun was brilliant overhead, and Yonada moved across the lower horizon like a high moving aircraft, its size and distance misleading. Dolphins swam along side the dock, always excited to watch humans come and go. Tammas tagged along behind, ignoring the dolphins, watching McCoy intently.

“When will we see you again?” she asked.

“I’ll be back for the next High Counsel Session,” McCoy assured her, and then touched his pocket, pulled out a disk. “Oh, nearly forgot. Account information and contact lists for any specialists you might require.”

“He’ll be fine. I promise we’ll take good care of him,” Natalia said.

“I know you will,” he said, and hugged her once more. He nodded to Juan and Tammas. The ramp began to close even as he was going up it.

Natalia took Tammas’s hand and guided him back towards the dock, where the three of them stopped to watch the shuttle’s departure. She tried to imagine how difficult it was for Tammas, in a strange place, with strange people, no doubt sad that McCoy was leaving, but he remained just as quiet as ever. Had he been an adult, she would have thought Tammas was simply resigned to his fate.

“Let’s go personalize your bed room,” she said, trying to be extra charming in hopes of distracting Tammas from wherever his thoughts were.

“Yes,” Juan agreed. “That sounds like fun.”

They led him back to the water dome and entered. The first floor was merely a walkway that circled the top portion of the dome, looking down into the living area. From the door they walked down into the house, and going behind the stair case took another stair down to the next level. At the end of the corridor was a bathroom, and to either side of it were bed rooms.

“This is the lavatory, toilet, and bath,” Natalia explained, looking for any signs he comprehended what she was telling him. “Our bedroom is there, Jovet’s at the other end of the hall, and this room is yours.”

The exterior wall was as transparent as the living room’s wall was. His view didn’t provide him with a direct look out to sea, but rather a side view that looked along the shoreline. The water line was above his head, so he couldn’t see the beach, but he could see the tree tops and the blue of sky. He could see the line of water rising and falling, and he could hear the gentle lapping of sea over house. In his room was a bed, a single, put on a pedestal that would force him to climb up into it. There was also a desk, and an ergonomic chair.

“This bed is called a captain’s bed,” Juan explained, pulling one of the drawers in the pedestal open. “It’s the sort of bed you would have found on a sailing vessel of old Earth. Lots of storage space. See if you can jump up here, Tam. May I call you Tam?”

“I like Tam,” Natalia said.

Tammas got close to the bed. He leaped and pulled himself up. It was awkward, but not unpleasant. From his new height, he could see across the top of the water.

“The water is nice, isn’t it,” Natalia said. “I don’t think I could live anywhere else in the world and be as happy. At high tide, you’re room is completely submerged. At low tide, you should be able to see the beach without needing a stool.”

On either side of the bed were shelves, flushed with the wall, and of varying depth and length. On one of the shelves near the head of the bed were some books. Juan saw Tammas looking towards them and nodded approvingly.

“Yes, those are for you,” Juan said, pulling several of the books out of sequence to show him the hard back covers with glistening letters and enticing print. “I replicated my favorite childhood books. The Chronicles of Narnia, by CS Lewis. And here, Lord of the Rings, Tolken. Oh, and no library is complete without the Hornblower series by Foster. I remember reading the chapter about the frogs and the lobsters, and about halfway through that chapter I started to realize that it wasn’t real frogs and lobsters, but rather, I discovered that the English called their sailors frogs and their armies lobsters, because of the color of the coats they wore. I’ll never forget that, because it was the first time I really started to notice how language and context is important to comprehension.”

“Honey,” Natalia said. “He’s only five.”

“So?” Juan said. “You don’t increase language skills and comprehension without exposure to new words and complex abstract ideas.”

“We don’t even know if he can read yet,” Natalia said.

“Tam, can you read?” Juan asked.

Tammas stared at him. He blinked a couple of times, but he gave no indication that he was capable of responding. A cat wandered into the room and immediately leaped up on the bed to approach Tammas. Before Natalia could get to it, it began scent marking Tam’s arm.

“This is a cat,” Natalia said. “It belongs to Jovet, my daughter. Its name is Darsam. Do you like cats? They’re from Earth.”

Tammas simply looked at the cat without bothering to pet it. With the cat actively pushing itself up against him, he really didn’t see the need to exert any effort to pet the cat.

“See, you can pet it,” Juan said. “It won’t hurt you.”

Tammas ran his hand along the cat’s back, noticing the harder he pet the higher it arched its back.

“Not so rough,” Natalia said. “It’s not a dog. Gentle, like this.”

“He wasn’t hurting it,” Juan pointed out.

“I don’t want him wrestling the cat like you do,” Natalia said. “It’s not a dog.”

“Tam, come over to your desk for a moment, and I’ll show you how to operate your computer,” Juan said, changing the subject.

Tammas hopped off the bed and went to the chair Juan indicated. Darsam followed, joining him in the chair. There was room for both of them side by side. Natalia laughed.

“Darsam really likes you,” she observed. “That’s a good sign. Anyway, here’s how you turn on the computer without voice. You can make all inputs manually by touching your desk top. The computer recognizes the difference between deliberate and accidental key responses, so don’t worry about setting a book or something on your table. This calls up the alpha-numeric interface...”

“Natalia, try English. I doubt he’s been exposed to the Fabrini language,” Juan said.

Natalia changed the language and fonts. “Do you understand this?” she asked. “If you don’t, the computer can guide you through lessons in order to help you learn its function, and can even teach you to read and write in any language.”

“Try the iconic display,” Juan suggested.

Natalia minimized the alpha numeric display and called up the iconic interface. “These pictures are pretty standard, representing the most frequently used features. Of course, nothing is fully universal when it comes to symbolic language, so some of them you will just have to learn. See how touching one gives you a menu for another grouping of icons, narrowing the focus? Try something. Touch one.”

Tammas reached out to touch the desk top.

“Not that one!” Juan said suddenly and dramatically. “You’ll blow up the house.”

Tammas drew his hand back quickly, his eyes growing wide. Natalia’s eyes narrowed in anger.

“Juan Phillip Garcia!” Natalia scolded.

“I’m sorry,” Juan said, still chuckling. “I couldn’t resist.”

“You do that again and I’ll smack you,” Natalia said.

“It’s not so bad. I established that he clearly understands what we’re saying,” Juan said.

“You haven’t established anything,” Natalia said. “He may have been reacting to your loudness, or your facial expressions. Don’t do that again.”

“Alright,” Juan said. “I’m sorry, Tammas. That was uncalled for.”

Natalia pulled an item out of a slot. “This is a Personal Access Display Device, or PADD, for short. It does everything your desktop can do, only it’s portable. That way, you can read in bed if you like.”

Tammas looked at her. He blinked. Natalia put the PADD back in its designated space. She then looked to her husband for ideas.

“You know what this room needs? What you need, Tammas? A model. No child’s room is complete without a model of a Starship,” Juan said.

“Oh, please,” Natalia said, rolling her eyes.

“I built ships in bottles,” Juan said, using the iconic interface to pull up the category he wanted. “And I built model airplanes and starships when I was a kid. Here we go. These are scale replicas of ships. This one. Constellation Class. I helped in the construction of the last one to leave Mars Orbital ship yards. Lets, see, we also need a pedestal. These are my favorite pedestals because it gives the illusion that your model is hovering in mid air, but it is really suspended in a magnetic field. Now, I’ll just send the instructions to the replicator... There.”

Juan stepped out into the hall and retrieved the model, one quarter scale. He placed it on the shelf, in one of the wider spaces due to the way the shelves were arranged

in alternating starting position. He touched it with his finger and the ship spun slowly on its pedestal.

“Boy, this brings back memories,” Juan said.

“I see,” Natalia said, wondering which of the two boys was the real child.

“Go ahead, Tam,” Juan said. “You give it a try. I know its not really making a model, but we’ll do that later.”

Tammas started to reach for the computer, hesitated, looked to Juan for reassurance, and then shifted through the graphic representations of ships. He chose one, and then switched over to the menu for pedestals. Juan was still by the door so he could easily retrieve the model once the replicator was finished. Tammas pushed the final button that executed his request. Juan turned to the replicator and paused.

“That’s interesting,” Juan said, bringing the ship into Tam’s room and placing it on the shelf. He backed away admiring the arrangement.

“That is interesting,” Natalia agreed. “I don’t think I’ve seen anything like that.”

“Me neither,” Juan said.

On the shelf, above and to the right of the Constellation ship that Juan had made was Tam’s Constitution Class starship. The scale was off between the two ships, but that wasn’t the interesting part. What caught the eye was the pedestal. The pedestal appeared to be a human hand, which was reaching up and out from the shelf. It was holding the ship by the front of the saucer section.

“How original,” Natalia said. “You’re going to be an artist.”

The cat rolled over onto its back, pawing at the side of the chair and Tam’s arm playfully.



Jovet didn’t take the news that she had a new brother too well. Though she knew her mother and step dad had wanted to adopt, and had discussed the concept with her, she really hadn’t thought through all the ramifications. Like, he might be a pest, and she would have no more privacy, and Darsam would like him more than her. To return home from school and suddenly find that she had a brother was somewhat disconcerting. She felt the stirrings of jealousies in the pit of her stomach. It didn’t help that Tammas had some obvious handicaps, such as not being able to speak. From the moment she came home she felt as if she were competing for her mother’s attention. Darsam followed him around like a puppy too early weaned. Of course, it didn’t help that when Juan dropped the lobsters imported all the way from Earth into a pot of boiling water that Tammas freaked. Juan and Natalia spent most of an hour just trying to find something he would eat, still wiping his tears. She stared across the dinner table at him as if he were an alien monster that might transmute into something truly awful and consume her.

Natalia wasn’t blind to the fact her daughter wasn’t responding well, and as she tucked her daughter up she was about to reinforce the fact that Jovet was still loved. Unfortunately, about the same instance that she was trying to find words to appease her daughter, Juan announced that Tammas was missing. Natalia jumped up from her daughter’s bed and rushed to Tammas’s room. Sure enough, he wasn’t in his bed, where she had left him sleeping. She turned to find Juan suddenly behind her.

“He’s not up stairs,” Juan said.

“Did you check our room?” Natalia asked.



Juan headed off to their room and Natalia turned to look at the bed again. The top blanket and pillow was missing, as well. She walked to the far end of the bed to make sure he wasn't sitting on the floor. When she turned to walk back, she saw Darsam's tail sticking out of the closet. She then opened the closet door and sighed with relief.

Tammas was curled up with his blanket and pillow in the closet. Darsam was lying next to him, purring and kneading his arm. She called out to Juan. He returned to Tammas's room and took in the situation. They discussed if they should just let him sleep there for the night, or risk waking him to put him back on the bed.

Jovet closed her door and went back to bed. Over the next few months, she felt practically invisible. Specialist came and went. The last was a speech therapist that failed to even get Tammas to respond to sign language. It was clear to both the doctors and therapist that Tammas was aware of his surrounding and understood what they were saying to him, but they were unable to elicit any sort of intelligible response from him. The closest he got to communication was game play. The therapists were able to engage him in board games. They discovered that even games as complicated as chess Tammas was able to quickly master. Much too well, considering his age and perceived mental disability.

Another interesting developmental issue was that Tammas displayed an unwillingness to move from one task to another until the first task was completed. If he were playing chess, he would stay on the game until he had lost or won, and sometimes after loosing he would sit and study the board looking for another option. If they handed him a puzzle to solve, he would not surrender the puzzle until he completed it. If they took it from him before it was resolved, he would only stare at it, displaying anxiety and frustration.

"He has an obsessive compulsive disorder," one of the therapists had said. "And I believe we should use drug therapy to treat it. Perhaps after doing so, he will begin to speak."

But Natalia was adamant about not introducing drugs at this stage of his development. Juan reluctantly supported her. She would have counselors counsel, and doctors doctor, but only to a point.



A few days after his arrival, Tammas spent some time bed ridden from a bacterial infection. It was unusual that a micro organism from one world could adversely affect the biology of an organism from another, as they tended to be incompatible on multiple levels, but it was not unheard of, and the computerized doctor had prescribed a specific antibiotic that would fight the Fabrini bacteria but leave Tammas's natural bacteria alone. For the Fabrini, the particular bacteria in question was a normal everyday bacteria, one they had brought with them from their place of origin. The Fabrini actually derived benefit from its existence, just as humans derived certain benefits from specific ecoli bacteria. For Fabrini, this particular strain helped in the digestion of food, and when the organism died the host simply digested it, absorbing the vitamin K that the bacteria produced. Unfortunately for Tammas, it competed for resources with the natural flora that lived in his body and the battle between the two was making him ill. Since he hadn't complained, they hadn't known he was sick until he was really sick. The first clue was vomiting at the breakfast table, and unfortunately, also on Jovet. Jovet screamed bloody murder, ran to the bathroom, washed thoroughly, and had to find something new to wear.

It had made her late to school and the incident only further alienated her from her new brother.

Natalia's office was an observation dome separated from the house by a transparent tunnel. It was much deeper than the home, as the tube followed the sharp descent of the sea floor. From there she was able to make her observations and record data. Heads up displays were projected onto the bubble, providing her detailed information about the organisms swimming or drifting by. Some of the larger animals had pet names, as they tended to be territorial and constantly in view. The dolphins assisted in the surveys of plants and animals by taking tricorders to identify the new and the strange. They also helped to reinforce the knowledge base on those organisms already cataloged. As the dolphins approached the bubble that was Natalia's office, their tricorders automatically dumped the info into her computer system.

Natalia's desk sat proudly in the center of the room, with one prominent leg that came from the floor at an angle. The desk was centered on that leg, sweeping back in a rakish fashion that almost gave it the appearance of flight. All together it looked like the vertical stabilizer of an airplane sticking up through the office floor. The table itself was glassy smooth and solid black. The entire surface of the desk projected computer information. Various windows of information were opened on her desk, including a live map of her region and dots of lights that represented the current location of her dolphin teams. One window showed Tammias's biometric information, and she was glad to see his temperature had finally receded. She brought another window to the foreground and in it was a live image of Tammias sleeping. Satisfied that Tammias was okay, she picked up her PADD and went to the bubble to where she compared information on the fish that was swimming by.

In his room, Tammias sat up. His black footed ferret had fallen to the floor, and he was unable to reach it without getting up. He got up and put it back on the bed, and then turned and watched the waves rolling in towards shore, wrapping around the contour of the outer wall. He went up to the wall and pressed his face against it. He saw no dolphins, only a few fish. Hungry, he went to his dresser, reached into his clothes and pulled out some bits of food that he had squirreled away. It wasn't his only stash. He raided two other stock piles before the hunger pains left him. He had to sit down for a moment because he felt like being sick again, but he held it in check, and then ventured out.

Tammias wandered into the Garcia master bedroom. It faced the shoreline, and the waves that were following the contour of the house met in the center of the wall and then proceeded towards the beach. The beach rose, gradually steeper until it met a rocky hill and plant life became less and less sparse until finally there was nothing but trees blocking the view of the horizon. It might have been easy to believe, from just this view, that the forest surrounded the house like a barrier, that this was all there was to their tiny little island home. The forest ran deep, only hugging the coast line for half a kilometer of either side of the Garcia's home.

Tammias crawled over the master bed, as opposed to walking around it, and studied the light on the night stand. He could have gone under the bed, for it appeared to float, attached only at the wall. The night stands on either side of the bed also had the illusion of floating. He examined the light. It had no switch, but it turned on when he touched it. With each consecutive touch, the light got brighter until the fourth time when

it turned off and cycled again. He left it at the medium brightness and wandered into the master bath. He turned the shower on, flushed the toilet, sampled some lipstick which he spat out, and then pocketed the lip stick. He dropped something from the cabinet into the toilet, attempted to flush it, satisfied his curiosity, and decided to explore further.

Leaving the master bedroom, he turned right and proceeded back down the hall towards Jovet's room. The door was locked, but it didn't slow him any. He simply pushed the same combo on the keypad that Jovet had. It opened right up. Compared to the other rooms, Jovet's space was a mess. She had piles of clothes on the floor, a couple books, a PADD, and some things he couldn't identify. He bid greeting to each of her toy animals and then wandered to her dresser. Instead of stashing food, Jovet had stashed a book. It was a locked book, but just like the door, he easily cycled the lock to open. There were lots of emotions in the book, and a few pictures that had been cut out from other sources and pasted in. He took the book to her desk. There he sat at the desk and made his contributions to her work of art, using the lip stick he had confiscated to help decorate it. Satisfied that he had added his share of emotions, he pocketed the lipstick, and decided to wander the rest of the house. But before he did, he decided to help Jovet by folding all the clothes on the floor and placing them in her dresser. He even rearranged her drawers so that it was more organized. He left her room happy, certain Jovet would be pleased with the results.

He wandered out into the living room. Still no dolphins in the windows. He touched the hologram of McCoy at the shrine, curious how his hand passed through the hologram, and then wandered into the kitchen. In the pantry he found a box of items wrapped in foil. He sampled one and spit it out, disgusted. He found another box of stuff and sampled it, and was pleased. He carried that box back to his room. The nutrition bar that he had taken a bite of went in the bottom drawer under his shorts. He put two unopened bars inside his pairs of socks. He stuck another in his pillow case, two under his mattress, one in his back pack, and the box with the remaining bars went to the back of his closet.

Tammias returned to the kitchen. He was very surprised that the Garcia household was so careless with the food, leaving it all in one place where just anyone could come and steal it. He gathered up some more supplies to distribute throughout the house. Some went behind the cushion of the couch. Some in the guest bathroom. He tasted a dried meat strip and put the rest of it in Jovet's pillow case. He was certain she would like it. He put a cookie between her mattress and box springs. He was just returning to the kitchen when Natalia came up the tube from her office.

"Hey there," she said. "I'm glad to see you're up and about. How do you feel?"

Tammias looked at her. Natalia came over and felt his forehead.

"You still feel a little warm to me, but the Doctor Program says you're still in the normal range. Are you still sick at your stomach?" Natalia asked.

Tammias looked at her.

"Are you hungry?" Natalia went on. She poured him a drink. "Here, try this, and we'll see if you can keep it down."

Tammias sampled the red concoction, hesitated, and then almost drank the remaining portion in one gulp.

"Whoa, whoa, not so fast," Natalia said.

Tammas offered her the cup, thinking she wanted to share, and Natalia chuckled. “No, it’s for you,” she said.

The door opened and Jovet entered the house like a storm in spring. She glared at Tammas, tossed her hair back, and headed towards her room.

“How was school?” Natalia called after her.

“Fine,” Jovet said, rounding the corner. “Why is my door open? Have you been in my room?”

“No,” Natalia said.

Jovet screamed.

Natalia recognized the scream. It wasn’t a “I’m being bit by a spider” scream, or even a, “I just stubbed my toe,” scream. This was more “Oh my god, I can’t believe what you’ve done and you’ve violated my privacy” sort of scream. Natalia went to investigate.

Tam followed.

“Look!” Jovet said, holding up her diary. “How did he get in here if you didn’t let him in?”

Natalia was at a loss to explain this. “Tammas?”

Tammas came around the corner to appraise the situation. Darsam came up right along beside him, and sat, its tail curling around his left foot protectively. They both looked very innocent and unconcerned by all the commotion that people in general like to participate in.

“Did you do this?” Natalia asked.

“Did he do this?” Jovet practically screamed in shock. “Who else would have done it? Are there any other monsters living in this house?”

“Stop calling him that,” Natalia said.

“He’s ruined it,” Jovet said, referring to her diary, stomping her foot. She paused. She looked around her room. “Oh, my god. Where- are my clothes?”

“Where did you leave them?” Natalia asked.

“Today is my laundry day, mom. I always wash my clothes on the Tendat,” Jovet said.

“Tammas? What did you do with Jovet’s clothes?” Natalia asked.

Tammas looked at her.

“He’s such a freak! Why couldn’t you adopt a normal person?” Jovet said, returning her diary to its drawer. She found her dirty clothes and she screamed. “I can’t believe this! I’ll have to wash everything in this drawer now! Oh my god, and this drawer, too. And…” She rounded on Tammas and pointed at him. “Stay out of my room you little, freakazoidal, monster head!”

Natalia crossed the threshold into Jovet’s room and pushed the button to close the door. The door closed leaving Tammas and Darsam on the outside. Tammas heard Jovet scream and there was crying and Doctor Garcia’s calm but persistent voice. Then it was silent for some time. When the door finally opened, Jovet was standing there, wiping her face. Natalia was behind her.

“I’m sorry,” Jovet said. “I know you’re new here and don’t understand the rules and all. I forgive your trespass.”

Tammas threw up, catching both Jovet and Natalia. Jovet began to cry and rushed off to the bathroom, sealing herself in. Darsam smelled the vomit and started pawing at the carpet as if to bury the mess. Natalia put in a call for the real doctor to come make a

house call, and got to work on cleaning Tammas, herself, and the hallway. It wasn't until later that evening, when peoples were retiring for the night, and Jovet screamed her last scream for the day, that they finally began to figure things out. Jovet showed them the half chewed beef jerky stick that she had found in her pillow case. They went through house and found most of his stashes, most importantly evidence of spoiled, but partially consumed, food hidden under his clothes. Only after they had thoroughly searched and cleaned the house of food caches and started policing their food stores did Tammas stop being ill.



The fact that Tammas had an obsessive compulsive disorder was only reinforced by the realization that no matter how hard they policed the food, food supplies were continuing to disappear. Juan eventually found where it was going by planting a homing device on a package of breakfast bars. Near to the Garcia's home was a descent size cave that Tammas had apparently discovered. Jovet had found it previously, so they had known about it, but they hadn't expected Tammas to find it since he rarely wandered far from the house. He tended to stay very close to home, in line of sight of Juan, Jovet, or Natalia. Another OCD ritual was that he refused to step over a line of Littles, or ants as Juan called them. Instead, he would walk meters out of his way to go around. The family doctor still wanted to prescribe medication, but Natalia, not lacking in medical knowledge, was still adamantly opposed. She stuck to her behavioral modification theories as the way to approach Tammas's issues.

Almost a year later, a communication break through began the day Jovet's music teacher came over to give Jovet her first weekly lesson. Jovet was learning the trean in school, a clarinet like instrument, only flatter, ending in two pipes. The air could be shunted through either or both, allowing for single or simultaneous tones of different pitches. It was something Tammas found rather interesting. He often sat by the door to her bedroom as she practiced, which bothered her to no end. It was as if she could feel him just outside the door, and sometimes she would open the door to find him there, his ear pressed against it. She would then proceed to chase him off. Sometimes a sparring match ensued between her and her mother about privacy rights, specifically the loss of hers.

Lorencia, the music teacher, enjoyed holding Jovet's lessons outside, but then, she was especially eccentric. The air was usually cool, with a slight breeze, and the waves lapping against the shore carried a gentle cadence that she said favored the trean's natural tones. "The sea has a natural rhythm, much better than a metronome," Lorencia would say. The beach sounds, like the gulls, made for interesting contrast to the crisp tones of the trean. Tammas sat near by, observing. Sea birds called to one another as they hovered directly into the wind, swaying left to right like kites on a string.

"Okay, try again," Lorencia said.

"Okay..." Jovet said, spying Tammas. "Go play somewhere, will you?"

Heedless of the look she had given him, Tammas came over and sat down near enough to her that had she wanted, she could have easily bonked him over the head with her trean. She felt certain that he was being so brazen because she knew that he knew she wouldn't hit him in front of her music teacher. And, it angered her even more knowing that he was right. She would pound him later, though, she assured herself.

"Again," Lorencia instructed, ignoring the sibling interaction.

Jovet frowned and began to play. Tammias lay down and looked up at the sky, listening to the sounds his sister made. He talked silently to the clouds, listening to the gentle, lap-lap, of the water swelling and falling just beneath his head.

“No,” Lorencia interrupted. “This is not a sad or angry song. Frowning negatively affects the mood you are trying to bring forth from the trean. You will always play what you feel and your body mannerism directly correlates to that feeling.”

“I’m sorry, I’m distracted...”

“Stop being distracted,” Lorencia said. “You have a choice. If you are sad, you frown, if you are happy you smile... Reverse it and you will find it works the same. You smile, you are happy. You frown, you are sad. Now smile and play. If you find yourself distracted, breathe, focus, and smile.”

Jovet forced a smile and the first note that came out squeaked. The reed vibration tickled and she shivered. Tammias covered his ears.

“I would like to see you do better,” Jovet said to him.

Tammias sat up and held his hand out for the instrument. Jovet laughed and handed it to him, preparing to unleash a score of words that would embarrass him so much he would never bother her again. “Go ahead, be my guest.”

Tammias examined it and then took up the posture his sister held when working the trean. He played with the finger grips and then attempted to produce the first note. It came out weak and splintery, worse than even the squeak Jovet had made.

Jovet laughed. “See,” Jovet said. “Not so ease...”

Suddenly, a pure tone burst forth from the instrument as Tammias hit a solid note. Tammias took a breath, unaware of how surprised Jovet and Lorencia were. He was focused on playing the trean. He blew, and again made the pure tone, and then he began to slowly work his way up the Dorian scale. He took another breath and, beginning where he left off, proceeded slowly down the scale. His eyes closed as he slowly began to increase his speed, up and down the scale, and then he started breaking it up into patterns, combinations of high and low notes. He somehow managed to make doing scales beautiful. Finally he burst into the song that Jovet had been attempting to play, following the memory of her practice sessions. He took it a bit further, adding his own notes. At the conclusion of the song, Tammias opened his eyes and offered the trean back to Jovet.

Jovet stared at her brother, seeing only the monster that had invaded her home. She got up and ran into the house with out a word.

Tammias watched her go, frowning.

“How do you feel?” Lorencia asked him. She knew of his inability to speak and the efforts the Garcia’s had put forth to help him in that endeavor.

Tammias only looked at her.

Lorencia gently pushed the trean back to Tammias’s lips and again asked, “How do you feel?”

Tammias played a combination of notes that expressed sadness, in A minor.

Lorencia opened her bag and produced her own trean, and played a response to Tammias’s musical statement. She ended her notes with another pattern that suggested a question. It had the same feel and quality of sound a cat might produce when its owner arrived, almost a purr, but not a full meow, but definitely a question sort of noise, with the pitch going up at the end. Tammias responded with complicated discordant sounds,

clashing notes, and then stretching pure tones into a pattern that slowly emerged until routine was established. Lorencia responded in kind, and before long they were both playing together in harmony.

When the music stopped, Lorencia had tears in her eyes. She looked up to see Natalia witnessing this event. Natalia fell to her knees and hugged Tammas, and then sat down beside him.

“Can you play something else?” she asked.

Lorencia interrupted. “This was not play. This was communication. The purest form of communication one can have: soul to soul.”

“What did he say?” Natalia asked, anxious to know what Tammas was thinking.

“Words are inadequate to express what has been exchanged here,” Lorencia said, standing. She gathered her stuff, touched Tammas lightly on the head, and then walked away.

Natalia couldn't wait to tell Juan of the incident and called him at work. His face was framed in the monitor on her desk as she described in detail what she had witnessed, even mentioning Lorencia's reluctance to share with her what Tammas had managed to convey through music, but summing it up that perhaps even Lorencia hadn't known what had actually been communicated.

“Well, I always told you she was a bit odd,” Juan said.

“But what should we do?” Natalia asked.

Juan thought about it. “Let's let him develop it. I'll replicate a piano and have it transported over. Move the couch in the entertainment room against the wall to make room for the piano. I'll also replicate other instruments, and we'll just see where it goes from there...”

And it went far. Tammas proved capable of learning any instrument they handed him. It was no doubt that he was a musical genius and his lack of ability to speak was now overlooked because of this surprising talent. The only thing that limited him was his size, for he simply didn't have the reach, for example, to play certain adult pieces on the piano, but he compensated so well, one would have never realized he was challenged. He could replicate anything after only one exposure. By the second playing he was changing it to fit his own designs, proving his insight went beyond just mimicking.

Of course, with the music came a heightened awareness of just how strong his obsessive-compulsive disorder was. Dragging him away from a music session to eat dinner for example, was like stretching a rubber band... He would literally pull himself up the stairs, sitting down, and going up one step at a time, backwards, acting as if he was a mountaineer struggling against raw nature and unreasonable gravities. And when he was released, he rebounded back to his music with the opposite and equal force, a missile launching from a silo.

“Perhaps we should consider drug therapy,” Juan suggested, once Tammas had disappeared from the table. Tammas would forgo eating, sleeping, and everything else if they hadn't twisted his arms to do these mundane things. Occasionally, Juan would offer a puzzle to occupy him when they needed quiet. Tammas would work with the same tenacity he put into learning a song. But once it was solved, he simply returned to his music. And Juan was giving him some pretty tough puzzles to solve in hopes of finding some quiet without retreating to the bedroom. They were all three-dimensional puzzles,

like blocks with interlinking ropes with a silver ring hanging, and the silver ring was capable of being separated without cutting the ropes.

“He is still too young,” Natalia said. The music from the piano boomed discord, then suddenly fell into an almost recognizable pattern of a smooth melody. It was a theme that Tammias often returned to. Natalia looked at her husband.

“Rochminov, I think,” Juan answered.

“Don’t you think it’s funny that it always seems to fit our moods and dialogues, as if he were playing to us as if we were actors in a movie,” Natalia asked.

“Never thought of that,” Juan said, musing over the music. It did seem that if they were cross, the music seemed to be harsh, and when they were pleasant, the music was gentle, or if they were romantic, the music seemed to fit the mood. “I’m sure it just seems that way. Anyway, I really think we should try drug therapy. This isn’t normal behavior. Even for abnormal, this isn’t normal.”

“Okay, I will consider herbs and supplements, but no drugs,” she said, pointing the knife she was using to cut vegetables.

“Please, Natalia. There is nothing wrong with using drugs. Your culture’s own history of drug therapy is far superior to the Federation, and even ours has proven invaluable to mental disorders,” Juan said. “If he were diabetic, you wouldn’t deny him insulin.”

“If he were diabetic, we would recruit stem cells to grow him a new batch of insulin producing cells,” Natalia said.

“I know that,” Juan said, the music behind him discordant. “I was trying to make an analogy. Like, if he needed dialysis we would...”

“Use a concentration of stem cells directed to grow him a new kidney,” Natalia said. “That only requires one pill, where psychotropic drugs generally require a life time commitment.”

“So, what’s wrong with that? It’s perfectly acceptable to treat mental issues with the appropriate drugs,” Juan said. “There doesn’t have to be a stigma attached to it.”

“It’s not a disorder. He’s just special. Why rob him of that uniqueness and make him like everyone else?” Natalia asked.

“Because he’s getting worse and we want him to have a normal, healthy life,” Juan said.

“He is normal. For him,” Natalia said. She pushed the cutting board away, then got up and left the house.

If Natalia could have slammed the door, she would have. It slid shut silently behind her. Tammias came in and looked at the door and then turned to Juan.

“Yes, she’s gone out for a walk,” Juan said. “You should really go out for a walk, too, once and awhile. Don’t you think? When I was a boy your age, I was running around outside all the time. My parents could barely keep me inside at all.”

Tammias just stared at Juan.

“You do understand me, don’t you?” Juan asked.

Still nothing.

Juan frowned, stirring his tea with a spoon. The noise of the spoon against the glass made a sound and Tammias drew closer to him. Juan noticed Tammias being closer as he put the spoon in his mouth. Just out of curiosity, Juan took the spoon out and purposely tapped on his glass.



Tammas came closer.

“You like sound, don’t you,” Juan said, and then he smiled, motioning Tammas towards a chair. “Come here.”

Tammas came over to the table and sat down.

Juan handed him a PADD and then pulled out one of his own. He called up a program that would teach Morse Code, with audio and visual components, and after running through the alphabet, Juan tapped out the words “I love you.” On Tam’s PADD, the letters appeared on the screen simultaneously with the dits and dah sounds that spelled it out audibly and visually in Morse code.

“I love you,” Tammas responded by tapping Morse Code. Juan would have thought nothing of it, that Tammas was just mimicking the pattern, except that Tam added the word: “Too.”

Juan felt suddenly very warm. “You understand,” he said. And when Tammas didn’t respond, Juan decided that he must have imagined it. Just to be certain, he spelled “You understand?!” onto his PADD, and instructed the PADD to translate it into Morse Code, sending it to Tam’s PADD.

Tammas tapped out, “Yes. I like this game.”

“What game?” Juan asked, and again, when no response came, he typed it out and the computer translated it into Morse Code for him. Frustrated with his own skill of tapping it out, Juan instructed his PADD to translate his spoken words directly to Morse Code and to transmit it to Tam’s PADD for audio and visual presentation. Juan simply wasn’t near as quick at learning Morse Code as Tammas had proved, but by morning he expected he and Natalia would be proficient enough to communicate with their son for the first time since Tammas had moved in.

“Are you happy here?” Juan typed.

“Yes. Is Natalia okay?” Tammas tapped out, English text appearing on Juan’s PADD. “Did I do something wrong?”

“No, no, you’ve done nothing wrong,” Juan said, touching Tam’s head in reassurance. “We’re not angry with you.”

“Jovet is angry with me,” Tammas tapped.

“No, she is simply... Okay, she is angry. But, trust me, she will come around,” Juan said. “Oh my, this is great. Natalia is going to be so happy that we can communicate with you.”

“I don’t understand. I talk to you all the time,” Tammas said.

“Of course you do,” Juan said, not understanding what Tammas was telling him. “Of course you do.”

♪♪▶

Indeed, Natalia beamed at this new game, as Tammas coined it. She started testing his reading and comprehension ability, followed up with basic arithmetic all through a Morse Code program that translated text for her, but audio for Tammas. Tam placed about a twelfth grade level. Out of all the tests Natalia gave him she wasn’t surprised to find he scored the highest on the music intelligence tests. Tam saw the entire testing process as a game.

“We’ll need to enroll him into school now...” Natalia began.

“Whoa, honey, not so fast,” Juan put the breaks on.

“What do you mean? He’s obviously intelligent beyond his years, and he should be in school. Plus, it is important to be with kids his age,” Natalia insisted. “It’s no wonder he has obsessive compulsive tendencies. He’s bored silly! His OCD must be a manifestation of his inability to express himself to request greater mental stimulation.”

“Perhaps, but I have some concerns. I doubt seriously he is going to bond with kids his age with scores these high. He’d have to be in a special program,” Juan began. “That alone is going to make it difficult for him to make friends, besides the fact he still doesn’t speak. He appears to be doing fine with this code stuff, but it will make students and faculty relations very difficult.”

“It’s no different than using the Universal Translator,” Natalia protested. “Like with the dolphins.”

“Its not the same and you know it,” Juan protested.

“Well, what do you suggest?” Natalia asked.

“How about we enroll him in an Online school. There is a virtual school on the Inter-Stellar Net which I have heard good things about, and there are some local net schools, too,” Juan offered.

“He needs to interact with people. As much as I love the concept of home schooling, and using educational tools on the IS-Net, I feel very strongly that kids need to mix with other live kids. That’s the only way they learn to socialize appropriately,” Natalia said.

“Then, in addition to online schools, we will have to get him involved with local clubs. Maybe send him to karate, or put him in the orchestra,” Juan said.

“Martial arts, maybe. Orchestra, no way. I don’t want it getting around that he’s a musical genius, or risk someone trying to exploit him. Besides, it would draw too much attention to him, and we were supposed to offer him a normal life. We want him to have an opportunity to be a kid,” Natalia said.

“No matter what we do, people are going to learn he’s special,” Jaun said.

## CHAPTER THREE

Admiral Cheyon and Admiral K were sitting comfortably in McCoy's home, discussing the vagaries of life and general problems in the Universe. McCoy stared mostly at his drink, as if answers might bubble up out of the liquid that he was holding. Their conversations ran the gambit of "the good ol' days" to current headlines. Until, that was, K asked McCoy if he had any news concerning his Secret Little War.

McCoy swirled the liquid in his glass and chuckled. "So, they're calling it my secret war, are they?" he thought. The Kelvan's had been isolationist ever since they moved in and so their civil war wasn't catching any headlines in any of the media, but secret wasn't exactly how McCoy would have classified it.

"No, I haven't heard anything new," McCoy said. "Their system is still divided."

"Divided? Hell, their system is so fractured it's amazing it hasn't fallen apart. The Vulcan listening post went silent, long range scans are turning up zip, we've lost six probes, and one ship, and you'll have me believe that this is just your average little conflict?" K asked. "I don't like this. I don't like it one bit."

"If the O'Kelvan," Cheyon began, using their term for the original Kelvan, "win this war it could be the worst threat the Federation has ever faced."

"Did you ever notice," McCoy said, peering at the firelight through his glass and the brandy inside it. "It's always the worst threat the Federation has ever faced?"

"This is no laughing matter, McCoy," K said. "They may not out number us at this stage of the game, but their technology is so far advanced we wouldn't stand a chance in a fair match."

"What are you saying?" McCoy said.

"I'm saying, why don't we go in there now and drop a little G-device in their system and let God sort it out," K said.

McCoy bounded out his chair, pointing his finger at him. "My God, man! Is your answer to everything complete annihilation? Where's your humanity? I never want to hear you threaten to use the Genesis Device again, regardless of the threat."

"Easy, Doctor," Cheyon said.

"Easy my ass," McCoy said. "I've seen what that device can do up close and personal and there would be nothing left of that entire solar system. I will not sit here in secret collaboration with anyone who would even contemplate that as a solution."

"Even if they revert to their original Kelvan ways?" K asked. "That one little colony could conquer this whole Galaxy within fifty years if they put their minds to it."

"I will not support war based on a hypothetical and I will never support genocide," McCoy repeated.

"By the time it becomes reality, we won't have the ability to defend ourselves," K argued. "And you can be sure this will fall on your head."

"If I weren't an old country doctor, I'd kick your..."

"So, you are still human enough to result to violence," K said.

"That's enough, K," Cheyon said.

"Kirk welcomed them and the Federation sanctioned that action," McCoy said. "It was the human thing to do. Right now, they are having a crisis, and the prime directive clearly outlines our roles in this conflict. We let them work it out."

"And when the conflict moves out of their system?"

"We cross that bridge when we get there," McCoy said, sitting back down.

The three of them were silent for a long time. K sighed. “We’re going to be commissioning a new starships soon. The first in a new class of ships, the Galaxy Class starship.”

“I’ve read the specs,” Cheyon said. “It’s the most advanced platform for deep space scientific research ever assembled.”

“One of these days, we’re going to improve ourselves right out of a job,” McCoy said. “Medical programs can do about anything. All they need next is to put a holographic face on it and poof, no more doctors. At this rate, we might even return to unmanned space flight. Just send out ships with holographic crews. New ships. New gadgets. What’s happening to our humanity?”

“It’s alive and well, thank you very much,” K said. “Every advance in technology frees us up from labor so we can devote more time to personal interest.”

“There’s nothing healthier than an honest days work,” McCoy said.

K chuckled and finished off his drink. “Here’s one for you. What happens when the holographic explorers we send out start coming back and demanding equal rights?”

“We’ll give them an apple and kick them out of the garden,” Cheyon said.

“What’s the first ship to be christened?” McCoy asked, changing the subject. He was pretty sure they didn’t want a lecture about how V’ger very nearly destroyed Earth looking for its creator. He wondered how that baby was doing.

“We’ve boiled it down to two,” Cheyon said. “It’ll either be the Constitution, or the Enterprise. I thought the three of us could decide that today.”

“I’m a bit biased,” McCoy admitted.

“No,” K said, his voice rich with sarcasm. “Not you.”

Cheyon and K clicked glasses, counting coup.

“Personally, after loosing the Enterprise C, I think we should give that name a rest,” Cheyon said. “Besides, every time we christen a ship Enterprise, the crew goes out of its way to top all the previous set records, and I hate putting that much stress on our personnel.”

“Nothing healthier than a little competition,” McCoy said. “It gives people something to aspire to.”

K grunted. “You’re a dreamer, McCoy. These grunts today aren’t half as strong and determined as we were.”

“My grandfather made the same observations about my father’s generation, as did my father about my generation,” McCoy said. “If this were a true trend, one would have expected the human race to be extinct by now.”

“Come on, McCoy. Even you have to admit that there is a human tendency for being spoiled when all your wants and needs are instantly gratified through replicator and holographic technologies,” K said. “The only thing these youths know is how to play simulations on a holo-grid, and they’re going to start putting these things on starships!”

“You saying there’s no hope for us?” McCoy asked.

“There’s always hope,” Cheyon said.

The meeting concluded, they said their farewells, and McCoy cleaned up after his guest, washing the glasses and plates by hand. He was in the process of drying his hands when the door chime rang. He went to the door and found the classic figure of death standing on the other side, a humanoid in a hooded robe. McCoy knew who it was before the stranger even dropped the hood.

“Are you death, or just a wandering Vulcan?” McCoy asked. “Spock! You old devil, you, get in here. How have you been?”

“I received a message that you wished to see me,” Spock said.

“A message?” McCoy asked.

“It said urgent,” Spock said.

“Urgent?” McCoy repeated and then he realized. “Spock, you’re just now responding to a message I sent nearly two years ago?”

“One year, nine months, and…”

“Would you please come in,” McCoy said.

Spock entered and McCoy closed the door behind him.

“Can I get you something to drink?” McCoy asked.

“Yes. Water would be nice,” Spock said.

McCoy did a double take. “You usually turn my hospitality down. Are you well, Spock?”

“Yes, Doctor, I am quite well,” Spock said. “And though I have treated your generosity in the past as if they were merely social conventions, I do recognize your sincerity in welcoming me to your home. That, and I am thirsty.”

McCoy actually laughed. “You’re developing a sense of humor, after all these years.”

“I see no need to insult me, Doctor,” Spock said.

“Go in and make your self comfortable,” McCoy said. “Would you like something to eat?”

“Simply water for now, thank you,” Spock said.

Spock moved into the living area, inspecting the room. A holographic fire illuminated the fireplace, but gave off no true heat. Above the mantel was the Vulcan lute Spock had given Uhura. He was touching it as McCoy entered.

“She willed it to me,” McCoy said. “With a little note to remember to let more music into my life.”

Spock nodded, drank from the glass McCoy presented him, and then took a seat. He stared at the fake fire, part of him accepting the illusion, even though he could discern that the artificial crackling cycled through a loop, instead of being random noise.

“You and I are pretty much the only ones left,” McCoy said, sitting down. “We never did find out what happened to Scotty.”

“It is logical to suspect that Scotty has passed on,” Spock said.

“Well, there’s always hope,” McCoy said. “But, I bet you didn’t come all this way for a family reunion and gossip.”

“Indeed,” Spock said. “I apologize for not coming sooner, but I have been out of touch, and when I found your message in the queue, its cryptic nature didn’t leave much in the way of explaining your need. Can I assume it was about Uhura?”

“No,” McCoy said. “I wasn’t on earth when she passed. But I suspect, given the time between when I wrote you and you received it, you are not here because of the message I sent.”

“You are becoming more logical as you advance in age,” Spock observed.

“And hanging out with Vulcans hasn’t helped,” McCoy said. Before Spock could respond to the quip, McCoy asked, “So, why are you here?”

Spock removed a PADD from a pocket in his robe, activated it, and handed it to McCoy. McCoy frowned, picked his reading glasses up from the table and examined the information.

“Another Aeneid,” McCoy read the title. “What is this? A lesson in mythology?”

“It is a modern rendition of this ancient story,” Spock said. “It is set in the 23rd century.”

“It’s been a long time since I’ve been in elementary school, Spock. So, why don’t you skip to the point you’re trying to make?”

“The original story, written in Latin, was about an archetype, Aeneas who embodies the ideal Roman ethic, and will establish Rome itself. Another character, Queen Dido, is a woman ahead of her time, and is in love with Aeneas. In order for Rome to come into being, Queen Dido must die. In this adaptation, Captain Kirk is Aeneas, and Edith Keeler is Queen Dido. In order for the Federation to exist, Edith Keeler must die.”

McCoy sat his glasses down, surprised by how much sorrow that statement had evoked in him. To this day, he still regretted not being permitted to save Edith. “Why are you bringing this to me?”

“The story is about our situation. This is what happened to us,” Spock said.

“So?” McCoy said. “It isn’t as if people haven’t read our reports and turned some of those events into dramatizations.”

“Normally I would agree with you, Doctor,” Spock said. “Except for the fact that the person who wrote this has access to a great number of details which are not known to the public. Indeed, some of these details are only known to you and me.”

“What? Are you accusing me of selling our secrets?”

“No,” Spock said. “I am merely trying to understand this mystery. You could not have written this, for it was written in Latin, in classical verse. The person who wrote this is clearly a genius, his subject matter notwithstanding.”

“Perhaps he just got lucky with details through being creative,” McCoy offered.

“I would have agreed with that speculation, had I not read the other stories available from this author,” Spock said. “Everything he has written is available on the Inter Stellar Net, and his last book just made the Federation’s number one list, drawing over one billion downloads.”

“Let me guess, it’s about us?”

“Yes,” Spock said. “It is titled, a Secret Little War.”

McCoy leaned forward, thinking back to his meeting with Admiral K and Cheyon. “It’s about the Kelvan?”

“You have read it?” Spock asked.

“No,” McCoy said, feeling somewhat annoyed by this discovery.

“It is written as fiction, the genre of horror,” Spock said. “And, indeed, if people were aware of just how many facts in this book are accurate, I suspect there would be pandemonium.”

“Facts like what?” McCoy asked.

“Facts like, the real reason behind the Kelvan leaving their home galaxy,” Spock said.

“Because of the radiation spreading throughout their galaxy, making life as they know it impossible,” McCoy said.

“More specifically, the fact that it is not a natural event, but rather a series of event created by a race who chose to commit suicide rather than be enslaved by the Kelvan,” Spock said. “This race created a type of doomsday machine that would travel about causing stars to go nova, consequently spreading the lethal radiation through out their galaxy. The fact the machine was first set off in the center of their galaxy where the stars were more abundant only exasperated the problem to the point where all life forms would be extinguished.”

“Dear god, this is fiction, right?” McCoy asked.

“Based on the number of facts and details that I know to be accurate, I can only speculate as to the nature of this suicidal race and the potential for its accuracy. At this point, I can neither confirm nor deny their existence. It would, however, explain some of the inconsistencies in the story the Kelvans gave us,” Spock said.

“So, we need to go talk to this author,” McCoy said.

“That was my intention. However, I have only been able to ascertain the author’s name. All other relevant information is restricted, which suggests to me that either the author is so reclusive that he has barred the computer from forwarding mail to him, or the computer recognizes the author as a minor, consequently limiting who has access to his personal information,” Spock said.

“Tammias Parkin Arblaster Garcia,” McCoy said.

Spock raised an eyebrow. “You have read his books?”

“No,” McCoy said.

Spock waited patiently for McCoy to explain himself. McCoy asked the computer to play a video file he recently received in the mail. A display beside the Vulcan lute activated. The video was of a young boy pretending to conduct an orchestra, which McCoy found rather humorous. The boy appeared not to be aware that his performance was being recorded. The music was the 1812 Overture and when the kid would stop conducting, the music stopped. During the interludes when the music stopped, the boy seemed to be scolding an offending section or musician. The scolding was silent, for the boy didn’t speak but simply adopted body postures that suggested he was a bit authoritarian in his manner. After he was satisfied with the correction, he would start conducting again and the music returned.

“Tammias Garcia, I presume,” Spock said.

“Yes, his parents sent me this to show me how much he loves music,” McCoy said. “He’s a musical genius, can play just about every instrument, and when he’s not practicing, he enjoys pretending to be a conductor.”

“Doctor,” Spock said. “Your lack of appreciation for the musical arts has blinded you to the fact that he is not pretending. Indeed, he is obviously running a very sophisticated musical simulation that requires a conductor to correct and improve the performance of the individual instruments and various sections. Computer, restart video from the beginning. The untrained ear, such as yours, doesn’t hear that the percussions are out of sync by not quite a fraction of a beat. He catches it three beats into this measure, stops the rehearsal, and corrects the issues by means I am not sure how, yet. Only then does he return to the music.”

“You’re telling me this is not pretend?” McCoy asked.

Spock stood up and approached the monitor. The boy had turned enough to reveal facial features. “Computer, freeze video. Increase magnification.” The image of

Tammas's head revealed a slight kink in the boy's ear. "He is multi-special," Spock observed.

"Biologically speaking, he's one quarter Vulcan, three quarters human," McCoy said. "Mentally, he may be part Kelvan, but it's proven impossible to measure."

"He looks familiar," Spock said.

"He should," McCoy said dryly. He then revealed to Spock the boy's lineage, his medical history, and his plight.

Spock digested all the information without interrupting McCoy and when McCoy finished, he remained silent. "So, what's going through that Vulcan brain of yours?" McCoy asked.

"It is imperative that I meet with Tammas," Spock said.

"Now, just a dog-gone moment, Spock. I didn't arrange for him to have a family just so we could go popping in there every time you and I get the urge play parents," McCoy said. "Not to mention, the risk of blowing his cover."

"I suspect, since he is publishing fiction of such caliber on the Inter Stellar Net, his cover was blown some time ago," Spock said. "None the less, I believe I know why he seems incapable of speech, and if I am right, his mental health is at risk. To confirm my suspicions, I must meet with him, in person. If I am right, this will explain how it is he seems to know so much about our lives."

"A mind meld?" McCoy asked.

"Telepathy, Doctor," Spock said.

"Damn, I'm getting too old. Why didn't I think of this?" McCoy said, coming to the edge of his seat.

"The same reason none of your recommended specialists did not see it," Spock said. "Humans are simply not use to dealing with telepaths. Even when it is right in front of your face, you deny it as magical thinking. No doubt you personally assumed since not all of his Vulcan genes were active, he was not likely to be a telepath."

McCoy actually slouched. "I'm sorry, Spock. I've really made a mess of this."

Spock put a hand on his shoulder. "You are my friend, Doctor, and I find no fault with how this was handled. You were, after all, looking out for his well-being. None the less, we need to ascertain whether or not my suspicions are accurate and address the situation."

"I will be reluctant to relocate Tammas," McCoy said.

"A telepath needs to be raised with fellow telepaths," Spock said. "However, until we ascertain the level of damage, if there is any, we need not worry about what steps must be taken to correct it."

"We'll need an excuse to pay a visit," McCoy said, looking up to his friend.

Spock looked to the boy on the frozen image.

"If I am not mistaken, the High Counsel will be meeting in four weeks," Spock said.

"And we are both honored members," McCoy said. "I could arrange passage for us."

"I believe the USS Fearless is available," Spock said. "If we left tomorrow, we could arrive in time to be a part of the High Counsel session."





The chime to the front door of the Garcia's house was a quiet little tone, easily lost amongst the nebulous sounds of the piano. When it rang the first time, Tammias paused in the Debussy piece he was playing, waited, and then started the musical phrase over again. The door chime rang again and this time he stopped and stared at the door.

Natalia came out of the kitchen and headed towards the door. She seemed a bit cross when she looked at Tammias as she passed through the living room. "You can answer the door, you know," she scolded.

Natalia pushed the button that unlocked the door, a little green light came on, and the door slid open to reveal Admiral McCoy standing on the other side. She immediately fell to hugging and kissing on him, even as he protested, and was so overwhelmed with her emotions that she didn't immediately realize there was another person behind him. She became aware of the other person as he folded the hood back to reveal his face. She stepped back, wiped a tear from her eye, and then nearly fainted as she recognized the stranger. McCoy grabbed her arm as if to support her and when she found her strength returning in abundance, she had to resist her urge to hug McCoy's companion.

"Damn it, Spock, how many times do I have to tell you not to scare people like that," McCoy said.

"I'm sorry, Doctor Garcia. It was not my intention to alarm you," Spock said.

Natalia tried her best to appear serious, as she raised her hand in a traditional Vulcan greeting.

"Ambassador Spock," Natalia said. "It is a great honor to have you here at my home. Would you both please come in? Make yourselves comfortable in the living room."

As they entered, Tammias stood up, staring hard at McCoy with concern. Natalia screamed for Jovet. Jovet came rushing up the stairs, yelling, "what?" with a look of disgust painted on her face that melted the moment she saw McCoy. She rushed to him and hugged him, her arms falling just above the waste.

"Uncle Bones, Uncle Bones..." she cried, all but ignoring Spock.

Natalia, meanwhile, had maneuvered to the table where she had left her PADD and placed a call to Juan. His face appeared just as he was turning to focus on his own monitor. She could see, judging by his face, that he was busy, but she didn't care.

"Hey, honey, can I call you back?" he asked, looking up from his work.

"No!" Natalia answered, with an air of emergency. "I need you home, now. Use the transporter."

"But..." Juan tried.

"Now!" Natalia said, disconnecting the link.

"That really isn't necessary," McCoy began, noticing what she was doing, even as he made himself at home on the couch, Jovet clinging to him like a conjoined twin.

It only took Juan a moment to step into the company transporter alcove, and from there, his trip took the amount of time it would take light to travel up to a relay satellite and bounce back down to his home coordinates. The golden, whispering lights faded leaving Juan a solid lone figure in the small space designated for transport use. He was about to yell what was up when he saw Admiral McCoy sitting on the couch with Jovet, and behind the couch, standing, was Ambassador Spock. Ambassador Spock was petting Darsam who was standing on the back of the couch. Natalia entered the living room with refreshments.

“What took you so long?” she asked Juan under her breath, no hint of humor in her voice, and a scolding look she shot directly to him. She quickly turned a welcoming, warm smile to Spock. “Please, Spock, will you sit down?”

Spock came slowly around the couch, moving as if each step required deliberate thought, or perhaps a blessing, turned, and sat on the edge of the couch. Darsam immediately went to the couch and then to Spock’s lap, where Spock continued to stroke the animal in a rhythmic pattern. Other than the petting of the cat, and an extreme sense of peace emanating from his presence, his strict posture might have indicated an urgency to leave. Jovet found herself in between Spock and McCoy. Though she knew Spock, because he, too, was on the counsel, and had occasionally visited before, she hadn’t established the rapport with him as she had with McCoy. Plus, she heard it was tabu to touch Vulcans without their permission and she was very inclined to honor that, but mostly out of a superstitious belief she had created. She feared that if she touched him he would instantly know all her secrets.

“And this year, at the beach festival, I’m entered in the model rocket contest,” Jovet was saying to McCoy. “I have a great design for a class two rocket. I can show you the plans if you want. Will you be at the festival? Please, please...”

“Honey, Uncle Bones is a busy man,” Juan said.

“I will endeavor to be at the festival this year,” McCoy said.

“Yes!” Jovet said, leaning harder into McCoy.

After Natalia set the refreshments in front of McCoy and Spock, she sat down in a chair near her husband. Tammias pushed himself into the same chair as Natalia, keeping a wary eye on McCoy. The conversation started with the usual inquiries about health and people they mutually knew. McCoy finally directed the conversation to Tammias.

“Oh, he’s doing well,” Natalia said. “We’ve learned to communicate with him through Morse Code. Tammias, why don’t you get your PADD and Code something to Uncle Bones and Ambassador Spock. Or better, play something on the piano for them. He’s proven to be such a musical genius...”

“He’s a trouble maker,” Jovet interrupted. “He keeps figuring out my codes and coming in my room. I don’t have any privacy and he’s always playing loud music, or using up all the bandwidth on the IS-Net.”

“Jovet,” Natalia interrupted her.

“It’s true!” Jovet said. “He’s in this Morse Code club, for the preservation of code and the proliferation of amateur subspace radio, and it just eats up all the bandwidth.”

“Jovet,” Natalia said, her voice a little quieter. Jovet frowned, but otherwise fell silent.

“Are Tammias’s dietary supplements working out?” McCoy asked.

“Yeah,” Natalia said, running her hand through Tammias’s hair. “But I’ve had to add a few things. I’m giving him some anti-depressant herbs, to counteract his tendency towards obsessive-compulsive disorder, and some synthetic proteins. The herbs don’t seem to be doing anything, though. The synthetic proteins are because we just can’t get him to eat any fresh meats. Once we had some range chickens and after Juan butchered one for dinner, Tammias relocated the remaining chickens to his secret cave hideout.”

While this conversation was going on, Spock had been observing Tammias. Though McCoy had told Spock that the boy was, biologically speaking, Spock’s great

grandson, due to the Kelvan's stealing his genetic code and using it to their own ends, the possibility that Tammias had acquired any latent telepathic abilities were slim, considering Spock wasn't a full telepath. Spock watched as the boy tried desperately to get some answers from Natalia, but she wasn't hearing him. He would push his hand against her chin, and she would gently redirect it. She finally held both of his hands still. Tammias tried to sit closer to her. He was all but shouting and Spock knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Tammias was indeed a telepath. He could hear Tammias just as plain as he could hear the conversation between Natalia and McCoy.

Tammias's pleas went, "Mom, he hasn't come to take me away again, has he? I don't want to leave here. Mom? Listen to me! I'm going to build a rocket, too, Jovet. Have you forgotten? I don't want to play the Morse Code game. Juan, why are they here? It's no secret, Jovet. You told me your pass code. Star wants to be in on the conversation, do you want me to open the comm. system?" In between his attempts to get through to his family, fragments of music would leak through his thoughts. One particular musical phrase kept repeating and he would talk back to it, saying, "Not now," or, "Please, I'm trying to talk," and then after a moment he would be aware that he was mentally humming it again, and cry, "Ahh, I hate that tune!" and would then focus on another melody until the old one was replaced. "The Laughing Vulcan and his Dog," was the tune he was trying to suppress and he hated it even more than "The Old Grey Mare."

Spock decided to transmit a thought. "Tammias, can you hear me?"

"Yes, I can hear you," Tammias answered. "What, do you think I'm deaf?"

"I am glad you can hear me. My name is Spock," Spock informed him.

Tammias's eyes broke away from McCoy's face and locked onto Spock's eyes. He froze. He squeezed Natalia's hand so hard that she made a noise.

"Tammias, please. We have guest. Now, stop that," Natalia warned him.

Jovet stuck her tongue out at him.

"Do not be alarmed," Spock told Tammias.

"You are not going to demand I play the Morse Code game to speak with you?" Tammias asked.

"We do not require that game to communicate," Spock said.

"This is much easier," Tammias said. "Even easier than the spelling game, or the hand sign games. I especially hate the hand sign game. They look so angry when they gesture. It's very loud."

"Why do you think the others require the games to communicate?" Spock asked.

"Because they are very strict. I think it is necessary for them to be strict because I am not their biological son," Tammias explained. "You know, like in the fairy tale where the orphans are always required to perform menial tasks. It is for my own good."

"I believe there is another explanation," Spock said.

"I thought maybe they were deaf, but they hear and talk to Jovet," Tammias said. "It is right that they do this. Jovet is Natalia's child and she has to respond to her. I am not her child, so I must work. That is the way of the universe."

"There is still another possibility," Spock said.

"I am not stupid," Tammias said. "There are rules to all games. I understand. I am not angry with them."

"I can speak with you" Spock pointed out.

“You have chosen not to play their game,” Tammias said. “Perhaps because you are an alien. I’ve met aliens before and they play different games.”

“Damn it, Spock,” McCoy said. “Are you going to just sit there like a lump on a log, or are you going to be sociable and speak with us?”

“If you weren’t so human, Doctor, perhaps you would have noticed I was having a conversation with Tammias,” Spock said.

This announcement got everyone’s attention. Only Jovet seemed to care enough to explain to Spock certain obvious facts. “Spock, Tammias could not be conversing with you because he is a mute. Dumb as a paper weight.”

McCoy leaned forward. “Spock? Is he...”

“He is telepathic,” Spock confirmed. “And, he has been speaking to everyone here, only, because none here are telepathic, the conversation is a bit one sided. Further, he has built some psychological defenses, myth making if you prefer, to explain the disparity between what he observes as normal communication and the way he has been trying to engage in communication.”

“I should have realized your genes would mess him up!” McCoy jabbed, to which Spock raised an eyebrow of surprise. “With all the mind melds you’ve done on me, and forcing your katra on me, I would think I would be able to hear him if he were telepathic.”

“Obviously not, because he has a telepathic bond with you and you are as deaf to him as you are to me,” Spock said. “Fortunately for him, the number of people he has come into contact with are few. It would appear that the telepathic bonds he has established are only to people who have come into physical contact with him. This also, no doubt, explains his ability to read and play music at such an early age. He’s gained a number of cognitive skills vicariously.”

“I imagine it has more to do with that experiment they did,” McCoy said.

“I have no doubt that the experiment has influenced him,” Spock said. “I can sense the Kelvan...”

“Spock!” McCoy interrupted him, not wanting anyone in this group to know Tammias was a Kelvan descendant.

“Ambassador Spock,” Natalia interrupted. “Please, I am still trying to catch up. If I understand you right, Tammias is expecting us to answer him telepathically?”

“Yes,” Spock said. “But you can not because you are not telepathic.”

“That explains how he always seems to show up right before we call for him,” Juan said. “And how he keeps figuring out Jovet’s computer passwords.”

“God, I’m never going to have any privacy around here!” Jovet sulked.

“You said fortunately he has not come into physical contact with many people,” Natalia said. “What would be wrong with that?”

“He is a child. His self perception and personal boundaries get lost in the perceptions of others,” Spock explained. “The more people he is bonded with, the more likely he will be to lose himself in the thoughts and feelings of others. I find it amazing that he is still capable of using pronouns, such as I or Me. I expect his obsessive-compulsive tendencies are psychological defenses and will go away when he has learned appropriate boundaries. For his continued growth and well being, I believe it will be necessary for him to move to Vulcan and have rigorous mental training.”

“Now, just a damn minute, Spock,” McCoy said.

“It’s okay, Uncle,” Natalia said. “If this is what Tammas needs for his health, then we will move to Vulcan.”

Juan’s eyes went wide and Jovet’s jaw dropped.

“I’m not moving to no hell hole,” Jovet said, matter of factly.

“Jovet!” Juan and Natalia said at the same time, though for Juan he was just trying to cover his own surprise at the notion he may have to move to “that hell hole.”

“No disrespect, Spock,” Jovet quickly added.

“None taken,” Spock said. “For this to work, none of you could go with Tammas. It will be necessary that he travel there without you in order to break the telepathic bonds he has established. Your remaining here is the only way to facilitate his own individuality. Seeing you, being around you, even breathing the same air that you breathe would be counterproductive.”

“Spock,” McCoy said.

“I can’t believe you would ask me to abandon him!” Natalia said. “What harm could come from me hugging him, or sharing our air...”

“Your body is continually replacing atoms,” Spock said. “And with every breath out, you exhale ten to the power of eight atoms. These molecules, like hormones, and the atoms themselves, still carry with them your essence. Tammas breathes them in, and his body recognizes you, and keeps himself acclimated. I know you do not often think in these terms, but if you think about it, for the last fifteen to twenty minutes, we have all intimately been sharing ourselves, and not just are thoughts and words, but bits of our hearts, lungs, and neural chemical messengers...”

“Eewww,” Jovet grimaced

“Spock, swallow your metaphysical philosophies! We are not sending Tammas to Vulcan,” McCoy said.

“It is more than a philosophy, Doctor. It is science, and it can be verified,” Spock said.

“You can verify this, too,” McCoy argued. “He’s not going to Vulcan. He’s staying here with the family he’s bonded with.”

Spock was quiet for a moment, as was everyone. Only he heard Tammas saying, “Please, I don’t want to go. Natalia. Mom! Please, don’t make me go. I will do whatever you say. I’ll even eat meat, if you don’t kill and clean the fish in front of me. It hurts. It hurts so much, but I will do it if you just don’t force me to leave you...”

“He will need to be trained in mental exercises,” Spock said.

“Then hire someone. Get him a telepathic counselor, if that’s what he needs,” McCoy said. “But I am adamant about not breaking up this family.”

“If it were up to me, Spock, you could have him,” Jovet said.

“I’ll even eat the chicken...” Tammas was pleading. “Please don’t send me away...”

“One other thing,” Spock said. “I highly recommend that you not kill any thing in his presence until he has become disciplined in separating the feelings of other living creatures from himself. The recent fish cleaning, chicken slaughter, and the lobster boiling has left visible trauma on his nervous system.”

Natalia burst into tears and pulled Tammas into a hug. She had had no idea that Tammas might actually be feeling what the animals had felt. She had simply thought he was too young and full of normal childhood empathy.

“We had no idea,” Juan said, feeling equally remorseful that he had unwittingly tortured his son.

“It’s not your fault,” McCoy assured him. “It’s mine. I should have checked for this possibility.”

“It is not too late to assist Tammias,” Spock said. “His mind feels strong and resilient.”

“He is still more human than Vulcan. I insist that we find a way for him to grow in a human fashion,” McCoy said. “Perhaps a Betazed counselor can help him establish appropriate boundaries?”

“Perhaps,” Spock said. “I think it best that I return to our hotel for now. Since you are insistent on raising this child in a human fashion, any prolonged exposure of Tammias to my presence risks undue influence over his mental processes and could be counter productive to that ends.”

“Is this why you came? To check on him?” Juan asked.

“We came for the festival,” McCoy said. “And, yes, to check on him. You are aware that Tammias has made a name for himself in the fiction market?”

“What, you mean his pen pals?” Natalia asked.

“No,” McCoy said. “I mean his stories.”

“We know he has his own web site on the IS-Net, but you’re saying he’s published fiction?” Juan said.

“He has created an entire line of fiction which is becoming increasingly popular,” McCoy said.

“It is a mythical world that rivals the Chronicles of Narnia written by C.S. Lewis, of old Earth,” Spock said. “But his most recent writings are drawing the most attention.”

“Don’t worry,” McCoy said. “No one knows his true identity, since he was given the name Tammias. We were just concerned and wanted to visit. For now, Spock and I will retire, and do some research on where we go from here. We have some connections, you know.”

“We’ll do whatever we have to,” Natalia said.

Jovet gave Tammias an icy look and thought as loudly as she could without actually vocalizing it. “So, you can hear my thoughts, rat boy? I hope you die.”

## CHAPTER FOUR

Tammas was a little unnerved by McCoy's visit. He knew that McCoy, and the one they called Spock, would soon be taking him away, even though McCoy was quite adamant about not doing so. Tammas told Star he was too busy to chat and so the dolphin eventually swam away, leaving Tammas at his desk keying one particular Morse code phrase over and over, SOS, but without transmitting it. He had to figure out a way to prove to Spock and McCoy that he was normal, and that they didn't have to do anything special for him. He also knew that he had a time limit to accomplish this feat. After the upcoming festival, a decision would be made about what to do with him.

"The festival," he thought. "I have to win the rocket contest! That will show them I'm normal."

Tammas considered his entry for the rocket contest. It was a simple one-stage booster, simulating the earliest design that might have put a satellite in a temporary orbit. It was so simple it wasn't likely to get anyone's attention. He downloaded the specs of the other classes available to him, chose a more sophisticated entry, and sent the specs to the house replicator. He had to leave his room to go fetch the new stuff, the closest replicator being in the hall. He could hear the Garcia's conversation in the kitchen as they cleaned up, discussing their day, how good Spock looked, health wise. He paused long enough to hear Mr. Garcia comment, "Hey, do you hear that?"

"Hear what?" Natalia asked.

"No music... Umm, I wonder what he's up to?" Juan said.

"Ah, let him be," Natalia said. "He's been quiet ever since McCoy came. He's probably worried McCoy came to take him somewhere new."

Indeed, he was worried about that. Sitting in the replicator was a finished model of the rocket he had requested, along with the pieces he would need to construct one of his own. He retrieved the kit and returned to his room to examine it more closely. This was a small re-entry vehicle, a capsule, which connected to the top of a two-stage rocket. The first stage was re-usable, but the second stage would actually burn up in re-entry. Of course, the model itself wouldn't go into orbit...

"Isn't it a bit late to be changing your entry?" Jovet asked, staring icily at him from his open doorway.

Tammas glanced up. The window made a nice mirror with the dark oceans beyond it. His sister's reflection was warped to fit the bubble. He turned his attention back to the rocket in hand.

"You realize if you go with that design, it has to be capable of supporting life for the duration of the flight," Jovet said. "You'll have to put your rat in it."

Without turning around, Tammas tapped out a response that was translated by his computer: "It's a hamster."

"It's a rat, but either way, it'll be dead before it even reaches space. The g-forces will crush it like a mouse in a trap," Jovet said, slapping her hands together for emphasis. "Hope you give that rat of yours a nice farewell dinner."

Jovet skipped off to her room, pleased to have tormented him so easily. Animals were his weak spot. She was certain this time she had managed to get the better of him. She suspected he would either return to his first rocket entry, or give up, and consequently wouldn't be able to up stage her performance at the contest, no pun

intended. She had every intentions of winning so that Uncle Bones would be proud of her and maybe her parents would start showing her a little more attention.

Tammas listened to the rules for this class of entry, the Morse translation filling his ear piece he wore when at his desk. In his mind he saw the requirements for the life support equipment. Indeed, Jovet was right that any capsule capable of supporting life would have to hold up during flight and return an occupant back to the world in good health. He was so alarmed by the thought of turning his hamster into a guinea pig that it didn't register on him that the "hamster" in this case was simply a sensor in the capsule that provided telemetry of the condition inside the capsule. He even re-read the rule a second time and still missed the portion about the simulated passenger because his mind was so clouded on how to make his capsule safe for his hamster. The more he study the rocket design, he was confident he could make it safe, but the bigger dilemma became the moral issue of whether it was right to experiment on animals. Nothing in his mind warranted this experiment and he began to wonder about the morality of the adults who would create a contest of this nature. How could adults sanction this kind of game simply to teach children the basics of physics? How could he participate in the game and still remain true to his feelings?

As Tammas reread the rules to the contest, a slight smile fell across his face when he discovered a loophole that should work in his favor. He called up the blue prints for his class of entry and began making the necessary modifications.

The next day, he quickly dressed and hurried outside without eating breakfast. Juan had left for work early, as usual, and Tammas now had a good morning's hike in order to meet Juan before his lunch break. Star chatted at him, but he signed for "later." Star didn't take the brush off so easy this time and so Tammas stopped and removed his head set from his backpack. One cushioned speaker rested over his right ear, giving him Star's response in Morse

"What?" Tammas spelled out with Morse. No one would have heard the impatience in the rhythm of his code.

"We should play," Star said. "Come swimming."

"I'm busy."

"Are you going to the cave? Can I come?" Star asked. "You have rigged the headset so I can see what you see, right? You promised to show me the cave."

"I'm not going to the cave, but I guess we can test the headset out now," Tammas keyed the Morse into his hand held computer, turning on the ultrasound on his headset. It would now map out the world directly in front of him, and relay the information back to the underwater computer terminal that Star used. "Alright, go to your computer and tell me if you can see. If not, you will just have to settle for talking to me as I walk. I have to go now."

Tammas started his hike at a run, hoping to make up as much time as he could for over sleeping. It took Star a moment to get to her terminal, but she got there and found the system working as they had anticipated. To her it was if she were swimming over the land, seeing the world as the land animals and humans saw it. Her only regret was that she could not control the direction Tammas was moving. Several times she asked Tammas to slow down to observe some odd flower, or examine a bug or an animal, or an air car passing over head, but he was too intent on getting to the Industrial Replicator ware house.



“I promise we’ll do this again someday, but first, let me take care of this matter. Now, try not to distract me while I’m in here,” Tammias coded to Star.

The guard at the front gate knew Tammias and passed him through and from there Tammias quickly made his way up to Juan’s office. The secretary winked at him as he came around, announcing him over the intercom. Her desk was just a table top, seemingly floating in thin air which gave him a nice view of her legs, even without looking through the transparent table top. He observed that she had kicked off her shoes and that the measure of her skirt was much shorter than anything Doctor Garcia ever wore.

“Who is this? Let me see her face? Are you going to introduce me?” was the voice in Tammias’s ear.

“Tammias? What are you doing here?” Juan said from the door to his office.

“Umm, Star wanted to see where you worked,” Tammias coded quickly, hoping Juan hadn’t noticed he had been fixated on his secretary’s legs. Why he had been thinking about it was beyond him, but he had been stuck for what seemed an uncomfortable time, and he was glad for Juan’s voice giving him new focus. He felt like his mind had just suddenly froze, like the computer occasionally does when he has it performing too many tasks at one time.

“Bye, Tammias,” the secretary said, winking at him.

Tammias didn’t meet her eyes. He just hurried into the office, “thinking out of sight out of mind.” Besides, he had enough to worry about with McCoy and Spock than a new source of Obsessive Compulsive behavior.

“Oh, so your little invention is working?” Juan asked about the headset.

“Yes,” Tammias said. “Star can hear you and see you. It’s limited to three dimensional objects, so she can’t see the pictures hanging from your walls, or read the titles on the books on the shelves, but she can count the objects.”

“Hello, Star,” Juan said, waving. “This is my office and where I do most of the electronic paper pushing. I prefer to be on the floor, supervising the dispersal of materials, but I have really good foremen and I’m rarely needed. Tell you what, Tammias, if you’ll wait here while I go check on this last order, then you and I can go get lunch and then I’ll take you home.”

“Okay,” Tammias coded. “Meanwhile, may I access your computer? I have decided to enter a different class for the rocket contest.”

“I’m so glad you have committed to participating this year. It’s nice to see you spreading some of your attention to other activities. Go ahead and sit at my desk, and I’ll be right back,” Juan said, stepping out of the office.

Tammias worked fast. The only hard part was covering his tracks. Even knowing Juan’s access codes didn’t assure that what he planned to do would work. A one tenth scale model appeared on the desk, along with the required number of pieces he would have to have to assemble on his own. At the same time, pieces to construct a full-scale rocket were replicated and transported directly to his off site location, the Cave Fortress. The amount of energy it took to create the materials and the tools necessary to manipulate the materials, plus the transport, would certainly have raised a few eyebrows, except for the fact that Tammias was able to quickly delete the records from the day’s cue. He now only had to explain the loss of energy and why the day’s schedule was interrupted for this project that was no longer on anyone’s manifest. The time was easy. He simply told the

computer to record the missing time as an unscheduled self-diagnostic procedure. The missing energy he decided was best handled by dividing that number and distributing to all the other manufacture items already on cue. He figured his production request was so miniscule that no one would actually notice the missing energy ambiguously added to all the other energy usage for this mornings work. He did all this while coding to Star, explaining some of what he was doing.

He felt fortunate that Star was unable to “see” the happenings on the computer screen, because a part of him felt bad for the subterfuge, otherwise he wouldn’t have worried that she might have alerted the Garcia’s to his intentions. He was finished in no time. Juan returned to find Tammias spinning around in his office chair, probably trying to make Star dizzy.

“Sorry that took so long,” Juan said, examining the model on his desk. “Wow. You really don’t do anything small, do you? Every one will be quite impressed when you get this little thing to fly.”

“I hope so,” he coded. “I hope so.”

The next four or five days he spent most of his time at the Cave Fortress. McCoy was concerned by Tam’s continued absence because this seemed abnormal behavior from everything the Garcia’s had told him about Tam. Juan explained about the fort and that Tammias sometimes went there to escape and play music in private, which also gave them a break when they were “musicked” out. In the conversation the missing rations came up and how Juan had discovered that Tammias had known about the Cave Fortress.

“Perhaps he’s afraid I have come to take him away again,” McCoy said. “After all, the first time he met me, I took him away from Guinan to bring to you.”

“I’m sure you’re over reacting,” Juan said. “As brilliant as he is, he is still just a kid. I think it’s healthy that he goes and explores nature.”

Tammias had been aware of the conversation. There was always a strong attraction for him to return to the Garcia home when they were discussing him, but it was not the urgent calling that came when they were calling him for dinner or wanting him to come clean up for bed time. He focused on his work. It was difficult sometimes to focus, especially when Juan and Natalia were together, for their amorous affection towards each other was always overwhelming. Often the only escape he had from that was his music and the privacy of the Cave Fortress. He started a full orchestra in his head as he began connecting pieces of his rocket.

The hardest thing Tammias had to do was learn how to operate the anti-gravity forklift. Once he had all the pieces in place, and bolted together, hooking up the wires, cables, and mechanical links were easy, though time consuming. He began to become concern as the deadline approached for fear he might not complete all the required tasks. He had to forgo painting the ship, for one. He forgave himself this, for there simply wasn’t the time. The contest was more about functionality than aesthetics. The night before the contest he was still tightening bolts down with the torque wrench. Afterwards, he sat back in his launch chair, exhausted, looking at his tiny view of sky at the end of the tunnel. He could tell Natalia and Juan were getting anxious for his return and so he would have to hurry home before they came up to get him and possibly spoiled his surprise. He would have to forgo the pre-flight computer tests. He convinced himself, on his walk back home, that computers were so state of the art that the likelihood of a failure

was miniscule. But even if he was wrong, it was at least a risk that his poor hamster wouldn't have to face.

Back at home, Juan had him wash his hands and report to the dinner table. Natalia remarked on the grease on his forehead and hands, asking him what he had gotten into, but she didn't pursue any definitive answers as she continued to prepare a meal for the family. Tammas had found that many questions were like this. "How are you?" was a great example. It was simply a way of greeting people, as opposed to truly identifying the feelings and condition of the person. He had noticed people saying, "How are you today?" without even slowing their pace so as to receive an answer.

Juan asked how his rocket was coming along, so Tammas produced the miniature model rocket for inspection. He really didn't feel like Morse code.

"Wow, is that what you've been working on all this time?" Juan asked. "Natalia, come look at this."

"Mine looks better," Jovet said.

"Yours looks great, honey," Natalia said, kissing her daughter on the forehead as she placed food in front of her. "I'm sure you will both do very well."

Jovet looked at Tammas and thought really hard, "Hardly big enough for a hamster. I got you beat."

Tam's smile unnerved her, with a little twinkle in his eyes as if he had something grand coming, and she sulked through the rest of the meal. After dinner, Juan read to them from classic literature. When Tam closed his eyes, he could almost hear the voice of his mother, long since past, as she read books and listened to music. Juan finished "The Raven" and suggested they get to bed as the morning's festivities would soon be upon them.

The next morning Tammas told Natalia he had left his headset at the cave fortress, and he needed to go get it so that Star could witness the rocket contest from his perspective. Natalia told him to hurry so they could leave together, but he suggested they go on with out him and he would meet them at the beach.

"Are you sure? We don't mind waiting," Natalia asked.

"Oh, mom, let the freakazoid catch up on his own. You're volunteering at the clam bake and I want to get my rocket entered first thing," Jovet said.

"Stop calling him names," Natalia told her. "Okay, Tammas. Just be sure to get there in time to enter the contest."

"No problem," he coded to her, and took off at a run.

The festival was spread out along Loral Beach with small tents erected for various entertainment activities and various foods to sample. Small sailboats were racing for the buoy, accompanied by dolphins. As soon as the Garcia air car settled on the dune overlooking the beach, Jovet was out and racing towards the rocket tent to register for this morning competition. The grass was sparse at the top of the hill, but still one blade of rough weed managed to catch her sandal and she had to stop to remove it, and scratch her foot. Natalia gathered her items for the clambake and headed down for her campsite, watching her daughter run and following the footprints her daughter had left. Juan came up the hill and greeted her with a kiss.

"Need some help?" Juan asked.

"No, thanks. I got it," she said.

"Jovet seems pretty excited," Juan said, walking back with her.

“Yes,” Natalia agreed. “She should do well.”

“Where’s Tammas?” Juan asked. “He didn’t cancel, did he?”

“No,” Natalia said. “He should be along directly.”

“Alright, well, I should get back to the tent. I’m coordinating launches,” Juan said. “First one will go up in about ten minutes.”

“I’ll be watching from our campsite,” she said. “I see you got the fire going. Thank you.”

“It’s what I’m here for,” he said, kissing her once more and heading back to his task.

Juan made it back to the rocket tent, where a number of judges were already sitting. They had portable computers so as to better monitor the flight of the rockets and to record the event. The launch site was an area of the beach roped off and there was a young man inside the ropes finishing up his preparations for the first launch. Jovet was at the registration table. Juan touched her on the head as he passed her. She looked up at him and smiled. Juan walked down to the boy and examined the rocket, visually confirming everything was legal, even though the judges would have already done such a confirmation electronically.

“Mr. Garcia,” the boy said, greeting Juan.

“Alex,” Juan said. “Looks like you might have a blue ribbon coming to you.”

“We’ll see. I changed the formula for the solid fuel and modified the satellite release mechanism. Hopefully everything will deploy appropriately. I’d just be happy if I could recover all my stuff this year.”

“I hear you,” Juan said. “Shall we get the games started?”

“Starting the one minute count down,” Alex said, following Juan back to the ropes. Using his PADD he began initializing computer systems as if this were a real honest to god launch.

“We have forty two seconds to launch,” Juan relayed into his headset.

“All systems green,” Alex said, watching the information on his PADD.

The audience had begun to build, prior to the first launch, with people setting up campsites. Campsite sometimes meant folding chairs, but was most often blankets, and always coolers, towels, and sunscreen. Now with the first launch imminent, a crowd was gathering at the ropes, mostly kids, for they liked the thrill of a rocket up close and personal. Alex’s father was there, holding his recorder up to catch everything. For Alex, one minute was beginning to feel like a lifetime, as he felt the excitement in his stomach and throat. Juan counted down the last ten seconds, with him and at “one” Alex pushed a button on his PADD. The rocket left the ground with a hiss, leaving a trail of smoke as it disappeared to a point in the sky. People applauded, thinking that was the best part of the show. Only those with hand held computers would notice that the stages hadn’t separated, and the satellite had failed to deploy.

Alex sighed, figuring it was all over but the crying. “Well, at least I’ll get it back in one piece,” he said.

Then came the sound of an explosion, as if a bottle rocket had just gone off, and people looked up to see a small globular cloud, the remains of the rocket. The audience let out a collective sigh. Alex just hung his head and turned to walk away.

Juan put a hand on Alex’s head. “It was a good show.”

“And a predictor for how the rest of the events will go,” Alex said. “The first shot is supposed to be flawless.”

“Ah, don’t buy into that superstition,” Juan said. “These things happen, and I assure you, if any others blow up, it won’t be because you jinxed everyone.”

“Yeah,” Alex said, walking away. He walked by the next kid taking his rocket out to the launch pad, who said “tough luck,” and then by a whole group of contestants. Jovet said as he passed, “Thanks for the jinx.”

Five more launches went up, none of which got a perfect score. Three went astray of their intended flight path, one of which went wild before blowing up in a brilliant display of flames and sparks. This caused a time out in the launching as the judges re-examined the fuel chosen for that rocket. A blow up was not necessarily an automatic elimination, especially if the child learned from the event. Points for learning could be carried over to next year’s event, provided the contestant entered the same event and could demonstrate how he overcame the flaw. In this case, it turned out the kid had used an illegal formula for fuel and would be disqualified.

Juan turned to listen in on an argument between Jovet and one of the judges.

“I’m next,” she insisted.

“I’m sorry, we accepted this entry before yours,” the judge said.

“But he’s not here and setting up, so he’s forfeit,” Jovet said.

“He still has time,” the judge said.

“I can’t believe this,” Jovet pouted.

“What’s going on, Lonny?” Juan asked.

“Tammias registered his entry via code,” the judge said. “I accepted it.”

“He has to register in person,” Jovet argued. “It’s not fair.”

“There are no rules that the registry has to be in person,” the judge corrected. “It only states that all his files and telemetry broadcast frequencies be registered before nine a.m.”

While they were discussing this, McCoy walked up to the tent to harass one of the judges. “So, Spock, it looks like they got you to volunteer after all.”

“I am most qualified to judge a science contest,” Spock said.

“Well, rocket science is certainly not like it use to be,” McCoy said.

“On the contrary,” Spock said. “Physics and the technical aspects of rocketry has not changed.”

“I’m not talking about rocket science, Spock, I’m talking about life in general,” McCoy said. “When I was young, we simply launched rockets. We didn’t have all these computer tech toys to grade and record the events. We just went out and shot rockets. Spock, are you listening to me?”

“Just a moment,” Spock said. Spock activated a comm. signal to Juan. “Juan, I’m receiving telemetry readings from the next contestant. He has started his one minute count down.”

Juan looked over to the area roped off for launching and saw the area was clear. He activated his comm. badge. “Um, Spock, how can that be?” Juan asked. “The launch area is clear.”

Lonny confirmed what all the judges were seeing. “I’m getting the same thing. He must be launching from a remote location.”

“This is odd,” Juan said, heading towards the primary judges tent. “Is this telemetry two ways? Someone patch me through to Tammass.”

“What is this?” McCoy asked, pointing to Spock’s screen.

“Telemetry...”

“I know that, but this looks like blood pressure and heart rate information,” McCoy pointed out. “I thought this was supposed to be a simulated hamster. That looks like human biometrics and it doesn’t appear to be simulated.”

“Indeed,” Spock said, noticing Juan coming up behind him, followed by Jovet. “I recommend we abort this launch.”

“Tammass, if you can hear me, abort! Do you hear me? Abort the launch,” Juan said.

“What’s going on?” Jovet asked, but no one heard her.

Of the last ten seconds, Juan would recall Spock trying to pin point where the telemetry was being sent from, listening to Lonny as he counted down the time remaining to launch, all the while he continued to repeat his message to abort. Juan felt imminent doom and he would later remember feeling suddenly disconnected, as if watching the event from outside himself. In all of his years of Star Fleet, he couldn’t remember ever feeling such strong anxiety. He saw Spock tapping his communicator and initiating contact with the Fearless, the Starship that had brought him and McCoy on official Star Fleet business. There was thunder from behind them and Juan turned in time to see a rocket accelerating into the sky trailing a great mass of smoke flames. The rocket broke the sound barrier directly overhead of the judge’s tent, breaking glass. At the same moment, a pressure wave from all the exhaust in the ravine swept over the hill and knocked over tents and stirred up a cloud of sand. The smell of exhaust and the chemical residue in the rocket propellant triggered allergic reactions in some of the people at the launch site, including two asthma attacks, but mostly just watery eyes.

“Holy crap,” Jovet said, falling back on her bum.

“Spock, his heart rate and blood pressure are abnormally high,” McCoy said, holding on to the table as the tent ripped away over top his head, a rope and pole just barely missing him.

“The Fearless is unable to get a transporter lock,” Spock stated, his voice raised to compensate for the sound of the wind.

“What do you mean they can’t get a lock?!” McCoy demanded. “My god, man. Can’t you do anything?”

“Not at this juncture,” Spock said, his voice loud by the sudden hard silence as the rocket’s thunder diminished. “Juan, can you come over here?”

Juan hurried over.

“The Fearless is sending a shuttle to intercept the rocket,” Spock said. “I’m afraid it will not reach it before the rocket attains orbit.”

“Beam him out of there,” Juan demanded.

“The Fearless was unable to achieve a transporter lock,” Spock explained. “They have scanned his capsule and suggest this is the result of an incorrect installation of a hull integrity field.”

“Damn it, Spock, with all this computer gadgetry, can’t you turn the hull integrity field off from here?” McCoy said.

“Possibly, but in doing so, I could deactivate his life support system, or cause another critical system to fail,” Spock said. “He was quite thorough in following the instructions, but it appears he cut corners and made modifications in order to be ready for today’s launch.”

“What can we do?” Juan pleaded.

“We can hope he was as thorough in the construction of his ship as he has been with the planning and execution of this event,” Spock said. “I believe he is capable of hearing you. Continue in your attempt to communicate with him.”

“What should I say?” Juan asked.

“Keep him calm, for starters,” Spock said. “He’s coming up on a critical stage separation. He’s got twenty seconds to release it. If it doesn’t happen, he will not achieve orbit and he will begin tumble. In any event, if the second stage starts to burn before the first stage is released, he will not survive.”

♪♪▶

Before the launch, as Tammias watched the numbers decrease on his count down clock, the thought never occurred to him that he might have forgotten something. Things were as good as they would ever be, and so, ready or not, he was going. The ship’s interior lights all came up and the hatch secured with a suction noise one might associate with opening a fresh jar of jam. His harness was a bit loose, for he was unable to tighten it any further. After going through his checklist, which showed green on life support, hull integrity, inertial dampeners, and avionics, he triggered his one-minute countdown and started broadcasting telemetry. He reclined in his seat and looked out the window. He could see out the mouth of the cave to the other side of the ravine. To his right was a series of switches. He raised the switch guard for the first in the series and clicked on the switch that would warm the element that would eventually light the solid fuel and start his acceleration. The rocket currently rested on a cradle with wheels. The wheels rested on rails that led out of the cave and then angled skywards. He had calculated that the cradle slash train assembly would simply fall free at the end of the track, but for the first time he started wondering what would happen if that failed.

He heard a voice in his head. It was Juan, telling him to abort. It was the same voice over the comm. panel, but it felt more passionate in his head.

Tammias thought about it. If he quit now, McCoy was sure to take him away and he would never see Star, Natalia, Juan, or Jovet again. Or his hamster. He remembered what Jovet had said. More than the threat of being taken by McCoy was his resolution not to bring harm or risk of harm to another animal that he was not also inclined to share. He saw the timer, and in his head he imagined a scene of what his life would be like if he aborted. In that scene Spock was telling him he would not have survived had he proceeded with the launch.

On the ten count he opened up the switch guard to the firing mechanism. His anxiousness fell away with his firm resolve to prove Spock wrong. He almost felt like he was a different person, or that he was floating outside his body looking down at someone else. Five. He thought of Guinan. Four. He remembered McCoy had been nice to him. Three. There was something mysteriously compelling about the Vulcan. Two. He was pretty sure he hated Jovet. One. “Never more.” Click.

There was no undoing that click. Once a solid rocket fuel canister is ignited, it burns until the fuel is spent. Tammias Parkin Arblaster-Garcia became aware of several

issues almost immediately. Three, to be precise. The first was that his rate of departure, due to the confined space of the cave, was accelerated, causing his ship to burst out of the mouth of the cave like a cannon ball from a cannon. The rails that once angled up and out of the cave were forced down, skewing his take off trajectory. The whole cavern filled with flames that briefly engulfed the entire ship, until it burst free into the light, trailing flame and smoke behind him, leaving nothing but blue skies ahead. It happened so fast that he didn't even feel the train fall away. The second thing he became aware of was that his inertial dampeners were not functioning. He was pinned back against his seat, struggling to stay conscious. With that struggle, he lost the ability to concentrate and focus on any one thing. The third thing, he was scared.

The cave fortress was no more, collapsing just moments after the rocket had left. The collapse had caused the two rails to fall and the rocket came free of the cradle prematurely, and, credit to Tammias in his ability to follow instructions, the auto gyros and avionics brought the rocket to an upright position just in time to avoid a collision with the other side of the ravine. Only graphic recreations would show just how close he had come to wiping out.

The rocket thundered into the sky, the capsule shaking and rattling fiercely. Tammias found it hard to breathe. A few clouds appeared, but they seem to drop away as if they were falling at supersonic speeds, as opposed to him being propelled in the opposite direction. As the nice blue tent to the sky became darker, the rattling eased a bit. He heard a voice. He thought it might be Juan, but he wasn't sure. His breathing came easier. Moisture froze to the edges of his windows. There was a red light blinking on the console.

Tammias thought the ice crystals on the edge of his window were the most fascinating thing, even more compelling than the view beyond revealing the curvature of the world and the shades of blue that was the atmosphere and that tinge of black that was space with one star. Seeing the ice crystal formation caused him to feel irritated by the distracting, blinking, red light. It's reflection in the view port made it hard to focus on the crystal pattern spread out around the seal of the window. The red light's significance escaped him, so he thought about the ice. Was there moisture on his ship before leaving the cave, or was his window leaking precious air, or was it bits of cloud that had followed him?

"Tammias, the automation is malfunctioning. You must release the first stage manually," Juan whispered in his ears.

He understood the voice, but even so he relied on the Morse code. His mind automatically translated the Morse code accompanying the voice over his headset, but he was having too much trouble to even attempt to tap out a response.

"How did you get up here?" Tammias asked. No one answered, but he was used to that. No one ever answered him unless he played the Morse game and he didn't feel like playing the Morse game. It would take too much effort to reach for his PADD

The first stage burnt out and Tammias flew forwards to the end of his seat restraints. And then there was the feeling of falling and he grabbed at the console. He accidentally hit the stage release. On doing so, the second stage lit up, and he was again slammed hard back into his seat. The sky melted away and he was in the black of space, the sun shining brilliantly. The star he thought he had seen earlier proved to be a starship. The sun light was reflecting off the ship, making it look like the model on his



shelf held out at arms length away from his face. He wanted to reach up and grab the saucer section with his hand. It was the Fearless.

Also in the sky with him was the spaceship Yonada. It looked like an asteroid, but too perfectly spherical in design to be anything other than an intelligent artifact. What treasure might it still hold? he wondered. It would be a dream to explore the inside of it, spacesuit on, and a torch to illuminate its darkened corridors. He wondered if it still had power. Maybe one day he would explore it, but not today...

The second stage burned out and he was again thrust forwards to the end of his restraints. He was weightless and sick at his stomach, but he had the presence of mind to release the second stage. There was a small push as the small explosives blew the capsule free from the second stage and then the capsule began to tumble. Through his window he saw the world, then space, the starship Fearless looming ever closer, the sun, and then the world again. Over and over he tumbled, until the air thickened. On the last revolution he thought he had seen a shuttle. It wasn't until the capsule finally righted itself in the thickening atmosphere that he saw there was indeed a shuttle following him. He could see the flames jetting off its hull as it started re-entry. He knew the same was happening to his capsule, which explained the rising temperature. It also disappointed him, for that confirmed that he was beginning re-entry too early. He had expected to be in orbit for about seven hours and a half, so that he could splash down near Loral Beach to a cheering crowd. Coming down early meant he had no idea where he was actually going to land. The worst part was when he realized he was not equipped to come down on land, but only in water. So, I forgot to plan for that contingency, he scolded himself.

♪♪▶

“Had he made it to a higher orbit, the Fearless would have been able to get a tractor beam on him,” Spock explained.

“Spock, stop saying what we can't do and start telling me what we can do!” McCoy said.

“I have plotted his course. He will splash down here. There's a recovery team on the way. The shuttle will continue its pursuit,” Spock said.

“I'd like to be there,” McCoy said.

“The Fearless is willing to provide us with a site to site transport,” Spock said.

“I'd like to go,” Natalia said.

“Step over this way,” Spock told them.

McCoy, Spock, Juan, and Natalia stepped away from the tent. Jovet started to come.

“Jovet, stay with Lonny, dear,” Natalia said.

“But I want to go...” Jovet protested.

“Fearless, four to transport,” Spock said into his communicator.

“Not now,” Natalia mouthed as the beam folded around them.

McCoy bit down on his complaint about having his molecules scrambled. They materialized onto the heaving deck of a ship. McCoy might have tumbled if not for the steadying hand of his friend, Spock. None the less, once he had his bearing and his vertigo pushed aside, he pulled his arm free.

“I can manage,” McCoy snapped.

The Captain met them on the deck as a wave hit the side and sprayed up over them. “Admiral, Ambassador,” the Captain greeted, acknowledging Juan and Natalia with only a curt nod. “If you’ll come inside, you’ll be more comfortable.”

“How long to splash down, Spock?” McCoy asked, raising his voice to be heard over the wind.

“Any time now,” Spock said.



Tammas was growing irritated with all the little red lights on his console. None of the lights were labeled and he was having trouble remembering what was what. There was an audio alarm going off near the altitude indicator that was also annoying the hell out of him. He wondered how anyone would have ever chosen that particular sound for an alert message. He puzzled over the lights and the altitude indicator. He was dripping wet from sweat, as the capsule had gotten quite hot.

Then it occurred to him what one of the lights was for. The parachute had failed to deploy. He reached up to deploy it manually and for the first time felt the pain in his arms from being slammed about the capsule. He became aware of all sort of aches and pains, but ignored it in order to reach up and pull that one last lever.

It didn’t want to pull down into the deploy position.

“Ah, come on,” he thought, grabbing it with both hands and pulling it with all his weight.

It came down and the chutes deployed. He was again bounced in his seat as the speed changed. He could see the chutes above him, which was a bit disheartening because he was looking right at it as one of the three chutes tore. The capsule began to spin. The spin accelerated until it wound the remaining chutes completely closed.

The capsule hit the ocean hard. This time when Tammas bounced he hit his head and was knocked out cold. One of the other red lights was for the auto-raft. The capsule disappeared into the ocean, slowed, paused at a meter’s depth, and then slowly continued its descent to the ocean floor. Fortunately, the floor here was only at seventy meters, well within the parameters of a dive team.

Of course, Tammas hadn’t known a dive team was coming to the rescue. He had roused when the capsule began filling with cold seawater. His head hurt, pulsing with pain, which was almost enough to distract him from the rest of his aches, and the odd way his blood swirled with the water. Who would have thought head wounds bled so much. He was ready to give into his exhaustion and might have had he not seen the face of a dolphin. It wasn’t Star, but it didn’t matter. The dolphins knew him and were here to help.

He unbuckled his harness and reached up to the hatch. It wouldn’t budge. He was too tired to figure out why it wouldn’t open. Perhaps he had hit so hard it had jammed. Perhaps it was the pressure differential. Either way, he didn’t know what to do about it. The water was now up to his knees. The dolphins each took a turn to peer in through the small port on the hatch, unable to do anything but sing encouragement.

Tam tried the door once more and then remembered the explosive bolts. He activated the system. The dolphins scattered. Each bolt fired off in sequence and where each bolt had been, a stream of water came spraying through. The door remained sealed tight. He sighed, laid his head against the door and closed his eyes. He had drowned

once before, back when McCoy brought him to this world. The worst part was that first breath. After that, he would be in a lot less pain.

A few sparks leaped from his console and then suddenly the whole ship went dead. The lights faded out and it became dark. When the water got to his chin, he sank down into the cold, darkness. As he did so, he pulled the handle that released the hatch, and the spring mechanism opened it enough for one dolphin to push its nose into the cabin. The other dolphins pushed the hatch the remaining way open, and then the one reached in, took Tammias by his floating hand, bit down, and hauled him out.

“Relax, Star’s friend,” the dolphin’s voice sounded in his head. “Star’s friend” was one word, in the dolphin language, a subtle click squeal combo, and it was the last complete thought Tammias received as his brain began to shut down. The dolphin’s voice was like a light, calling him to stay but he didn’t want to. “We help you. We take you up.” The dolphins were trying to soothe Tammias in his own language, but it was unnatural for them to think in English because they had no way of physically making the sounds.

All the dolphins there pushed him towards the surface, brushing up against him, another taking his other hands. They were directing sonar at him, low pulses which almost felt like a cat’s purring, but more intense. He could feel their vocalizations through his body more rapidly now as they continued to soothe his distress. It was making death easier to handle.

“You no die today,” the lead dolphin said.

But Tammias was already, technically, dead.

Divers met the dolphins. Tammias was quickly slung into a harness and raised to the ship’s deck, where he was ushered on a gurney and into a room nearby. Natalia buried her face in Juan’s chest. He hugged her while the medics, under McCoy’s instructions, brought Tammias back from the dead. He started retching and finally vomited the sea water out his lungs. He coughed for a good minute before easing down into a normal breathing pattern.

“Is this death?” he thought, counting all his hurts, including his chest pains, the fire in his lungs, the way his entire skin was crawling.

“You are alive,” Spock answered him, his voice soothing and near, as if inside him.

“I was dead?”

“Yes,” Spock said. “Clinically speaking, you were dead for two minutes, seven seconds.”

“Is that a record?” he asked.

“No,” Spock said. “I, and several of my closest friends, have died a number of times. My record still holds.”

“I failed,” Tammias said.

“This is not a record you want to compete with me on,” Spock said.

“No, I didn’t win the contest. You are going to take me away now.”

“Sleep,” Spock said, touching Tammias’s head. “Allow your body to heal.”

## CHAPTER FIVE

McCoy, Spock, Natalia, and Juan sat together in the same room, looking at no one, or anything, specific. Occasionally McCoy or Natalia were looking at Tamm as he rested in his bed. He continued to sleep deeply, his vitals all normal.

“When will he be going to Vulcan?” Juan asked, finally saying the unspoken.

“Aren’t we risking his being discovered if you take him away from here?” Natalia protested.

“Because he has been publishing music and stories, keeping him a secret is no longer an option,” McCoy said. “Misdirection is the new game.”

“I really feel I should take him,” Juan said.

“No, I will go,” Natalia said, though she knew she couldn’t go. And not because of her research.

“You have to stay here with Jovet,” Juan said.

“Then we’ll all go,” Natalia insisted.

“Spock?” McCoy asked quietly.

“I believe you are right, Doctor,” Spock said.

McCoy did a double take. “Excuse me?”

“I believe Tamm is more human than Vulcan. It would best serve him to find a more human approach to his mental and emotional needs,” Spock said.

“I did it,” McCoy said. “I finally lived long enough to hear you say the words, you were right.”

“I’ve told you that on a number occasions, Doctor,” Spock pointed out. “You were just too eager for an emotional response to hear the actual words. Vulcan is not the best place for Tamm at this time. But since he will need a psychiatrist who is endowed with telepathic abilities, I believe your suggestion of taking him to Betazed, where fellow telepaths can help him develop his individuality and psychic boundaries, is his best option.”

“Well, then, I will take him there,” Juan said.

Spock looked to McCoy, suggesting he would defer to his counsel, folded his hands together and brought his fingers to his lips.

McCoy shook his head. “In order for Tamm to develop as an individual, he must be free of the mental and emotional bonds he has created with you.”

“You mean Spock was right?” Juan asked.

“Um, Yes,” McCoy said.

“How can you even say that?!” Natalia demanded. “You asked us to provide him with a stable environment, give him love and security and you would have me just abandon him? Abandon him like everyone else has?”

“I hear that you are emotionally invested in his well being...” McCoy said. “As am I...”

“Emotionally invested?” Natalia shouted. “He’s a part of me!”

Spock lowered his hands. “That is precisely why we must do this and we must do this now. Preferably while he is still asleep. The emotional strain of your current separation will be extremely traumatic, the equivalent of doing a surgical amputation without pain killers.”

“This is outrageous,” Natalia said. “I don’t believe in all this mysticism. Uncle Bones, please.”

“Natalia,” McCoy said. “I came to you because I knew you had the strength to deal with a child that had challenges. His challenges have exceeded either of our abilities to cope with. I need you to let go. Just as I have to let go. This is when I need you to be rational and consider his greater well fare.”

“If it’s any consolation,” Spock said. “Your bond with him will never be completely broken. When it comes to psychic bonds, time and space are not limiting factors. There will be times when you mutually think of each other, or be reminded of something, and in this manner, your minds will have connected and shared the love you mutually share. You will be able to correspond with him, and, in time, eventually you can be reunited. But for now, it is necessary to sever your ties with him.”

“I’m sorry, Natalia,” McCoy said. “I must be getting old to have blundered so badly.”

Natalia stood, walked over to Tammias, and said a quiet good bye. As she left the room, she briefly paused to put a hand on McCoy’s shoulder. She didn’t say anything that might negate McCoy’s feelings of failure, nor did she lash out at him for the pain she was feeling. She simply touched him and then vacated the room. Before the door closed on her, she was sobbing hysterically. Juan stood up.

“I don’t know what to say,” Juan said. “I didn’t know any of this could be so challenging.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Spock said.

“I still feel responsible,” Juan said. “He used my work authorization codes...”

“No one would have imagined he would pull such a stunt, much less be capable of it,” McCoy said. “He was quite clever in covering his tracks.”

“But what kind of demon could have driven him so hard?” Juan asked.

“He wanted to win,” McCoy said. On saying that, McCoy remembered his closest friend, James T Kirk. He looked to Tammias searching for any resemblance. There was no one individual feature that suggested Kirk, or any of his other former companions whose genes Tammias shared for that matter. His skin tone was the beautiful rich color that only comes from a mixture of human races. His genome was truly representative of what humans would look like had humanity never divided themselves among superficial, surface features, like skin pigment and body types.

Juan shook his head. “God speed,” he said, and left with just a passing look at Tammias.

McCoy and Spock sat there in the uncomfortable wake of emotions that comes with difficult decisions, as if he had told the Garcia family that their son was terminal and they had to pull the plug and let him expire. Though it wasn’t as bad, it would feel like that to them, especially given the emotional and psychological bonding that had occurred.

“Well,” McCoy said at last. “Never a dull moment.”

“Indeed,” Spock agreed. “Shall we take a shuttle?”

“After all these years, you still have to ask?” McCoy asked.

“I’ll make the arrangements,” Spock said, stood, and exited the room.

McCoy got up and gave Tammias another once over. Satisfied that there was nothing more he could do, he patted him on the head. “Rest easy, son. Everything tends to work out, one way or the other. And if luck has a genetic component, well then, you’ve certainly been blessed with a lot of luck.”



In many ways, Betazed was very much like Earth. Looking at it through the lens of a camera, a human might not have been able to tell a modern day Betazed city from a modern day Earth city. People going about business, shopping, exchanging information, eating, or just every day normal social gatherings would not seem any different than any gathering of human beings from the untrained eye. Of course, if one observed closely, there were differences. Human communication, as measured by science, is approximately eighty percent body language and twenty percent verbal. On Betazed, verbal and body language was almost non-existent, as might be expected in a population of telepaths. Their other senses, sight, smell, and hearing, were equally as good as humans, and, if one were a really good observer, one might notice that in the general population, the greater the distance between two Betazoids the more likely they would use gestures or verbal language to communicate, but up close and personal, those behaviors usually took a back seat. Even the greatest telepaths on Betazoid often used gestures to summon someone at a distance greater than their ability to send or receive telepathy. The only other time they might use gestures was when the other person was a non-telepath, as Gart Xerx did when he saw McCoy coming out of the terminal.

McCoy adjusted his eyes to the noonday sun, saw Gart waving, and waved back. McCoy maneuvered around the crowd, with Tammias dragging behind. The boy looked to be sulking, and judging by his gait and facial expression, Gart got a good feel for the severity of the boy's clinical depression. Up close and personal, it would have been overwhelming had he not been trained to deal with acute mental illness. Some of the telepaths nearby picked up on the depression and chose to give Tammias a wider berth, but none could resist looking at him to try and fathom how someone so young could be so apathetic to living.

Gart Xerx welcomed Admiral McCoy with open arms and a kiss on the cheek. Though he knew McCoy was uncomfortable with such affection, public or private, he knew that he could get away with it. "It is so good to see you again, my friend. Come, come, I have transportation to a restaurant waiting. You know, you just missed Chandra's wedding by a few days."

"Chandra got married?" McCoy asked. "I'm getting so old."

"Nonsense, my friend," Gart assured him. "Why, your mind is still as strong as I ever remember it... Why, who's this? Tammias Parkin Arblaster Garcia, is it?"

"Tam," Tammias corrected. "As in Uncle Tam's Cabin."

"You mean Tom?" Gart asked.

"That's what I said," Tammias said.

"No, you thought it. It's hard to hear the distinction when you don't speak," Gart said.

Tammias ignored the response and studied the hustling crowd at the spaceport terminal. He returned stares for stares and noticed that his deliberate eye contact often hurried folks along, which only fueled his ideas that he was a monster. His eyes paused on a girl who was not observing him. She was Fleet and wearing the mini skirt option of the uniform. It's yellow and black patterns reminded him of a bumble bee, her hose was sheer with glitter sparkling in the noon sun.

Gart repeated his request for Tammias to get in the car. Tammias had spent so many years not communicating he was now indifferent to any of Gart's efforts to engage

him. He frowned as McCoy gave a little push towards the vehicle and the woman disappeared from his view. He climbed into the vehicle and slid to the far side, letting his back pack come around to his lap. He held it to his chest like a security blanket, the stuffed ferret's head sticking through the flap. Gart and McCoy climbed in after him.

"I hear you're going to be eight years old next week," Gart said.

Tammas frowned. "In Earth years. On Oran, I've got four more months to go."

"Well, we'll go by Earth years, then," Gart said.

Tammas met Gart's eyes.

"Yes," Gart said, to the question McCoy couldn't hear. "I'm speaking to you with my voice, as well as communicating with you telepathically. Can you hear the difference?"

"I don't understand the game," Tammas said.

To Gart, even Tammas' thoughts were monotone, but he couldn't help chuckling at Tam's remark and how dry it sounded. "I think I can help you with that. How would you like to celebrate your birthday on Betazed?"

"Why would I want to do that? Not only was I born in the past, I wasn't born on this planet. If there was a celebration, it was done along time ago, on another planet far away from here," Tammas thought.

"I see someone has been hanging out with Vulcans," Gart said, chuckling. "If I'm not mistaken, it is a human custom to celebrate the anniversary of each person's birth. Did you not celebrate any of your birthdays while with the Garcia family?"

"Oh," Tammas thought. "They played a game that I didn't participate in. Besides, it's illogical for you to ask me if I would like to celebrate it on Betazed, seeing how I have no choice in the matter."

Gart smiled. "He seems well adjusted to me," Gart said, turning to McCoy. "Driver, take us to Metsuine. Even if I weren't telepathic I could tell you are both starving and you will love the food there."

The driver of the electric car that was to take them from the spaceport to down town was obviously a robot of some sort, but Tammas wasn't interested in its thin frame, or the animated face as it accepted instructions. Tammas closed his eyes and leaned back, not allowing himself the luxury of looking out the window. They could force him to come here, but they weren't going to force him to like it.

"You really should look at the scenery, Tammas. We take pride in our landscaping. The architecture of our buildings contributes to the ecology of the local terrain. Telepathic races prefer to live in harmony with nature," Gart explained to him. "It wouldn't make much sense to destroy the environment that nurtured your species and allowed it to evolve, now would it? Besides, being surrounded by nature enhances our moods and helps lay down a foundation for healthier lives."

"According to Spock, Tam's telepathic abilities are limited to people he has had physical contact with," McCoy said.

Gart nodded. "I've already assessed his abilities and determined he is an extremely sensitive empath. I can sense that he has bonds, but I am unable to determine the numbers. At the moment, he's relying heavily on you for emotional assurance that he's safe. Don't worry. I am confident I can help him develop appropriate boundaries. I suspect I will have him talking like a normal human child in a couple of weeks. With in reason."

“Within reason?” McCoy asked.

“Most of his bonds have been with adults,” Gart said. “Though he clearly still has thought processes that have child like qualities, his thought patterns emulate adult thinking. It’s what you might expect of a child raised strictly around scientist without other kids to play with. Being bonded to adults has also influenced his physiology. For example, because the adults he has bonds with are and have been sexual, he has started puberty much earlier than he probably would have had he not been telepathic.”

“You’ll have to treat him as if he were abused?” McCoy asked.

“I don’t think so,” Gart said. “All of his bond mates, if you will, seem to have had reasonably healthy attitudes towards sex, so I wouldn’t compare him to a child abuse case. He was not the target of any sexual aggression. He was just more aware of sexual thoughts and emotions than a non-telepath would be. We see this particular issue a lot on Betazed. Most Betazoid kids simply ignore the adult thoughts until the onset of puberty, and then we deal with their curiosity relative to the child’s temperament. Of course, given Tam’s obsessive compulsive tendencies, had he fully entered puberty around adults without establishing better boundaries he would certainly have had some difficulties ahead of him.”

“I guess we came to the right place,” McCoy said.

“Absolutely. It seems he has experienced some trauma” Gart went on. “I’m guessing he witnessed the death of his parents and it was violent? But the most intriguing mental aberration deals with something pre-natal, which I don’t understand. There was a definite event which has affected the physical structure of the brain.”

“He has more developed neural pathways than someone his age might have,” McCoy said. “But I saw nothing in his brain scans that might suggest abnormalities.”

“It’s not an abnormality and it wouldn’t show up on a scan,” Gart said. “I can see it because I can feel the way the energy moves through his brain. And I’ve never felt this in a human that was socially functional.”

“What do you mean?” McCoy said.

Gart thought for a moment. “Are you familiar with the species Medusans?”

“Yes,” McCoy said, reminiscing. Every human who had ever seen a Medusan had gone completely and irreversibly mad. “I met Ambassador Kolios, ages ago, and he was accompanied by Doctor Miranda Jones. She was the psychologist who established the first successful telepathic bonds with a Medusan. She had avoided insanity due to her blindness.”

“I’ve read some of her work. Anyway, I attempted counseling humans who have had such an encounter in an attempt to cure their insanity,” Gart said. “That’s the sort of impression I get when I watch the energy flow through Tam’s mind.”

“He’s not insane,” McCoy said more than asked.

“No, he’s clearly not insane, but one could say that his predilection towards genius is a manifestation of that prenatal event,” Gart said. “I’ve been observing a number of recurring thoughts and patterns, which is part of his OCD. Based on this encounter, and his medical profile you sent me, I highly recommend he be fitted for an implant to help alleviate some of these symptoms of anxiety and depression, as well as control for the compulsive behavior and attention deficit disorder. The implants will help monitor more closely his glutamate, serotonin, and gamma-aminobutyric acid levels, and add neurotransmitters when deficient.”



“I was afraid you were going to recommend that,” McCoy said. “It’s not the first time this treatment has been suggested.”

“It’s not a bad thing, Doctor,” Gart said. “With this implant, we can rely totally on counseling and biofeedback technologies and not be limited to psychotropic drugs. The device will only increase deficient levels of natural neurotransmitters and only under the guidance of a Doctor.”

“I know,” McCoy said. “I’ll authorize the procedure.”

“Can you share with me what happened to him?” Gart asked.

“Can you keep a secret from other telepaths?” McCoy said.

“Of course,” Gart said.

“Alright then, you have permission to read my mind,” McCoy said. He began thinking about Tammis and what he understood the Kelvan mind impression technique was like and what the expected results were supposed to be and what the actual results were. Gart now had enough information to understand. And, just for extra, McCoy shared his experiences with the Kelvans, from when he first met them to now. He also shared how Tammis is biologically speaking, McCoy’s offspring.

“So, though he may look human,” Gart said. “Thanks to this imprinting, he is in actuality a Kelvan. I have never met a Kelvan. I wonder if the imprint was a hundred percent affective or only partial. Well, we’re here. Let’s put this aside and enjoy our meal. You will be staying as my guest for a few days, right?”

“I would like that,” McCoy said. “If it won’t interrupt Tam’s progress.”

“He’s halfway cured,” Gart promised.

## CHAPTER SIX

Tammas wasn't supposed to be aware of the implant they had placed in his head, but he was adamant that he could feel the pressure of where it was. He didn't care if it was a "real" feeling or psychosomatic response to something having been inserted into his head. Real or imagined, he felt something. At first, he had refused to have the procedure done, but as they tried to explain to him how beneficial it would be for him, he started warming to the idea. Supposedly, it had not yet altered any of his neurotransmitter levels, but was only monitoring him and giving the doctors a map of his brain activity, both chemical and electrical. He watched the monitor fascinated by the explosions of lights and the dancing web of electricity that spider webbed through his brain like lightening. The neural transmitters were assigned colors and they ballooned and flowed through the brain in amazing patterns, like spherical explosions of fire works that triggered waves of further explosions, a mixing of fluidic colors.

"Will this make me normal?" he asked.

"You are normal," Gart assured him, also fascinated by the computer generated representation of Tam's brain at work.

"No, I am not normal," Tammas said, raising the volume as he spelled out "normal" in Morse Code.

"Normal is just the wrong choice of words. You have some mental and behavioral challenges, which are mostly the result of complex biological processes," Gart tried to explain.

"So, again, it will make me normal?" Tammas asked. "It doesn't help me if you soft soap stuff and you give me a false impression about reality."

"Pretty much, yes," Gart surrendered. Tammas had already begun to change from being associated with him and the other doctors. His mind set was more clinical and absolute as opposed to the more nebulous thinking patterns he had arrived with. His spatial acuity and musical comprehension were off the charts.

"Will it hurt when it dumps medicine?" Tammas asked.

"You won't even know it's there," Gart said, half heartedly. He was following a line of information on his PADD. He had to open another window to run the recording back several second and observe the artifact he thought he had seen. The real time image remained prominent. "McCoy, did you see that?"

"See what?" McCoy asked, obviously missing it.

"I already know it's there!" Tammas protested.

"I assure you, it's you're over active imagination," Gart insisted, trying to stay focused on his work. "There it is again. What is that?"

"Beats me," McCoy said.

"Can I have upgrade options?" Tammas asked

"What sort of options?" McCoy asked.

"I would like the ability to access computers without manually typing out Morse code. Also I would like to access visual and audio information from the IS-Net directly into my head," Tammas spelled out in Morse.

At first McCoy balked, saying things like, "If God had meant for us to be wired to computers, he would have made us out of silicon." But in the end, McCoy consented to certain upgrades. He figured it would facilitate communication until Tammas learned to speak.

It took a few days before Tammas had full control over the “Extra’s” in his implant, but as soon as he got the hang of it, he was able to access his email without even getting up from his bed. He was also able to surf the IS-net in the comfort of his head, accessing all sort of information, words either translated directly into audio speech, or Morse Code, depending on his preference. None the less, he had access to everything, whether it was audio, visual, olfactory, or tactile. Best of all, his writing speed increased to the speed of thought. He was now able to knock out whole stories in a quarter of the time it previously took. He was also able to write and record entire musical scores. If it weren’t for Gart’s consistent interruptions, he would have never left his head. McCoy wasn’t there to see how well his brain had taken to the implant, as he had had to return to Earth.

“Tammas, when we added the upgrades to your implant, you told me you would practice the bio and neuro feedback programs I supplied you with,” Gart said.

“They’re difficult,” Tammas thought, his words spelling out over Gart’s PADD, even though he could also hear his thoughts.

“Well, your computer access time will be limited from now on and will be awarded based on your efforts and performance of biofeedback exercises,” Gart said. “And for now on, if you want to communicate with someone, you must use your voice.”

“I don’t understand the game,” Tammas said.

“Have you noticed how our communicating is different than say with McCoy, or Natalia?” Gart asked.

“There isn’t continuous feedback,” Tammas observed. “It’s like Spock. It’s because you are alien and we share this game.”

“No, the reason they didn’t have continuous feedback,” Gart explained. “As you put it, is they were not telepaths. And I have not allowed you to establish a permanent telepathic bond with me, so you won’t get it with me, either.”

“I don’t understand,” Tammas said.

“What’s your explanation for non-telepaths, Natalia and Juan, ignoring you?” Gart asked.

“I am not an adult, so they can’t respond to me,” Tammas said.

“Oh, but they talked to your sister, Jovet,” Gart pointed out.

“They were biologically compelled,” Tammas said. “And even so, they did not truly communicate with her. They often failed to listen and identify with her emotional state. In that regard, we were both equal. Children are lesser beings. It’s the only explanation as to why we are so often disregarded as entities.”

Gart sighed. “You’ve created a pretty solid paradigm. You have an explanation for everything.”

“Not everything,” Tammas thought.

“Really?” Gart asked, not a little sarcastic. Dealing with Tammas was like dealing with a know-it-all teenager. “What don’t you know?”

“I don’t know. If I knew, then I would know...”

Gart laughed out loud.

“Are you hungry?” Gart asked.

“No.”

“Well, come with me. We’re going to go relax for awhile.” Gart said.

“Can I access the IS-Net?” Tammas asked.

“No, we’re going to do something fun that’s social,” Gart said.

“The Net is a form of social interaction...” Tammias explained.

“No to the Net, yes to let’s go,” Gart insisted

Gart took Tammias to a museum where they walked around and talked about art. Tammias was often more interested in observing the people than the art. He often got annoyed when Gart interrupted his observations about the people with questions about the art. He was especially interested in a red head who was sitting Indian style on the floor, drawing on a sketch pad. Gart distracted him again. “So, what do you see here?”

When Gart asked him about the art, Tammias felt he was being tested, and he was becoming more and more frustrated that he couldn’t find the answer Gart was looking for. He had always managed to find out what people wanted, and again, he reminded himself that Gart was an alien and this was a new game to master. But what did that mean exactly? Could it mean some people were easier to understand than others? Was there actually different ways to communicate? If Morse Code was a game, could waving one’s hand be a game?

“What do you see here?” Gart asked.

“It’s a visual representation of the First Man and Woman, a parallel to the Adam and Eve stories from earth,” Garcia said, describing the naked people in an idealistic garden setting with lots of animals. “Only, it can’t be the First Man and Woman.”

“Why not?” Gart asked, perplexed.

Tammias looked at Gart as if he were an idiot. “Because, they have belly buttons,” he explained, patiently. “That means they were born, they had parents.”

Gart had to laugh at the obvious, something even he had over looked. “Tell me, Tammias,” Gart said. “Other than writing, and your pen pals, do you have any hobbies or interests?”

“I like building rockets. And I have my amateur subspace radio license,” Tammias said. The red head was packing her stuff to leave.

“Would you like something to drink?” Gart asked.

“I guess,” Tammias said, wanting to follow the red head. He wanted to see what she had sketched. Maybe he would write a short story about her.

They ended up at the café, part of which was inside the museum itself, leading to an area outside shaded by trees. There was a stage with musical instruments lying cradled, which Tam observed with apparent interest. They sat and Gart ordered their drinks. Tammias was surprised by the person taking the order, for he was male. Tam was accustomed to seeing a female in that role and he actually wanted to see a female in that role. When the man returned with the drinks, he wondered if there was something wrong with the man.

“There’s nothing wrong with him, Tam,” Gart assured him.

The drink was interesting. It was a fruit drink that Tammias hadn’t tasted before, a combination of sweet and bitter that he found pleasant. While he sipped at the drink, he looked at the instruments out of curiosity. He hadn’t played any music since arriving on Betazed and he was feeling a compulsion to run to the stage and start playing.

“The Laughing Vulcan and his dog,” Tammias thought and then locked down on that. “STOP singing that,” he told himself.

Gart observed Tam as he tried to get around his obsessive compulsive disorder, wondering what the deeper thoughts that were trying to surface were. Obviously he

wasn't ready to deal with those thoughts yet, and so his mind was using the song compulsion as a way to distract himself from the deeper stuff. The brain was a remarkable instrument. It knew more about itself than even the person did and it would do everything it could to protect itself, even resorting to amnesia or a coma if that was the only way it could protect itself from information it wasn't ready to process.

"I thought you said the implant would eliminate compulsive thoughts," he told Gart, disappointed at the persistence of that one song.

"I said it will help. Your mind has seven years of practice, it will take some time to build some new habits," Gart said.

Tammas nodded as if he understood. He looked back to the stage.

"You're welcome to go play them," Gart said.

"Will I get in trouble?" Tammas asked.

"Of course not," Gart said. "That's why they're there."

"I mean," Tammas thought, looking around. "It's okay to play in public?"

"Absolutely," Gart said. "Who knows? Maybe someone will play with you."

Tammas was hesitant. "Play with me?"

"Go, play. They will come."

Tammas pushed his chair away from the table and went to the stage. The instruments were strange and new, but after a moment with each one, he had sufficiently figured out how to make them sing with the sound of expertise. His first attempt at one of the wind instrument made a familiar, awkward sound, reminding him of the trean. He looked nervously around and noticed no one was paying him any mind, so he continued with the thing until he mastered it as well. Satisfied, he returned it to its cradle and moved to the last, making some observations. On the whole, musical instruments had some universal traits, which made them predictable. Variables were manifestations of the creatures who designed them, accounting for appendages necessary to perform, and audible capabilities. Betazoids were humanoid and their hearing range was so similar to humans, it stood to reason that they would enjoy similar tonal qualities in their music.

The last instrument he tried, however, presented some peculiar challenges. For one, it was meant for an adult. His hand barely managed to fit the range of keys. He was about to give up when an elderly man took up the sister instrument in a cradle near by and emulated Tam's performance. Tammas repeated the tones and the elderly man again repeated Tam's performance, but then added his own. Tammas followed suit and each time the man pushed the complexity of the rhythm and sound to another level. This went on until Tammas exceeded the man's ability to keep up. The old man started laughing.

"My name is Ian," he said. "If you would like to continue to play a duet with me, don't challenge, rather follow along with my tempo and rhythm. Triplets and such are fine, but try not to over flourish. Okay? Follow my lead."

Tammas found it easy to play along and quickly figured out the rules to the music based on Ian's playing. It was similar to a fugue, with repetitive themes. The old man played with his eyes closed, as if remembering something. Then Tammas realized it was all improvised and that the man was simply enjoying the shared experience. Even though Tammas was playing off the old man, the old man was also responding to Tammas, and each caused the song to evolve through subtle imitations and improvements. At the songs conclusion, Tammas discovered the audience had grown, but none were really

looking at him. He made the sudden connection that people can hear without seeing. He wondered why he had never made that obvious connection before.

Ian opened his eyes after a moment of silence and then laughed hardily. “Good show, son. What’s your name?”

“Tammas,” he thought.

The old man seemed unable to hear Tammas’s thoughts and Tammas had no way of reading him. Out of reflex he reached out to touch the old man, but Gart mentally reprimanded him and he withdrew his hand. Two other men came on stage and took up instruments.

“Tammas,” Gart thought to him. “Use your voice, not your mind. Speak to them.”

“If you’ll lead,” the old man said. “We’ll follow.”

“I am, but they aren’t listening. Are they human?” Tammas asked Gart.

“No.” Gart said.

“Then they can play your game,” Tammas said. “They should respond to me.”

“They are,” Gart said. “Listen and emulate.”

Frustrated, Tammas decided to stick to music. Wasn’t that what Gart was telling him to do. Listen and emulate? At least people listened when he played music. There was expectancy in the room that was calling him to fill the silence with sound. And sound he gave them. He threw out a dozen simultaneously clashing notes, which at first reflected his frustration, but he couldn’t leave the tonal tension so unresolved and chaotic. He found form in that mess he threw out there and slowly brought the cords together until there was something meaningful. As he brought clarity to his musical theme, the others began to join in one by one until all four instruments were playing in harmony. He closed his eyes as he neared the end of the movement, imagining how glorious it would be with a full orchestra resounding to life in the second part. What a let down it was going to be as he continued driving them towards this end and not having the back up he imagined it needed. He considered accessing a computer and pumping some music in over the museum paging system, but when he realized how far astray his thought process was taking him from the music, he took a breath and refocused on the theme at hand. The four instruments now sounded as one, soft, but pure in tone. One by one they dropped out until only his was left. He would have to do something very subtle to end it here. Fading. There, we can leave it at that, Tammas thought.

But his mind wanted, no, his mind demanded the next movement, and as he heard it in his head, he heard it in real life, exploding like the 1812 Overture with full cannon accompaniment that nearly blew him off the stage. He stood up, eyes opening. He thought he had imagined it, but indeed, a small orchestra ensemble had assembled itself while he had been focused on the theme. It didn’t matter that it was not a full orchestra because of their superior ability to perform. The cannon noise came from a synthesizer.

Tammas looked to Gart Xerx for confidence or for answers. He wasn’t sure which. His daughter Chandra had joined him and she was accompanied by a friend. That friend was smiling as she pulled her chair in closer to Gart and Chandra, showing off cleavage as she did so. She looked up and smiled at Tammas, brushing a bit of hair out of her eyes, as she made herself comfortable.

Her smile practically paralyzed Tammas. He quit playing, his heart pounding in his chest, his head full of music like he had never heard before, and he was tempted to

run a diagnostic on his neural implant, thinking he might be getting feedback from all the music... but then, he decided he liked the sensation. He felt heat on his face and arms, and a trickle of sweat began to course down the side of his face. His only thoughts were, "Oh, my, god." And her smile grew as if she had heard him.

"Tammias," Garts voice broke in over his pause. "Focus on the music."

"I need..." Tammias tried to think. What was it? Clarity? Purpose? Resolve. A link. He wanted to touch her. More than the red head. More than the Fleet girl at the airport whose legs sparkled as she walked. Here sat a goddess. A heroine from one of the stories he had heard or told or retold. He wanted...

"I know." Gart's thoughts were kind, but they were also resolute.

"Please..." Tammias pleaded.

"No, Tammias. I will not allow you to create a bond with her," Gart said.

"Oh my, Deanna," Chandra said. "He's in love with you. What is it with you and human males?"

Deanna shrugged. "Isn't he a bit young for puberty?"

"I feel..." Tammias pleaded.

"Focus on the music," Gart said, more insistent.

"What is this?" Tammias asked.

"Focus..." Gart said. His thoughts were patient, but firm.

"Maybe I should leave," Deanna said.

"No," Tammias pleaded

"Wait," Gart said, putting his hand on hers.

"He's clearly distressed," Deanna said.

"He needs to work through this. This is therapy," Gart said. "Tammias, if you want to establish a friendship with Deanna Troi, you will have to learn to speak. You will not be able to communicate with her telepathically and I want you to stop eaves dropping through me."

"Deanna," Tammias tried.

"Focus on your music," Gart said.

"Why are you doing this to me? I don't understand!" Tammias all but screamed, wanting to throw a tantrum, but for some reason he worried that Deanna may not approve of such a public fit. "This is torture."

"You will live," Gart assured him

Tammias' rage exploded out of his instrument. It was anguish and anger and it clashed with the concert behind him, but when they didn't quit playing out of shock from his tantrum or because the harmony was completely shattered, his mind turned to solving the musical equation he had introduced. It was complex, but workable. As he calmed, so did the music. Soon he was playing a new melody that melted into the score behind him as if it had always been meant to be. Soon, part of the orchestra adapted to that new theme and incorporated it into their performance, while the others carried on with the original plan. It became difficult to distinguish between melody and harmony because the competing themes often traded emphasis on what was important.

While the music was winding its way to its conclusion, Tammias was again formulating ways to create a bond with Deanna. Perhaps if he fainted, she would rescue him, or if he could drown she would resuscitate him, or if he just simply died she would have such feelings for him that he might live forever and for the first time Tammias

actually had a feeling to associate reading Romeo and Juliet. From this time forward his writing wouldn't just be emulation of the great writers, but would be more powerful than ever, and it was all because of Deanna Troi. Troi, obviously the face that launched a thousand ships, Troi. Even his music had gained a quality that he had not remembered having before. This woman who would launch a thousand ships, or was that Helen Troy, no, Helen of Troy... No, just Deanna, and he was ready to die for her. He could reach her that way.

"Is that really the sort of game you want to play?" Gart asked.

There was a sense of sadness as each musician dropped out, one by one, until again Tammas was the solitary performer. He faded and ended with three clashing notes. It took all his might to push away from the instrument and leave the stage without resolving that musical tension he left in the air. He went and sat down at the table with Gart, Chandra, and Deanna the goddess Troi. He ignored the orchestra as they started up a new song, focusing only on Deanna. Gart was right. That wasn't the game he wanted to play. He wanted to be alive and in her presence rather than simply a fleeting memory.

"That was your theme song," Tammas said.

"So, Tammas, is it?" Deanna said. "How long have you been playing like that?"

"Just today," he answered her. "I never played before seeing you." But she didn't hear him.

"That was just over the top, Tammas," Chandra said. "Father had told me you were a genius, but I thought he might be exaggerating."

"Have you made many friends since coming to Betazed?" Troi asked.

"No," Tammas answered.

"Well," Troi said. "It's good seeing you, Gart. I'm meeting someone here in a little bit."

"That wouldn't be that Riker guy you swore you would never talk to, now, would it?" Chandra asked.

"If you must know... Yes," Troi said. "I'll check in with you later, mother."

Chandra laughed. "That's not fair, Deanna."

"Bye," Deanna said.

"No," Tammas said, his voice sounding strained.

Troi stopped. "What?"

"Don't go," Tammas said, his voice sounding harsh and untrained, as a deaf person's voice might sound.

"I must go," Deanna said, for though she couldn't understand his voice, she was able to read his mind.

"Deanna," Gart said. "Would you be interested in getting some extra credit to apply towards your internship?"

"Sure," she said.

"Would you be willing to work with Tammas, maybe one to three days a week?" Gart asked.

"That would be lovely," Deanna said. "Is that okay with you, Tammas?"

He simply nodded, star struck as it were.

"Well, then. I guess that's settled. Stop by my office and I will update you on his particulars," Gart said, and bid his farewell to Deanna.



Deanna waved and departed for her hot date. Tammas strained to keep her in his line of sight until she was gone and then he crumbled to the table, completely exhausted. Gart rubbed his shoulder.

“This is great, Tammas. You’ve yet to realize what a big step this was for you today,” Gart said.

Tammas tried to say a number of things, but nothing coherent came out.

“You will have to slow your thoughts down a bit, Tammas.” Gart said. “The brain thinks much faster than it can speak. If you practice the biofeedback programs I offered you, they will help you immensely to slow your thinking down enough that you can speak affectively.”

“Who’s this Riker fellow?” Tammas thought.

“He’s Star Fleet,” Gart said. “A nice person. I’ll introduce you.”

Tammas only glowered at the table. He didn’t like Riker. He didn’t like him one bit.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Three Betazoid days later Tammias had made no progress in learning to speak. He spent most of his time sulking, unable to find a way to better communicate the difficulties he was having. Of course, the Xerx's household believed his acting out went beyond mere sulking. Most children who were out of sorts could grumble, complain, maybe even throw a tantrum, but since Tammias had not learned to use his voice, and the staff was forbidden to respond to his psychic outbursts, he was left with nothing better than to try their patience by simply getting in the way. And it wasn't that he was just preventing them from doing their work. He was actually creating more work, even going as far as breaking glasses, or knocking furniture over, which for the most part appeared accidental, but they saw through him.

Tammias wouldn't have known he was acting out, for much of the stuff going on was subconscious. He did know that he was lonely and he wanted desperately for that loneliness to end with Deanna Troi. Xerx was patient, but as a reservoir of answers Tammias found him empty. He wasn't allowed to tap into that resource. Not being able to relate to the strange new way that he felt was making life even more frustrating. This puzzled him because Mr. and Mrs. Garcia didn't have any issues communicating, and he felt certain what he was experiencing was similar, just more potent. At first, Deanna had been a calming influence on him and he had worked hard on the tasks Gart set before him. Now, he had slipped back into trying to communicate by thoughts. Several times he had attempted to establish a link with Deanna, but Gart effectively blocked it. Tammias was building some resentment towards Gart. A story his mother had read, something about good cop bad cop, kept coming to mind, and he wondered if they were playing him. He could make sense of that, but that would suggest paranoia. Paranoia fed into his myth making skill that he utilized to explain life phenomena, which he was warned not to trust at this stage of his development.

One of the problems with using his voice was Tam had discovered that he hadn't actually spoken intelligibly at the café. When he had heard his voice played back to him by a speech therapy program he had been shocked into silence and was even more reluctant to speak. He knew he could make noises, but they were horrible noises, and he had no desire to hurt his ears, much less cause anyone else such discomfort. It was bad enough that his voice sounded harsh and explosive to him from the inside, but hearing the recording of his voice had been down right frightening. He was sure that that couldn't be his voice. It just didn't sound like him, and he wasn't buying the story that no one thinks their voice sounds like their voice, because everyone hears themselves from the inside out.

Tammias was sitting in the therapy lab, looking at his monitor. Gart and Deanna were next to him. The computer display was an animated view of the human mouth and tongue. The computer would speak and the animation would show him what the anatomy was doing to produce the sounds. His job was to emulate it. It was the worse game he had ever played. Even Strategema was less boring than this one. He sat there, defying the computer's request that he try again, as if it might irk it or change its response. Tammias screamed in his head at Gart who ignored him and reached for another biscuit. Tammias was so angry he didn't even want one of those, stupid, chocolate covered wafers.

“So, how’s your mother,” Gart asked out loud, before chomping down on the biscuit. He made the face of someone savoring what might be the very last morsel of food for months to come. Mentally, he sent reassurance to Deanna Troi, who sat across from him: “Trust me, Deanna. If you’re going to be a good counselor some day, you are going to want your clients to do most of the work.”

“But he’s so frustrated,” Troi returned. Out loud she said, “Oh, she’s fine. She’s not too pleased that I dated a human, recently, but she’ll survive.”

“You mean Riker,” Gart said more than asked. “You really should try these biscuits.”

“Thank you. You’re right, these are excellent,” she said, wondering just how many people knew about Riker. It wasn’t like she lived in a small town where everyone knew every one else’s business. Of course, more people than not seemed to know her business and it was, no doubt, due to the importance of her mother. Famous because her mother was famous. Everyone wanted to see how the next generation would turn out. So she knew deep down that the running gossip about her and Riker was less to do with telepathic transmission and more to do with just good, old fashion “in your business,” behind your back sort of talk.

Tammas’ eyes narrowed at the mention of Riker. He may not have realized it consciously, but he was responding as if Riker was competition. Out of habit, he tried tapping out Morse code, sending the translation directly to Gart’s PADD. But since Gart was talking to Deanna, and drinking his coffee, he appeared uninterested in the words scrolling across the screen. Even when Tammas made the words flash in contrast to a flashing back ground, and added sound bites, Gart just kept on going. Gart was even unimpressed with Tam’s mental screaming, which, had it been vocal, would have brought every mother this side of the planet running to the aid of a child in distress. It was all Deanna could do to not respond to all the histrionics playing across Tam’s face.

“I really don’t think I will make it as a counselor,” she thought to Gart, hiding her wince from Tammas. It was crucial he didn’t know just how much his mental cries were affecting her. Thank god for chocolate, she thought, having another biscuit.

“You have great potential, Deanna. And I believe you are on the verge of a major breakthrough,” Gart told her mentally.

“More like a major break down,” she jested with him. “This Riker guy is driving me crazy.”

“Is he?” Gart asked. “Or are you simply trying to ignore some internal facets of your being that his unique light has caused to sparkle?” Out loud he said, “Tammas, speak it, don’t think it.”

“You and your analogies,” Deanna laughed.

Tammas struggled to say something and they turned to listen.

“Why? I ate y oie.” Mentally they heard “I hate my voice.”

“Your voice sounds fine,” Gart assured him. “You just need to slow down and enunciate all the words.”

“This sucks,” Tammas stated slow and clear. The computer repeated it, giving him a visual of the body mechanic at work. “Inefficient,” he added.

Gart and Deanna laughed. “Indeed, it is. But almost every species you meet, especially humanoids, will require you to converse in an oral fashion, not only to communicate, but to fit in socially.”

Tammas sighed heavily. “This can’t be. Even this psyche book of yours says that eighty percent of human language is conveyed through visual components, such as gestures and facial expression,” Tammas said. Though half his words were inarticulate Gart and Deanna both knew what he had said.

“Yes, the book does say that,” Gart agreed.

“You really are coming along well with the speech therapy program,” Deanna said. “I hear improvement with every minute you spend with the computer. Perhaps you would find it easier if you imagined your voice as a musical instrument.”

“Nice analogy, Deanna,” Gart praised, raising his coffee in salute.

She communicated with her eyebrows. The return was not lost on Tammas.

“This is a game,” Tammas said. “Everything you do communicates. Smile, eyes, lines in your forehead... Body language. Why am I just now seeing this? And why do you ignore my gestures?”

“Until just recently, you never had to use gestures,” Gart said. “For the first time in your life, you are being forced to deal with people on equal terms. Part of what we are teaching you is not to rely on your empathy. I submit to you, if you become a master in reading body language, people would swear you were reading minds regardless of whether you were a telepath or not.”

“I want to learn. I want to spend more time with Deanna,” Tammas said, taking his time so that each word was distinct and separate.

“He really learns quickly,” Deanna thought to Gart.

“Like anyone else, when he wants something bad enough,” Gart agreed. “And if you make a game out of it, it holds Tammas’s attention longer. He’s obsessed with games.”

“Aren’t all boys?” Deanna asked.

“Tammas more so than any other child I have ever worked with. Tammas, if I give you the day off to spend with Deanna, will you promise to only use your voice?” Gart asked.

“Yes,” Tammas said, the sudden loudness of his own voice scaring him.

“Would I be imposing on you, Deanna?” Gart asked.

“Not at all,” Deanna said. “You’re paying me, remember? Extra credit.”

“As if you need it,” Gart thought. Out loud, “Well, go on. Both of you get out of here.”

♪♪▶

Deanna had made a list of things for Tammas and her to do and was crossing them off as they accomplished them. The last thing they checked off was having an ice cream cone, while walking through one of the many garden-parks available to them. There were couples walking in the park and a family playing with a Frisbee. A dog ran to and fro between the family members chasing the Frisbee but never catching it. It barked loudly, wagging its tail, pausing in its game to greet Tammas.

“I see animals love you,” Deanna said.

“I’ve never met a dog I didn’t like,” Tammas agreed. “Or any animal I didn’t like.”

“What about people?” Deanna asked. She made it sound like a simple question, slipping it in through his defenses. It no doubt got through, maybe because the dog was

distracting him, but she could tell he had a visceral reaction to the thought of some people he knew.

“I don’t do too well with people,” Tammias admitted.

“But you like them alright?” Deanna asked.

“Some of them,” Tammias mused. He ignored the family waving at him as their dog returned to the game of Chase the Frisbee.

“I love you, Deanna,” Tammias said, hardly interested in his ice cream.

Deanna touched his shoulder. “I know. I love you, too.”

“I don’t think Riker’s your type,” he said.

Deanna only smiled. She had no intentions of discussing this with him.

“What do you want?” Tammias asked.

“I don’t understand the question,” Deanna said, though she sensed his intent.

Tam’s face reflected his frustration. “What is Riker? What do you want? Is he balance? Is he interesting? What are you looking for?”

“I don’t know,” she mused. “Someone who’s seen the world, I suppose.”

“What world? From what altitude?” Tammias asked. “I’ve seen several worlds.”

Deanna laughed. “No, that’s sort of a figure of speech. A euphemism for well traveled and seasoned.”

“Me?!” Tammias pointed out.

“It means I want someone who’s knowledgeable about people and places.

Someone who is interested in learning new things,” Deanna continued to muse.

“Someone that would never be boring, always challenging me to learn new things.”

“All of which describes me,” Tammias said.

“Tammias,” Deanna said, her tone very serious. “We can only be friends. It would be inappropriate for us to be anything other than friends, first because you are a client, and second because of the disparity in our ages. Do you understand?”

“Age is irrelevant,” Tammias said. “Mental and physical ages do not necessarily line up linearly, or always correspond to a person’s mental age.”

“Interesting. You left out emotional age, which is also important. I don’t think you’re ready for an adult relationship,” Deanna said.

“I will be someday. And, even if you’re right, how will I ever know if I am ready if I am not afforded the opportunity to experiment. Shouldn’t you at least give me the chance?” Tammias asked.

“No,” Deanna said, trying very hard not to laugh, for fear of hurting his feelings. She remembered her first crush, a teacher long ago, and the power in that feeling had never been forgotten.

“Is it really because of our age disparity, or is it more that you yourself are not ready for a relationship?” Tammias asked. “Maybe that’s the real reason you haven’t given Riker even an opportunity to demonstrate his ability to become more than he currently is.”

Deanna stopped in her tracks, almost rebuked him, but remembered his age, and then, realizing that he had analyzed and spoken in truth something that perhaps she had been unwilling to consider. For a moment she wondered if this wasn’t just Gart in disguise, or if Tammias were an alien adult in disguise. Maybe she did owe Will a chance, an opportunity to demonstrate that he is actually more than he seems, a brash young man with only one thing on his mind. Maybe she should take Will to the museum. Test him.

“Do you like sports?” Deanna asked.

“I don’t like watching sports,” Tammias said.

“Neither do I, but do you like playing?” Deanna said.

“I have never tried,” Tammias said.

“Well, do you know how to ride a bicycle?”

“If I can drive an anti-gravity fork lift,” Tammias said. “I’m sure I can figure out a bicycle.”

“Really? Where did you learn to drive an anti gravity forklift?” Deanna asked.

Tammias sighed. “In another time, on another world,” he said, sing-song fashion, sighing heavily, with a wave of his hand.

Deanna laughed. “You sound as if you’re very old.”

“I told you, I was born old,” Tammias said. “Isn’t that what the say about Capricorns?”

“I don’t do astrology,” Deanna said. “Besides, I think you can only be a Capricorn if you were born on Earth. Something about how the stars line up.”

“Maybe that’s why it’s an ancient religion,” Tammias said.

“Was it a religion or a philosophy?” Deanna asked. “I can take you bike riding tomorrow. I think you’ll enjoy that. Oh, and tomorrow evening, I have a Tai Chi class. Would you be interested in learning?”

“Tie cheese?” he asked.

“No, Tai Chi. It’s a form of martial arts, from Earth. It is physical fitness with a philosophy for healthy living embedded in it,” Deanna said. “It really helps me relax, and it was something my father use to do.”

“Use to?”

“He’s past on,” Deanna said.

“A euphemism for death?” Tammias asked.

“Yes,” Deanna agreed.

“My parents are past on, too,” Tammias said.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Deanna said, feeling very hopeful that she was about to make a breakthrough. Gart had told her about his mental readings, but knowing details was not the same as a subject bringing them to the surface of his own mind for the purpose of sharing.

Tammias paused, studying the horizon as if searching for an answer, or maybe watching a bird hovering in the sky. “Talk about what?” he asked presently.

“How they died?” Deanna asked.

“Who?” he asked and began walking again.

Deanna followed, suppressing her eagerness at wanting to get at the information that she felt sure Tammias was repressing. It would come out in its own time, and so there was no need to force it. The mind was able to protect itself from things it was unable to handle, and Tammias would remember when he was ready. Occasionally the trauma would try to surface from his subconscious, but his brain would quickly repress it, pushing it down so fast that it never became a complete thought. Instead, the thought manifested itself as an Obsessive Compulsive Behavior. She heard the song in Tammias’s conscious mind, “the Laughing Vulcan and his Dog,” noticed that it got to about the third chorus before his awareness of the song was stronger than his awareness of the ice cream,

and he had to actively force himself to stop singing it. This merely shifted the behavior of singing to another quirk. Tammias chewed on his lip.

“So, are we on for tomorrow?” Deanna asked. She wanted real bad to go back to his story about his parents. She felt so close to a breakthrough that she felt that if she were to nudge him just a little he might remember and he would be healed. Of course, if she nudged him and she was wrong, it could have the opposite effect. She chose to let it be.

“Okay,” Tammias said. He would have agreed to anything to keep in her company.

Deanna wanted to extend their time together, mostly because she still felt very close to a breakthrough with Tammias.

“Have you seen the latest holographic technology?” Deanna said. “They just opened this place up down town and the game capabilities are over the top. It’s called a holo-suite. Do you like role playing games?”

Tammias shrugged. He did like games and was familiar with many computer based games, for playing alone or in tandem through the IS-Net, but he had never been to a holo-suite.

“My father always loved westerns,” Deanna said. “How would you like to be in a real live western, starring us?”

It took them about twenty minutes to arrive at the holo-suite, and it was the most impressive gaming system Tammias had ever experienced. In the blink of an eye, a non-descript room, with a grid like pattern on the floor, walls and ceilings, could become an entire universe ready to explore. Deanna verbally programmed the scenario: “Earth, the Old West, somewhere in Texas, small ranch, horses, and I’m the Sheriff.” After it appeared, Tam asked “Who said Rome wasn’t built in a day?” Deanna couldn’t help but laugh, and then they established some rules for game play. Tammias managed to fall into role-playing very well, and soon learned he could pick up new accents and languages just as fast he could pick up new instruments.

“Hey, Ma,” Tammias said with a Texas draw while simultaneously chewing on a weed. “I thought you said you killed ‘dem ‘dar outlaws.”

Deanna nearly burst out laughing, but managed to contain herself less she lose points for breaking character. They had mutually agreed on a point system and breaking character was the fastest way to loose points. She came out of the log cabin, drying her hands on her apron, and squinted at the rider quickly approaching. Her sheriff’s badge sparkled in the sunlight as she stepped out of the shadow of the cabin. She wore a plaid shirt with a denim skirt and cowboy boots. Tammias was wearing overalls, with no shirt and no shoes.

“Well, son, that’s the thing about outlaws, and Texans. You kill one, you got to kill their brothers, too,” Deanna said.

“Law of the west, I expect,” Tammias said.

“Law of the west,” Deanna agreed, and spit.

Tammias broke character, laughing hysterically.

Early the next day Tammias returned to the holo-suite by himself and created his own role playing games. He figured, if he had to do speech therapy, why not make it fun, and so he tied his speech therapy program into acting lessons. Over the following week, we would call up old Earth movies, picking most at random based on titles that looked

interesting, and then following up on actors or themes that he liked. He chose the characters he would play and then moved through the scenes reciting dialogue that came to him via his neural implant. The whole while he acted the computer would grade him on speaking the script and presenting the appropriate facial expression. The first day of this, he got in two whole movies before Deanna interrupted him for lunch and a talk therapy session.

Tammas stared at her, as usual, as she drove, studying her every movement as she steered the vehicle. She smiled at him, wondering what she was doing that could hold his attention for so long, and then turned her attention back to the path she was navigating.

“Deanna,” Tammas said, seriously. As if he were ever not serious, she mused. “May I ask you a question?”

“Well, of course,” she said. She was curious why he even asked. Asking if he might ask was either a new game, or he had figured out that there were social rules that came with speech, and limits to what people were allowed to ask depending on good taste and good company. She steeled herself for something heavy.

“Are you familiar with this Earth movie called the Poseidon Adventure?” Tammas asked her.

“Um, no, I can’t say that I have ever heard of that. Is it good?” she asked, wondering where this was leading.

“Well, I’m no critic,” Tammas said, pausing as he watched her laugh. Her teeth were nice, and she brushed her hair out of her eyes. He was uncertain at why she laughed, but he pushed on. “I’m very puzzled. It’s about this luxury liner that gets flipped by a rogue wave and the people are trapped inside an upside down boat. A few people make their way to the bottom of the boat, which is now the top of the boat, hoping someone will be there to cut through the hull and pull them out.”

“Sounds rather dreadful if you ask me,” Deanna said.

“Exactly!” Tammas agreed, as if she had just struck his point for him. “Why is it called an adventure? It’s filled with people drowning, getting burned, getting injured, and making poor decisions out of fear, and six people out of hundreds come through it all with their lives and these awful memories of love ones and strangers dying horrible deaths, but they call it an adventure! Can you see someone selling it to their kids? ‘Hey, kids, let’s go to the Poseidon Adventure where we can have death served to us in all these cute, bite size chunks! Doesn’t that sound like fun? Get in the car anyway! We’re going and that’s final.’ What were people thinking back when this was made? Why isn’t called the Poseidon Tragedy? Or the Poseidon Disaster? Where’s the adventure in that?”

Deanna couldn’t help but chuckle at his animated gestures. In some respects, his mannerisms reminded him of the video-biographies of James T Kirk. Tammas often went from very stoic, emotionless qualities, to over dramatizing every word with extreme gestures and facial expressions, his voice stalling at certain places as he emphasized certain phrases as if they were almost musical. If she hadn’t known better, she would swear he was impersonating Kirk.

“Did you get anything out of the movie?” Deanna asked, still trying to think of an answer to his question.

“Yes, this awful song. It was the only song this one character seemed to know, and it’s stuck in my head,” Tammas said, shivering. “There’s got to be a morning after.”



Ugh. What kind of music is that? I mean, it fits, if you happen to be one of the six survivors, but, ugh.”

“You’re familiar with the Odyssey by Homer?” Deanna asked.

“Yes, it’s an epic poem,” Tammias said, as if he were reciting text book information, but had nothing emotional or personal to connect the story to him.

“Yes, but are you familiar with it?” Deanna asked, emphasizing the word familiar. “Look, our whole lives are these adventures. That movie is like a little vacation, with some really good things and some really awful things. It’s a reflection of life. There is good and there is bad, but all in all it’s how you perceive it that makes it an adventure, or a disaster.”

“What are you chewing,” Tammias asked.

“Gum,” she said, wondering if that was as far as he wanted to study today’s philosophical question. She was a little disappointed and decided to say as much. “I felt what I said was very profound. Did you hear any of it?”

“Gum?” he asked.

She chuckled, and showed him the gum she was chewing by blowing a bubble. “You never had gum?” Deanna asked. With a free hand she retrieved a pack of gum from her bag and handed it to Tammias. “It’s an earth treat. Spicy cinnamon flavor, enhanced with vitamin C and anti plaque, and bacteria inhibitors to help prevent tooth decay and bad breath.”

Tammias examined the pack, and traced the lettering. “Spicy cinnamon?” he mimicked her voice. He removed a stick, unfolded the paper but not the foil. He tasted it. He felt a tingle in one of his teeth and shivered

“Don’t eat the foil,” Deanna said.

Tammias removed the foil and examined the hard, flat gum. He looked at her, and back at it. How could something so hard be so chewy? It was so brittle it was easily broken in two.

“Put it in your mouth and chew it,” Deanna said.

Tammias put the gum in his mouth. At first it was dry and crumbly, but then it all became one, solid lump of malleable mass, and the flavor exploded in his mouth. His eyes were wide with excitement, and even a tear formed, and he was tempted to fan his mouth. He had never tasted anything like it.

“Don’t swallow it, chew it,” Deanna instructed. “Also, save the foil. When the flavor is gone, or you tire of chewing, wrap it up in the foil, and put it here, and I’ll dispose of it in a matter-energy recycler later.”

“And this is good for you?” Tammias asked.

“Actually, yes. It wasn’t in the old days, but, as with everything, it evolves with time. It’s been around since the ancient Mayan civilization, if I’m not mistaken,” Deanna said. “There are all sorts of flavors. We can try others later if you like.”

He chewed loudly, nodding.

“Chew with your mouth closed, though,” Deanna said. “We’re here. Are you ready to learn to ride a bike?”

Learning a bicycle wasn’t a piece of cake. He didn’t pick it up as easy as he had the antigravity forklift, but he did manage to avoid falling more than twice, and was soon able to keep up with Deanna as they followed a path along the shore. They stopped about sunset, walked out onto the beach, where Deanna spread a blanket, and broke out the

meal she had packed for them. They talked about the day, as Tammias examined the sand. He removed his shoes and pushed his feet into it, feeling the warmth it had captured from the sun. He noticed that many of the pebbles were shaped like tiny stars. He scooped up a hand full and brought it up closer to his eyes to confirm what he thought he saw. In his hand were tiny star shaped things mixed in the grains of sand, sparkling in his palm as he let it slip through his fingers. It reminded him of a book title from a list of old Science Fiction he had been browsing to adapt for a holosuite self-learning language session.

“Those are the shells of little animals,” Deanna said. “We call them star shellers, and they’re as plentiful as plankton on Earth. This beach is comprised of coral sand, the remnants of animal shells, with only bits of quartz and ruby and stuff. These particular shells come in different colors, but don’t get much bigger than that. The inside of the shells are highly reflective, and that’s why the sand here seems to sparkle in the sun and moonlight. It’s especially sparkly as the waves roll back, stirring the sand, exposing broken bits of shell.”

They sat quietly watching the horizon as the sun fell behind the planet, and the last ray disappeared into the sea, as if extinguished by the ocean, or Poseidon’s greedy hands. Of course, Poseidon was an Earth myth, he reminded himself. Then a marvelous thing happened. The sea lit up with the luminescence of sea life and it was like looking at a liquid plasma ocean. Though bioluminescence was not a hot light, just a cool, green shine that permeated the water, the sea seemed to be boiling with light. There were occasional streaks of oranges and reds and blues, but green diffused through the ocean lighting it all up at first, and then it began to fade and brighten at different places like lightning illuminating different parts of a cloud. Deanna explained that the light came from the star shellers as they shed their shells to feed. Once fed, their skins would harden to make a new shell, and by morning the sea would have lost its glow.

“Do you ever dream that you’re a jelly fish, just floating in the ocean?” he asked.

“No,” Deanna said. “Do you?”

“No,” Tammias lied, wanting his answer to match hers.

“Do you write your dreams down?” Deanna asked

“Yes,” he said. “Many of them are published online. You’re welcome to read them if you like. I’ll email you the link.”

“Okay,” Deanna said, noticing his eyes moving up and to the left.

“Done. You’ll find it when you check your email next,” Tammias said.

Deanna was surprised. “You’re implant is multitasking? And you can get a signal here?”

“There’s a tower on that building there, and I’ve got four bars,” Tammias explained, pointing to the antennae array.

Deanna understood four bars as a representation of signal strength, but she wasn’t sure she liked the idea of an implant that accessed the net. She herself wouldn’t like it, and there was the potential for internet addiction, and it seemed to her that Tammias was especially susceptible due to his social difficulties with real people. She would have to keep an eye out to ensure he wasn’t substituting his telepathic abilities for a technological ability. Ultimately, it all boiled down to one thing, a lack of social boundaries. She would just have to introduce him to lots of physical activities and other people.

“I love you, Deanna,” Tammias said.

Deanna hugged him.



Deanna had always enjoyed her classes, but now that she was working with Tammias in her spare time she was just now actually examining the possibility of doing a full time internship. Her mother, of course, would not hear of such a thing, but Deanna liked the idea of becoming a counselor. She also enjoyed the friendly banter that was often exchanged between Chandra, Gina, and Michelle after class. Gina was good at mimicking Professor Xerx so well that even Chandra found it difficult not to laugh with them. Deanna had a lab to attend, but they had classes in the same general direction and so they were walking together when Deanna noticed Riker sitting near the fountain, at the middle of the campus. She inwardly sighed, and forced her self not to look in his direction, but her friends noticed a slight change in her posture, as well as a decrease in the level of her telepathic openness. In typical telepathic society, especially amongst a group of females, it was usually considered bad form to suddenly withdraw lines of communication because the group usually wanted to help each member work through any potential issues. But Deanna was also partly human, and her friends knew if she wanted the privacy to figure something out on her own, they would not pry. None the less, Chandra became more aware of her surroundings as if looking for a threat, and she, too, saw Riker. Gina and Michelle were clued in by Chandra's unspoken look of disgust on her face and they made their own opinions of the situation.

"Are all human males so obsessive?" Gina asked.

"No," Chandra said.

"But even that kid your father's working on has OCD," Gina pointed out.

"That's why we're working with him," Chandra said.

"Oh," Gina said. "And that's why you're working with Riker, Deanna?"

"Don't start," Deanna said.

"We do have anti-stalking laws, Deanna," Chandra tightly beamed to her.

"No," Deanna said.

"YOU'RE AFRAID OF ME," Riker shot at Deanna with a burst of focused clarity that he had worked all day to send, waiting for just this moment when she would walk by and he could unleash it on her.

Deanna nearly tripped over her own feet. She wasn't sure if Riker saw her misstep, but Chandra caught it. Chandra decided not to comment on it, for this was clearly something Deanna and Riker needed to work out. That, and she noticed her friend wasn't particularly receptive to advice, at least from her, and especially at this particular moment, and about this particular subject. Had Riker been telepathically receptive, though, Chandra would have given him an ear full, so to speak.

Tammias was working with his biofeedback program, and had moved further along than he had ever before. He managed to relax his muscles and thoughts, causing the level indicator to increase in number and complexity to twice his previous efforts. Of course, the real test of mastery would be to repeat the success at the next session. Anyone looking at him might have thought he was simply meditating, sitting reclined in his chair, and in one sense he was. The difference between simple meditation and biofeedback was that he was getting audible and visual information describing exactly how relaxed he was. As he achieved greater levels of relaxation, the feedback would tell him he was doing it correctly, at the same time, he could assess how his mind and body

felt and would eventually learn to reproduce this same feeling without the biofeedback program. His feet and arms felt heavy, and tingly, the feeling that often comes from being ultra relaxed. This also increased the circulation, and consequently, his surface skin level had come up to nearly 95 degree F, just three points away from his core temperature, as he normally ran about 98. The neuro-feedback portion of the program allowed him to see the various brainwaves he was creating, and what their specific amplitude levels were. His goal lately was to increase the amount of alpha, without falling asleep, while decreasing theta and SMR, a subset of Beta waves

Before Deanna even entered the room, he started losing concentration, his mind began to wander, the skin temperature began to fall, and he began to get upset because he was losing it, and of course, because of his growing anxiety, the rate of slippage accelerated until he was even more stressed than when he first entered his biofeedback session. Had Gart been present, he would have dropped what he was doing to see why Tam was so distressed. When Deanna actually entered, he had given up, visibly upset, and was unable to sit still. He fidgeted, his leg bouncing a million times a minute.

“What’s wrong?” Deanna asked.

“I don’t know... I just feel... Ugh,” Tammas said, he got up and paced the room.

Deanna was suddenly aware that even though she had not been openly broadcasting her feelings, Tammas had somehow picked up on it. She had been very careful to avoid any telepathic bonds with him but their close working relationship had somehow brought them closer than she would have imagined. She focused on her breathing, and as she brought herself under control, Tammas began to visibly relaxed, but he didn’t get anywhere close to the level of relaxation that he had attained before she arrived.

“Look at your levels, here, Tammas,” she said pointing at the PADD that graphed out Tam’s session. “You really are doing well. You managed to bring down your SMR levels significantly with out theta falling below the set threshold. Increased alpha waves. Excellent.”

“Why do I have to worry about alpha waves?” Tammas asked.

“Well,” Deanna said. “The map we made of your brain shows very little alpha wave production. For example, when you close your eyes, the visual centers of your brain should fall into a standby or idle mode, meaning we should see an increase in alpha waves for that region of the brain. We don’t see that in you, and our goal is to try and bring balance to your brainwaves.”

“Balance,” Tammas repeated her word as if he was disgusted with all these words of waves and balance. “I’m tired of all this existential crap. Tai Chi, balance, male and female, light and darkness. Balance is irrelevant.”

“What makes you say that?” Deanna said.

“No reason. I just felt like it. It sounded good,” Tammas said.

“Well, your ability to speak has improved tremendously,” Deanna said. “You should be proud of yourself. You’ve really come a long ways in a very short time.”

“I sing better than I speak, but I can see the improvement,” Tammas agreed. He sat down on the couch next to her. “And I like living through old Earth movies. Some of the scripts during the nineteen fifties and sixties were out standing. My favorite is this movie called People Will Talk, starring Jean Crain and Carry Grant. Way ahead of its time, if you ask me. It makes me want to be a Medical Doctor. Like McCoy.”

“That’s good,” Deanna said, offering him a hug.

“I hate him,” Tammas said, his eyes closed as he enjoyed the warmth of her hug.

“Who?” she asked, taken back by his choice of words and by the sudden change of topic. “Admiral McCoy?”

“William T Riker,” he said, almost gritting his teeth.

Deanna was a little more concerned now. Apparently he wasn’t just tapping into her emotions. “What do you know about Riker?”

“I know I don’t like him,” Tammas answered, disgust growing on his face.

Deanna had never seen Tammas so animate with emotions. With a few exceptions, like when she saw him after a role playing game, he was usually very neutral, almost Vulcan like, in the way he expressed himself. “I don’t think you have enough information to make that sort of assessment,” Deanna said, matter of fact.

“You think poorly of him,” Tammas pointed out. “That’s sufficient for me.”

Deanna tensed. Was she really sending out this message? She didn’t hate Riker, not like that, so surely whatever Tammas was picking up on wasn’t coming from her. He was probably just internalizing stuff he had picked up from the environment, most probably his own internal environment. Of course, it was strange how she had to hear Tammas say he hated Riker for her to admit to herself that she didn’t hate him. She again re-evaluated her feelings, searching for the signals she had been sending.

Deanna frowned and then rubbed her temples. “Maybe I don’t hate him,” she said. “There is definitely some internal conflict, but I don’t think it is hate, and if it is, it’s not directed at him.”

“If it’s not directed at him, then it must be directed at your self,” Tammas proposed. “You should just drop him. I’ll take care of you.”

Deanna laughed and held him close to her. “I love you, too. But taking care of someone is not necessarily love.”

“I don’t understand,” Tammas said. “The movies and books I have accessed contain very clear gender roles for people in love.”

“One day you’ll find someone and fall in love,” Deanna said. “And then you’ll understand that roles aren’t always so absolute.”

“I am already in love,” Tammas insisted. “Adults too frequently dismiss their children’s capability to emote.”

“I know, and I’m not dismissing your feelings, Tammas,” Deanna said. “They are very strong, and very real. In time you will find someone who shares these feelings with you equally. Someone closer to your own age and abilities. Love has to be mutual for it to be love.”

“I don’t want anyone else,” Tammas said. “And you’re crazy to think I’ll ever find anyone more equal to my abilities.”

“Tammas, there are lots of people who are as smart, if not smarter than you,” Deanna assured him. “And I know I’m not the only one you have noticed. I catch you checking out girls all the time.”

Tammas blushed and he took a long moment before speaking again. “My implant seems to be malfunctioning.”

“What’s wrong?” Deanna asked, concerned.

“I concur with your last assessment, which means I have a new obsessive compulsive addiction,” Tammias said. “I need to be fixed before I start falling in love with every girl that comes within my field of vision.”

Deanna laughed so hard she had to sit at the edge of the couch and wipe her eyes. “What you’re experiencing is normal,” she finally said. “Of course, humans typically go through this in their teens, after they have developed more mental resources to deal with these types of feelings. Still, you’re pretty smart, and I have no doubt that you will catch up with these exciting changes.”

“I only want eyes for you,” Tammias said.

“Is that a pop song?” Deanna asked. “I’m sorry, Tammias. This is difficult for you to understand because of your age. All I can say is one day you will understand. I promise.”

“I understand,” Tammias assured her. “You don’t love me.”

Deanna slapped the arm of the couch with her palm. “Don’t ever say or think that again. I love you and we will be friends forever. Nothing either of us do or encounter will ever change that, is that clear?”

“Yes,” Tammias said, looking at the floor, feeling a bit cowed.

“Look at me when you answer, so I can see that you believe it?” Deanna said.

He looked at her, defiantly. “I don’t believe it. What you say is what all adults say to kids, especially right before they leave. The words are not real. They’re just things people say to make parting easier, makes the lie easier to swallow for the one saying it. None of this is real. This place is not real. This is all temporary. I’ll move, or you’ll move, and this will all be but a dream. Computer! End Program, poof, gone, good bye.”

Deanna took his hand and opened her mind to him. The thread of thoughts that wove their telepathic bond was made more secure with each word she spoke: “Know that I am real, and know beyond a doubt that I am your friend. No matter where we go, we are always friends. Neither time nor space nor life nor death will ever change that inscrutable fact.”

Tam’s eyes filled with tears and water streamed down his face. Was this intimacy? Was this knowledge so real that it shone with a life force all its own, brighter than the even the sun? He knew without a doubt she was sincere, and he was a little afraid and wanted to run back into the shadows where certainty was not so in his face.

“Why are you crying,” Deanna asked.

“You really do love me,” Tammias said. “Even though I am imperfect.”

“Who said you had to be perfect?” Deanna asked.

“Isn’t that why you’re so harsh on Riker?” Tammias asked.

Deanna felt a bit ashamed. “When did you become so perceptive?” Deanna asked.

“The moment you opened your heart to me, as mine has always been to you,” Tammias said. “This verbal stuff is so inefficient.”

“It can be,” Deanna agreed.

“Would calling you Imzadi be inappropriate?” he asked

“Yes,” Deanna said. “No. Maybe not. I would definitely say we were destined to meet, that we have challenged each other, and are better for it.”

“I don’t feel better,” Tammias said.

Deanna hugged Tammias close, and for the first time, as far back as he could remember, which was further than even he liked to remember, he felt very safe.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

Tammas was living at Gart's place, but it still didn't really feel like home. He slept on the bed in the guest room, but hadn't turn back the covers ever since he had arrived on Betazed. Instead, he used a sleeping bag, as if he were at a camp, and slept on top of the covers. He didn't even use the mosquito net that was available to him, but then, he really didn't need it. The local flying, biting insects seemed remarkably uninterested in him, perhaps because of his alien biology. The things in the guest room were alien to him, as were the things in most of the house, and they tended to be fragile things, for decoration not handling. This place was not for kids at his level of curiosity, or children period. He wondered how Chandra could have grown up in this house, for even her room lacked the toys he figured should be typical of childhood.

The one room he liked was the library, full of dusty, smelly old tomes that he couldn't read. The room carried with it a feeling of high traffic, as if it was the most used room in the house. The books called to him. He wasn't sure exactly what their appeal was, since the texts were indecipherable. Except for an occasional picture which he could imagine a story for, the importance of the books was exaggerated in his imagination. It reminded him of the books Mrs. Garcia had accumulated in her study, and he imagined that getting ones doctorate meant reading all of these books that spanned from one side of the study to the other, on three walls, from floor to ceiling. He couldn't imagine ever being able to read all these books, but if that's what it took to get a doctorate, then that's what he would do. He would have to make a list of all the books he needed and learn to read them so he could become accepted. He would make it a point to learn everything he could that would come with a certificate or license, and then perhaps Deanna would appreciate him more. He was already up on his amateur subspace radio license. Perhaps he'd focus on a pilot's license next.

He recognized that his mind was certainly preoccupied with Deanna, but even with her in his life, the reinforced connection, Tammas felt the longing for home with the Garcia's. He missed looking out into the ocean from his bedroom window. He missed the way the light shimmered on his walls as the wave surged overhead when high tide came in. He missed the dolphins. Especially Star. He knew that his days there were special, and that very few people ever got the opportunity to establish relationships with dolphins the way he had, or to live in a house in the sea. His life was an adventure. Deanna had taken him to the ocean several times, but it just felt different. It tasted different. He wanted to go back home, and yet, he wanted to stay with Deanna at the same time. He wanted the best of both worlds.

After reflecting over this, or more accurately, mourning his loss, for he had given up hope that he would ever be allowed to return, he spoke a letter to Natalia, trying very hard to keep it positive. He was preparing to transmit the letter, including holographic photos of him with Deanna, to the Garcia family when suddenly he was flooded by an overwhelming sense of panic. His heart rate accelerated, his breath caught in his throat, forcing him to take conscious control over his breathing to avoid passing out, and the palms of his hands began to sweat. After all his biofeedback work, he recognized the fight or flight response, but he could not identify any immediate, or nearby threat. He walked around the house, looking for something out of the ordinary, and finding nothing, he started working on his relaxation techniques. He would have better understood this



seemingly random fear had it been dark outside, or a fierce thunderstorm had been raging. Or a bomb had gone off.

But outside, it was a beautiful, sunny day, and birds and insects circled and approached the various bird feeders as if controlled by ATC. It was interesting watching the birds, but he wanted more immediate distraction, and so he turned on a computer and tuned into a local channel. The local daily programs he had become accustomed to seeing were being interrupted by a live report of a hostage situation at the museum.

Tammas knew instantly that Deanna was in trouble. He didn't know how he could help, but he knew he had to do something. The first something was to steal Gart's hovercraft from the garage. He discovered flying a hovercraft was nothing comparable to driving an antigravity forklift, even though he had watched Deanna do it on several occasions when they had traveled together. On backing it out of the garage he swiped the corner and knocked down a wall, bringing part of the roof down with it. Some of debris landed inside the vehicle, as the convertible roof was down, while other bits of debris lay scattered across the hood until Tammas spun the vehicle too quickly around. Further, he discovered it had a maximum height at which it could hover, one that didn't quite permit him to clear the fence surrounding Gart's estate, nor allow him to fly up over houses so that he could go straight to the museum. The final thing he discovered, before crashing it into the side of a building, was that at high speeds it didn't turn on a dime. Its inertia gave it a wide turning radius, and so the harder he tried to turn it, the faster the hovercraft began to spin, like a helicopter without a tail rotor. Tammas was forced to run the remaining two blocks to the museum, ignoring the shouts from people who were upset about the destruction of their property, or perhaps concerned with his visible injuries.

Scratched, bleeding, battered, and bruised, he was in visible sight of the museum when he was tackled by some unseen force and swept off his feet. That force was none other than the very same William T Riker that he so hated and despised.

♪♪▶

William T Riker couldn't believe his eyes. A kid was running towards the scene of the crime, either oblivious to, or simply ignoring, the ship on top of the museum, or the gathering security forces that were even now surrounding the museum. The ship's turret guns were swiveling around to target the kid, and without thinking, Will dodged out into the open, swept up the kid, and threw himself to the nearby decorative, brick planter, which just barely towered above his head if he scrunched. And scrunched he did.

Tammas squirmed to get loose of Riker's tight grip.

"I got to help her..." Tammas insisted. The words he used blurred together as if it were one word.

"Easy kid," Riker demanded.

Frustrated that Will wasn't listening and recognizing that he had lost the ability to speak effectively, Tammas grasped Riker's hands and tried to link telepathically. Riker got to his feet and ran back to his previous hold, hauling the screaming kid with him.

"Where did he come from?"

"Beats me, Tang. Everyone else ran the other way," Riker said. "Is Wendy still at our office?"

"Affirmative," Tang reported.

"Great. Get this kid to her and tell her to sit on him if she has to," Riker said.

"His parents must be inside."

“You got it boss,” said Tang, promptly handing the kid and instructions over to someone else.

Wendy soon found that the kid was just too over the top, out of control, and called in reinforcements. Lwaxana Troi beamed in a moment later and took charge of the situation, meaning that her manservant, Homn, had to restrain the child, while she tried to reason with him. She decided to have the four of them beamed back to her place, and there she tried placating him with food and drink, but he wouldn't have it. When the spider ship, with the single hostage of Deanna Troi, crashed, Tammas went into a fierce rage forcing Homn to lock him in a tight body grip to prevent him from escaping. Lwaxana called for a medic to come have the kid sedated.

“Please, I know where she is, I can find her, please,” Tammas insisted, all the while remaining in verbal communication mode, though his speech was obviously unintelligible. Tam was certain that if Gart were present, they would listen to him, but Gart was on the way to the hospital with his daughter. Rumor hadn't been confirmed yet, but it appeared that Deanna may have saved her by sacrificing herself. “Don't you understand? This is not a game!”

A medic arrived with a sedative to help calm the kid down. Tammas saw it, knew what it was for, and knew, no matter what, he mustn't go unconscious. He stopped his struggling and screaming, and stood absolutely still, barely breathing.

“There now,” Lwaxana said. “This is much more reasonable. Take him into the kitchen and give him the chocolate I promised him. I'm getting too old for all of this, and I must keep my focus on Deanna. What's the word on the on the hostage situation, Wendy?”

“Apparently, all the hostages have been recovered but one,” Wendy said.

Lwaxana nodded. “She's still alive, I know that much. I really can't be bothered with that kid any more. If he makes another noise, sedate him,” she said, dismissing the doctor, allowing him to join Homn and Tammas in the kitchen.

“Thank you for your help, Lwaxana Troi,” Wendy said. “I'm so sorry.”

Lwaxana embraced Wendy. “Oh, Wendy,” she said, and started to cry.

Over the next couple of days, Tammas stayed at Lwaxana's place. Apparently Gart had asked the witch, as Tammas was beginning to refer to her, to keep him while he remained with his daughter. Chandra was going to be fine, but he really didn't want to be away from her. Lwaxana, of course, understood, and she was too preoccupied by her own worries to notice anything Tammas was doing. And he was doing everything he could to keep his mind simultaneously on Deanna and Riker. He knew exactly where they both were, and had they let him, he could have gone right to them. Instead, he was trying to encourage Riker to move in the right direction. Of course, he couldn't communicate with Riker like “go right, go left,” but he could send very positive thoughts when he was moving correctly, and withdraw that support when he was heading in the wrong direction. To help concentrate, Tammas wandered through Deanna's room. He could smell that she slept here. He would smother his face in her pillow, or push his way through the clothes in her closet, breathing in deeply. Her aroma, bits of hair, bits of dried skin, sweat, hormones, and everything a body sheds, her full essence, would always be in this room, no matter how much time went by, and no matter how good or often the room and the items in the room were cleaned.

Riker, of course, had no idea he was getting extra help. He was confident in his ability to track and usually tended to ignore his gut feeling. On this occasion though, he knew that he had a connection with Deanna that he had never had with anyone else, and so when his intuition told him to move in a specific direction, he gave it more reverence than he might have before meeting Deanna. If you asked him, he simply knew that he would find her, that he would be the one to rescue her. That was his destiny. Riker not only found Deanna, but he was rewarded for it with romance, just like in one of Deanna's westerns.

Tammas let out a shriek that had everyone running up the stairs at full speed to investigate. They found him hitting his head against the wall in Deanna's room. Lwaxana swept him into her arms.

"Hey, what's wrong, honey," Lwaxana asked, unable to reach him even telepathically. "Wendy, go call Gart and tell him I need him."

It took a moment for Gart to arrive via a transporter. He materialized outside and Homn let him in and showed him up stairs. Tammas was awake, but non responsive. Gart was not use to experiencing frustration, but that's what he was feeling as he discovered even his greater telepathic abilities couldn't penetrate through Tam's defenses and help break him out of the cell he had created for himself. Gart administered a sedative, secretly hoping that Tammas would be normal when he woke up, as if sleep might reset his neural functioning.

"What happened?" Lwaxana asked.

"I suspect the worse," Gart said, suggesting that he believed Tammas was somehow linked with Deanna telepathically, and that she must have died.

"No," Lwaxana said, wanting to die herself just at the thought of such a possibility. "I may not be as strong a telepath as you, but I would know if my daughter died, even if she was on the other side of the galaxy. There's no way this mere child, a human at that, could discern such a thing and I can't."

"If it's not that, I don't have a clue," Gart said.



When the sedative wore off, Tammas felt some confusion, then some stirring of memories, then anger, and then he locked down on his thoughts again, blocking everything and everyone out before Gart even had a chance to get a feel for what he was dealing with. He was concerned that Tammas was having a nervous break down, and so he put in a call for Admiral McCoy.

"I've done everything I know how to do," Gart said. "Short of an archaic electro shock therapy, I just don't have anything for this."

"My god, man, zapping his brain with electricity isn't an answer," McCoy said.

"I know that," Gart snapped back. He sighed. "It's just my way of saying I'm at my wits end."

"I know," McCoy said. "Hang on a moment."

Exactly four and a half minutes later, McCoy came back on line. "I've arranged for a ship to retrieve Tammas and transport him to Vulcan. They can have him there quicker than I can get out there to you, so I will simply rendezvous with him there."

"I'm really sorry. I feel like I let you down," Gart said.

"Oh, Gart, you didn't let me down. As best as I can tell from these tricorder scans you sent me, my guess is he activated his Vulcan genes for emotion suppression, and,

quite frankly, over did it. Highly over did it, judging by the neural cellular stress level,” McCoy said. “Was there some drama there recently?”

Gart sighed and filled him in on all the drama, providing details from his daughter’s injury to the dramatic chase and recovery of Deanna Troi. He explained how he thought Deanna had been killed based on Tam’s behavior. He told him of how close Tammias had gotten to Deanna, and that he was beginning to suspect a bond had formed between them, even though he had taken measures to prevent it.

“What ship should I expect?” Gart finally asked.

“The USS Potemkin,” McCoy said. “She’ll be there in four days.”



Deanna Troi buzzed a third time before the door opened and Gart answered. He looked like a man who had not slept well in over a week. He actually looked like she felt, but she didn’t comment on it.

“I heard you were okay,” Gart said. “But I am relieved to see so in person.”

“Can we talk?” Deanna asked.

It was evident that Deanna had been crying, so he started shifting some of his psychological skills to the forefront of his brain to be employed on Deanna and her problem, letting his personal worries drift away. “Sure, come into the study,” he said, guiding her to a comfortable place to sit. She noticed he had a book out, and had probably been reading it, under a soft light from a hover lamp, positioned so that as Gart sat reading, the light would fall perfectly on the pages of the book. A glass of milk sat on a stand next to his favorite chair.

Gart arranged a chair for her in front of his chair, while saying, “I can’t thank you enough for all you did for Chandra. Sit, talk to me.” He sat down and gave her his full attention.

Deanna sat down and almost immediately started weeping, knowing full well that she was safe to do so. Gart had never judged her harshly, and was kind to everyone she could think of, always very approachable, humble, soft spoken, and so it was very easy to open up to him. Through her tears, pain, and confusion, she managed to talk about her abduction, her rescue, her time with Riker, the confrontation with her mother, then witnessing her mother’s confrontation with Riker, her turning away from him, listening to him call to her, the final words between her and her mother, how she felt when she watched Riker leave from an upstairs window, then her mother’s ultimatum and unreasonable demands on her life, then how she told her mother off, and how she finally left in a fit of rage to go join Riker, only to find him in bed with Wendy. She was filled with hurt and uncertainty about her future and upset about her recent past choices as if she could contribute them all to lapses in judgment. Then, very suddenly, she became keenly aware that Gart was suppressing strong emotions of his own. Specifically, anger. Her tears stopped flowing, and she felt a sudden, surreal displacement from her own worries to the very real concerns about Gart’s emotional state. If she had not known him better, she would have suspected that she was in physical danger.

“You’re angry?” Deanna asked Gart, not bothering to wipe her tear stained face.

Gart fumed silently, but he was being generous enough not to broadcast his feelings telepathically. The only trace of his emotions was on his face, and for a telepath to be so angry that it reflected on his face alone, without emanating in psychic waves,

was a chilling thing to experience, even for someone like Deanna, with only partial abilities.

“Yes,” Gart said, the words escaping his tight lips.

Deanna blinked, wondering what she had done, but then figured, it wasn't necessarily something she had done. “Um, why? What's wrong?”

“Let's see if you can figure it out,” Gart said.

Oh, dear. If he wants me to work, I must have done something wrong, she thought. “Something I said?”

Gart forced his breath out through his nose, an auditory event that startled Deanna, his chest collapsing before he took another breath in before unleashing on her. “Do you really think, given the number of people that were searching for you, and given the radius of the search area, that it was just a coincident that Riker found you?” Gart snapped.

“Uh?” Deanna asked, a bit taken back. This was not proceeding the way she imagined it. “It was...I really hadn't thought about it.”

“Obviously. So what was it? Luck? Destiny? Girl, wake up and smell the coffee,” Gart snapped. “There's no such thing as astrology, magic, fairy tales, and luck. You are not strong enough of a telepath to have guided Riker to you and it certainly wasn't your mother. Hell, I couldn't have done it, and my telepathic rating is off the scale! So, you tell me, how might these events have come to pass?”

“I don't know what you're looking for,” Deanna said, her voice shaky.

“An admission of guilt, for starters,” Gart said.

“For what?” Deanna asked, confused.

“I specifically requested that you avoid creating a telepathic bond with Tammias, and you went ahead and did it anyway,” Gart said. “I can see the connection just as plain as day.”

“No, I mean, yes, but,” Deanna stammered. “I just wanted to reassure him.”

“Damn it, Deanna,” Gart said, pounding the small table beside so hard that his glass of milk over turned. It swelled around the book he was reading, streamed, and spilled over the edges to the floor.

Deanna jumped. She also had to resist the compulsion to clean the milk, which wasn't hard because Gart's energy was raw and intense, and she was afraid of getting closer to him for fear of being struck. She watched the milk dripping off the table because she couldn't stand to make eye contact.

Gart pressed on. “You can't go boosting every client's psyche with your own emotional strength. Look at you! You can barely support your own emotional weight, and yet you expect to carry your mother's weight, and Riker's weight, and Tam's weight, and no doubt the rest of all Betazed's on top of that? Your first obligation is to yourself. If you can't find the moral fortitude to make a decision and stick with it, and own up to the resulting repercussions, then you need to stop begrudging the people who make those decisions for you. Second, if you are going to continue counseling people, you've got to trust that somewhere, deep inside the heart of every person is the strength to stand up and face the world, whatever world that may be, and carry on. Whether they find it or not is irrelevant, you have to allow them the opportunity to do it.”

“I thought it was only a crush,” Deanna said, almost whimpering under Gart's controlled anger. She would have been happier if he had punished her physically, simply

slapped her face, or struck her. Only her dad had ever produced such a strong feeling of shame and failure. "I really thought I was helping him."

"He doesn't understand it was just a crush," Gart explained. "He may be a precocious little prodigy, but deep inside, he's just an eight year old kid. He doesn't have the coping skills to deal with adult stuff, and certainly not the wisdom and experience to avoid jealousies and anger. Hell, you're supposedly an adult and look at how you're handling Riker's suspected impropriety! Did you ever consider that your rejection, coupled with your mother's final stand, might be too much for any mere human to tolerate? I don't know what coping skills Riker has, but I would certainly have drowned my sorrows in bottle of whiskey, and worried about the repercussion on the morrow. You're just so caught up in you, how you feel and what you're experiencing mixed with this delusional fantasy, romance novel, hero crap, coupled with this love ever lasting nonsense that you failed to see that we're all just getting along the best we can. When you rejected Riker, you had no right to expect him to cope in a manner you would find reasonable. That's what happens when you boost someone. Eventually someone expects a certain outcome yet experiences another and the fall is generally a hard one."

Deanna was at a loss for words and overwhelmed with thoughts and emotions. She wanted to flee, just as she had from her mother. Just as she had from Riker.

"Right now," Gart said, lowering his tone, his anger fading. "There is a small boy who believed he had a commitment from you, a belief as strong as any kid who believes in fairy tales. He saved your life by guiding Riker to you, which is an amazing accomplishment in and of itself, and his reward for doing so was betrayal. He didn't just experience the loss of a love, he experienced a loss of a dream. It's like telling a kid there is no magic before they're equipped to deal with it. You have irrevocably changed who he is, and you've changed who you are. Before you met Tammias, or Riker for that matter, do you really think you would have gone up against your mother? Do you really think you would be questioning who you are today? Do you think if I had told you a year ago you would be a counselor and were probably going to move off Betazed that you would have believed me? Of course not!"

Deanna was speechless. She felt like an ignorant child, her mouth agape, processing information but not sure how to fix her transgression. She knew there were no words that could make it better, and interrupting Gart with apologies at this moment was inappropriate. In a way, she knew she deserved to be punished, so she simply listened, knowing anything Gart said or did would be less than she deserved.

"Here's the analogy," Gart said, wrapping up his impromptu lecture. "Every time someone touches you, you move in a new direction. Maybe the change isn't much, or noticeable at first, because you've got inertia. But you give it enough time and distance, even a mere deflection of one degree can send you light years from where you thought you would end up. And sometimes, as is the case with you and Tammias and Riker, you not only have a complete directional shift, but you evolve into something altogether new."

Though Deanna wasn't feeling too good at the moment, she could see more and more of the truth in what Gart had been telling her as she continued to process it. She was indeed no longer her mother's "little one." She was Deanna Troi, and her life mattered, and her decisions had repercussions, wide ranging effects that reached out beyond her small world.

“Will Tammias be okay?” Deanna asked, a quiet resolve settling over her.

Gart shrugged. He was all out of words. He sunk into his chair, exhausted by the rage he had allowed to consume him.

“May I see him? Would it help?” Deanna asked.

His first impulse was to say “no, you’ve done enough damage,” but he was older, wiser, and too drained from his emotions to fight. Besides, he thought, it wasn’t his job to punish her, and her mistake wasn’t criminal, or it would have had to have gone to another level beyond him. It was sufficient for him to merely point out the error of her ways and let her learn. Punishment was her job, and if it came by trying to fix things, bringing back some sort of balance, then penance was possible. Gart waved his hands, giving her permission to go up and see Tammias. He remained seated, and watched her until she disappeared up the first spiral of stairs leading to the second floor. He mentally gave her directions to Tam’s room.

The door was open and Deanna went in. She noticed the tiny bottle of sand he had collected from the beach they had visited together. It sat on a little turntable, with three tiny spotlights focused on it so that the tiny sea-star shells sparkled as it spun. Also, the black belt Tammias had been awarded for completing all the tests in Tai Chi was on top of the dresser, with several other mementos. She examined a folded piece of foil, and discovered it contained some gum she had chewed, and she now realized just how obsessed he had become with her. Not that she didn’t collect mementos to remind her of personal encounters. She had no intentions of throwing out the poem Riker had given her, but she couldn’t imagine saving his chewing gum! Thinking of Riker currently caused her some pain, and imagining saving his chewed gum made her laugh and cry. She had thought Tammias had been joking when he said he had wanted a vial of her bath water.

A PADD lying on the nightstand displayed his medical information, which she casually glanced over as she pulled up a chair next to the bed. She leaned in and ran her fingers through his hair.

“Tammias? Tam, honey, can you hear me?” Deanna asked in a soft voice. “I wanted to thank you for saving my life. I know you helped. More than you’ll ever get credit for. Will you talk to me?”

Tammias remained unresponsive. Deanna wanted to cry more, but decided she had shed enough tears to last her a lifetime. It was now time to start being an adult and start being responsible for her life and the decisions she made and will make, regardless of what other people thought, including her mother.

“Well, it was worth the try,” Gart’s said, his words in her head. She wondered if he was cleaning up the spilt milk.

“Tammias,” Deanna said, in a sudden, harsh, loud voice. “Get up this instant! Tammias Parkin Arblaster-Garcia!”

“Deanna, come on back down stairs,” Gart called to her mentally. He felt her frustration, which mirrored his own in dealing with this situation.

Deanna sighed, pushed the chair back and stood. She was guilty of creating an inappropriate bond with a patient and this was the price. Tammias would pay the price for her lack of experience and judgment. It was an extremely sobering lesson. She had not realized she had such power. She saw the sand, the belt, the gum, and a guitar he had played for her. A song. She felt certain she could reach him with a song, but it needed to

be something simple. Something that would stick in his head, that reverberated with his OCD. Something annoying, maybe a jingle. Perhaps the Laughing Vulcan and His Dog? Then it came to her. It was one of those childhood songs that her father had sung to her once or twice, but which she had only recently been reminded of because occasionally Tam's obsessive-compulsive disorder had him humming it. It was one she had obsessed over as a kid. She decided to sing it out loud, turning back to face him.

"Row, row, row your boat," she sang. "Gently down the stream..."

The medical display began to show mental activity, which in an odd way seem to reflect the pattern of Deanna's singing. She returned to the side of the bed, and sang softly to him as she caressed his hair. Tam's head turned towards her. She kept singing, until eventually Tammias began to hum along, and finally began to sing the words.

Deanna dropped out and he finished, solo.

Tammias opened his eyes and looked at her, passive. The twinkle in his eyes seemed to be gone. She wanted to see his eyes live with wonder, as they were when he chewed his first piece of gum. But he seemed empty, drained. Though she could not discern any hint of emotion on his face, she didn't have any compulsion about not displaying the relief she felt on hers.

"Oh, Tammias," Deanna said, so pleased she kissed him on the cheek.

Tammias looked puzzled. One of her tears dropped to his face, and he noted its warmth. She laughed and wiped it off his face with her thumb.

"Are you alright?" she asked, wiping back her tears.

"The song is a cannon," Tammias said.

"Uh? Oh. Yes, I think so," Deanna said, and sniffed. Why did noses have to run when your eyes water, she wondered? And then she wondered if his use of the word cannon was the traditional, musical connotation.

"I thought the words were meaningless," Tammias said, his voice also seemed to lack an emotional component. He looked up at the ceiling, obviously considering the song.

This was the new Tammias, the one he had evolved into because of her inappropriate actions, she thought. He had learned to speak because of her, and his voice had been over the top with rich emotions and his face had been equally expressive, as if he were an actor that needed to be seen from the back row. Now, it was as if the spark in him had been extinguished, like a cancer patient with only the strength to speak. Like a boy so close to you he has to whisper a secret.

"But the words are important," Tammias said. "They're not simply nonsense words."

"How so?" Deanna asked, pushing his hair back, wondering how long it would take for him to fully recover, if ever, that shining, happy person she had come to know.

"Row your boat," Tammias said. "Not my boat. Not Riker's boat. Definitely not your mother's boat. Row your boat. And how? Gently. Not fast, and not up stream. It's a waste of energy to struggle against the stream. But gently, so as our ripples don't become waves and topple other boats. The Poseidon Adventure. Still, some confusion. Do you suppose the stream represents time?"

"Maybe," Deanna said, chuckling, and wiping more tears from her face. "I hadn't ever thought about it. Not like this."



“Well, if stream represents time, then we have no choice but to row downstream, cause there is no going back,” Tammias said, his gaze distant, as if he could see through the ceiling. “And life isn’t a dream, is it? If it were we could do what ever we want without consequence.”

“No, there is still consequence in dreams. All the other characters in a dream are you, so what you do to them is what you do to yourself,” she said.

Tammias nodded. “I had always hated this song because I thought the words were too simple. Meaningless. Is there always a lesson? Why would this song annoy me for so long in the back of my mind and only now the lesson appears to me? Does ‘the Laughing Vulcan and His Dog’ also have a hidden meaning? If I figure out the meaning will I still be obsessing over it? Is this why people like my writing so much, because it means something different to an adult than it does to me? I thought my stories were all literal, just dreams I had to write down, but they might be metaphors for a larger theme that runs rampant though my life but it’s so big that I either can’t see it or, perhaps I’m lacking some quality. Intelligence, age, experience... I’m sorry, Deanna. I’ll be quiet now.”

“Tammias, if you were any more quiet, you wouldn’t be here,” Deanna said.

## CHAPTER NINE

“You have to go,” Gart said.

“I’m not getting on the transporter pad,” Tammas resisted, firmly planting a foot.

“It’s very safe,” said the transporter technician, Lean Carpani.

“I may be a kid, but I know I have rights, and one of those rights is not to have my molecules scattered throughout the Universe,” Tammas said.

The technician shrugged. “The kids right,” she said. “I can’t transport him against his will.”

“Ah, would you explain to the Potemkin that there will be a slight delay while we find a shuttle to escort him up?” Gart said.

“Sure, hang on,” the Technician said. “Transporter Betazed Seven A, to USS Potemkin, come in please.”

“This is Transporter Tech Malone, go ahead Betazed,” answered the transporter chief on the Potemkin. “We’re still waiting for your signal.”

“Yes, well, we have a slight problem,” Lean said. “The young man is refusing to be transported.”

“Did you say he’s refusing?” Malone asked.

“Affirmative,” Lean confirmed.

“I thought all kids wanted to be transported,” Malone said.

“Not this one,” Lean said. “Gart Xerx, his chaperone, is going to charter a shuttle to bring him up. I wanted to explain the delay.”

“Stand by, one,” Malone said.

Lean smiled at Gart and shrugged. “It’ll just be a moment,” she said, trying to establish some small talk, unconsciously pulling down on the hem lines of her skirt because the kid’s eyes kept going there. She was relieved when the Potemkin’s transporter chief hailed her again.

“Um, Betazed Seven A, this is Malone,” the Potemkin’s transporter chief said. “If you will have Mr. Xerx escort the package to the Lenax spaceport, hangar seven, we’ll have a shuttle waiting for your arrival.”

“I’m sorry for the inconvenience,” Xerx said.

“It’s not an inconvenience. The shuttle was picking up supplies anyway,” Malone said. “They will delay their lift off until you arrive. A William T Riker will be waiting.”

“Oh, great. I know him,” Gart said, smiling at Tammas who was now planning to drag his feet over sharing a shuttle with Riker. “Good day.”

“Potemkin out,” Malone said.

Lean powered down the system. “Have a nice day, guys.” She smiled at Tammas, whose eyes lingered on her a little bit longer than she would have expected from a kid his age. She resisted the urge to adjust her skirt down, and thought how amusing it was that kids are getting started earlier and earlier. She attributed it to all the holosuite gaming going on in the worlds these days.

“Come on, Tammas,” Gart called, but Tammas seemed hesitant. “What’s wrong?”

“I’m thinking,” Tammas said, wondering how he was going to avoid Riker. Transporter, or Riker. Transporter... Riker.

“You’re not going to change your mind and use the transporter after I just arranged for your shuttle ride,” Gart said. “Now come along.”

Tammas sighed, and followed Gart out of the room. Lean returned to her Engineering homework. What a strange kid, she thought.

William Riker was hopeful about the delay, thinking Deanna was going to come around the corner any second. He was a little disappointed when Wendy, Gart, and Tammas came around the corner instead.

“Hey, Will,” Wendy said.

“Wendy. Doctor Xerx,” Riker said. “I was glad to hear your daughter got out of the hospital so quickly.”

“Thank you,” Gart said. “I have a favor to ask of you before you go.”

“Anything,” Riker said.

“Tam’s the reason for the delay,” Wendy said.

“Um, it still takes nine months, doesn’t it?” he said, trying to jest.

“Don’t be silly,” Wendy said, amused. “Of course I got nine months left.”

Not expecting the quick retort, Riker nearly stumbled. “Uh?”

“Just kidding, Will. Relax,” she said.

“That’s not funny,” Will said.

“What does any of this have to do with getting me to Vulcan?” Tammas asked.

“I’m taking you to Vulcan?” Will asked.

“You’re taking him to Vulcan,” Wendy said.

“I am?” Riker asked. He hadn’t heard any of this.

“The Potemkin is, and you’re now part of the crew, so, I guess that means you,” Wendy said.

“He should have a guardian awaiting him on the Potemkin, if the flight schedules coincided,” Gart said.

“Very well,” Riker said. “So, Tammas, have you ever been on a shuttle before?”

Tammas glowered at Riker but did not answer.

“What’s up with him?” Riker asked.

“He’s a child, Commander,” Xerx said. “Tammas. Behave.”

“Of course,” Riker said. “Come on, then.”

Xerx leaned down to Tam’s height. “Remember what I’ve taught you. Practice your meditations and you’ll be fine. Also, know you are always welcome in my home,” Gart said, mentally.

Tammas reached out and touched Xerx’s face, and then hugged Wendy. He observed Riker’s posture and noticed impatience, and decided to drag out his departure a little more just to antagonize the Commander. And though his prolong hug with Wendy was suppose to be torture for Riker, he was beginning to note how pleasantly warm her embrace was. Tammas was beginning to suspect that there was definitely something medically wrong with him.

“Tammas, go on,” Gart told him, fully aware of his intended mischief, and noticing Wendy was feeling a bit awkward.

Tammas slung his backpack with the souvenirs and a few clothes he had collected, and boarded the shuttle. The toy black footed ferret’s head stuck out of the pack, as if keeping an eye out for people sneaking up on him. Riker followed him on, closing the door behind them. Tammas had gone right to the co-pilots chair and sat down.

“Hey, kid, that’s my chair. You’re over here,” Riker said. “And you will strap in.”

“You don’t have to strap in,” Tammas pointed out.

“It’s regulations. Kids will be strapped in,” Riker insisted.

Tammas tossed his bag down, sat, and pulled the straps out of their hidden recess. He wondered if he could challenge Riker on this “rule,” but the more resistance he gave the more time he would end up spending with the man. He wanted to be done already.

Riker put Tam’s bag into a compartment. “As soon as you get clearance, Ensign.”

“Aye, sir,” the Ensign said.

Riker felt as if the back of his head was burning and he turned to see Tammas staring at him with laser eyes, his arms crossed across his chest. He shivered and turned back to what he was doing.

“What’s with the kid?” the ensign asked, not looking back.

“Beats me,” Riker said. “I think that’s the kid I saved the other day.”

“Try not to do it again,” the Ensign said.

Riker permitted himself a smile, but otherwise didn’t encourage that line of humor.

“Besides,” the Ensign continued, “Kids and starships are a bad combination, if you ask me, Sir.”

“Yeah,” Riker agreed, glancing back at Tammas. “But times are changing. It won’t be long before its standard practice for whole families to live on board starships.”

“Yeah, right, and we’ll be letting the kids pilot the Starship,” the Ensign laughed.

Riker laughed, too. “Yeah. Can you seem some kid saving a Starship when the highly trained officers can’t?”

“Or an entire Away Mission revolving around saving kids?” the ensign said.

“Or kids swaying the command decisions...” Riker said.

“Trust me,” the Ensign said. “It’ll never happen.”

They both had a good laugh.

The shuttle departed Betazed, signaling the Potemkin of its approach. Tammas had resisted even small talk with Riker, and so Riker simply chatted with Ensign Garold. Tammas did observe a bit of water vapor freeze to the glass of the left port window as the ship climbed out of the atmosphere. It reminded him of his first solo rocket flight. The Potemkin loomed ahead of them larger and more impressive than Tammas remembered seeing in the past, but it was still a familiar sight. He was sure it was the Potemkin that he had seen on that memorable occasion when he launched himself into space. What were the odds of it once again coming to his rescue, he wondered? The moment they touched down, Tammas clicked out of his harness and jumped to the door before the power down sequence had finished.

“Hey, wait a minute,” Riker said, getting up to stop him.

But the door was opening and Tammas was through it before the ramp had even finished lowering. Riker followed, not that he would have been able to do anything had the shuttle bay leaked any atmosphere while they slipped in through the annular shield. Tammas tore across the hangar deck, and pushed the button to open the door that allowed him egress from the hangar deck to the rest of the Potemkin. Riker pursued.

“I said wait a minute,” Riker yelled, running to catch up to Tammas.

The door cycled through its safety, and slid open to reveal the Captain and a person in a robe. Riker tried to gain composure as he slid to a halt in front of the Captain. Tammas leaped into the arms of the man in the robe, his hood falling back to reveal the highly decorated, and well-known Vulcan.

“Um, Ambassador Spock,” Riker said, surprised.

“Lt.,” Captain Keller said. “I know you were anxious to get here, but you could have waited for the full power down sequence before exiting the shuttle.”

“Aye, Captain,” Riker said.

“Thank you for your assistance in transporting Tammas, Lt.,” Spock said.

“Captain, if you’ll excuse us, Tammas and I will retire to my quarters. Please notify us when we have arrived at Vulcan.”

“Of course, Ambassador. Please let me know if there is anything I or my crew can do to make your stay more comfortable,” Captain Keller said.

Spock nodded, and walked away with Tammas. Captain Keller turned back to Riker, who was feeling a bit anxious. He looked to the Captain, wondering if he should even asked.

The Captain decided to oblige his new Officer’s unasked query. “Don’t even ask,” Keller said. “All I know is some retired Admiral with a bee up his bonnet managed to facilitate our maintenance and repairs, and with no little subterfuge, had us rendezvous with the Ambassador, swing by here ahead of schedule, and now would have us expedite their delivery to Vulcan.”

“How odd,” Riker said.

“That’s just the half of it,” Captain Keller said. “You and I are the only ones who know about Ambassador Spock’s presence, and we’re to forget that, if you know what I mean.”

“I understand.”

“Oh? Then you understand more than I do. By the way, welcome aboard, Lt. Riker,” Captain Keller said, giving Riker a firm hand shake.



Captain Keller piloted the shuttle that delivered Tammas and Spock to one of the busiest orbital facility at Vulcan. Tammas got a good look at the registry at the bottom of the Saucer section: the USS Potemkin, 1657 C, as the shuttle backed into a docking port. Spock thanked Keller personally for delivering them, pulled his hood up, and exited the shuttle. Tammas followed, flashing back to the hustle and bustle of Deep Space K7. The Orbital Star Base at Vulcan was different. There were more Vulcans present in this one place than Tammas had ever seen before, which made sense, them being at Vulcan, and all. Even the air smelled of Vulcans. Living and breathing on a station made smells and taste more noticeable. There were still quite a few humans, but the diversity that he had witnessed at K7 did not seem to be here. And the smell of humans on the station was quite noticeably different than it had been on the Hood, obviously suggesting that concentrations of people made a difference. It wasn’t that the Vulcan smell was an unpleasant smell. It was just different than humans. In fact, he would say humans smelt more unpleasant than Vulcans, if he were pinned to make a preference.

From the space station, Spock and Tammas took a private shuttle down to a small spaceport. From there they took a tram to the outskirts of the city, where Tammas got use to seeing more and more hooded Vulcans coming and going. He was getting curious

as to what sort of game this was, hiding under the hood. Not all Vulcans hid themselves. Most of them, but certainly not all. Yes, it was hot, and the sun was intense, but it wasn't like they were avoiding sun exposure. At the ninth stop, Spock got up and Tammas followed him out of the tram. The heat hit Tammas like a train, and he wanted to return to the air-conditioned comfort of the tram. His sister's words about comparing Vulcan to hell came to mind.

"I must pick up a few items from market before we head home," Spock said.

"Okay," Tammas said, taking in all the strange sights and smells. He was more curious about exploring new surroundings than he had been when first arriving on Betazed, probably due to Deanna's influence. He knew that he had changed, or evolved somehow, but if you asked him he couldn't tell you in what way. He wanted new experiences and he wondered if he would ever feel settled again. Spock urged him to keep up and he hurried his pace. He was not likely to ever argue with Spock, he realized, as he might with Pa Pa, grandfather, Admiral, Doctor Leonard Bones McCoy. Whatever Spock said, Tammas was going to do.

None the less, he became distracted and began to wander in a new direction, and inquired telepathically about a sign on a certain vendor's shop. Spock redirected his focus, and Tammas returned to following Spock through the bustling crowd.

"We agreed you would avoid using telepathy," Spock reminded him.

"Okay," Tammas said, making sure he said it out loud. He looked up into the sky to see if he could see the Hood. He couldn't, and he wondered if it had already departed on some adventure, or would be staying a couple of days. He blinked in the heavy sunlight, wondering how far up he would have to go before the air started cooling substantially. He also wondered why people use air conditioners when it might be possible to just erect pipes up into the atmosphere and pump the cooler air down to the ground level.

They forged on quietly through the streets, occasionally slowing so Spock could examine the fruits and vegetables of a near by vendor. While at one booth, something stirred in a bag near Tam's feet. Tammas looked to Spock, who had dropped his hood and was haggling with the booth keeper. He was tempted to send a telepathic query, which seemed less rude than interrupting the haggling process, but then, he reminded himself he was not to use that skill. He looked back to the sack and knelt to examine it. The sack shifted in his hands. Again he peered back at Spock and the vendor before returning his attention to the sack, where curiosity finally got the better of him. He opened it.

A creature leaped out of the sack. Tammas gave a cry as he fell backwards, his hands coming up to protect his face from the thing that was bearing down on him. He resisted, as it licked at his face, a tooth brushing the side of his cheek so that Tammas was sure the creature was trying to bite his face off.

"You'll have to pay for that," yelled the vendor. He was an Andorian and Tammas would have been impressed that an Andorian's face could actually become even more blue when displaying emotions, but Tammas was still quite distracted by his life or death struggle.

"I don't see why I should pay for your carelessness," Spock said.

Tammas continued to cry for help.

"It has imprinted on your child and is now useless to me," the vendor said.

Spock picked the creature up by the scruff of the neck, holding it well above, and out of Tam's reach. It struggled to return to Tammias, reaching for him. Tammias struggled to regain composure. As he looked around to see how his emotional outburst had disrupted the quiet little Vulcan street, he quickly put a lid on it and stood up and brushed himself off, as if embarrassment from losing one's composure could brush off so easily. The animal seemed less foreboding now that he could see what it was. He had no idea what it was, but it looked less threatening, none the less, especially hanging from Spock's grip. In fact, the more it whined and struggled to get loose from Spock's grasp the cuter it seemed. Tammias looked to Spock and tried to figure out what his response should be. Spock was simply unreadable by any measure he had been taught on Betazed, and he was still restricted in his use of empathy. It would have been easy enough to gather intelligence by following his telepathic thread back into Spock's mind, but he was quite aware that he needed permission to do so.

"If you don't take it, I'll have to put it down," the vendor said. "Either way, you just bought it."

"Tammias," Spock said. "The shopkeeper is right about one thing. It was irresponsible for you to examine his property without asking."

Tammias didn't have a response for that.

"You are responsible for its life," Spock said. "Are you willing to care for it?"

"Yes," Tammias agreed. He didn't want the shopkeeper putting it down.

"Very well," Spock said, lowering the creature into Tam's arms. "You will be responsible for its well being and training. It will not respond to telepathic communications. You will have to use hand and voice commands. Also, I expect you to reimburse me for the price of this sehlat, which I had not intended to purchase."

"Okay," Tammias agreed. It was large, heavy, warm, and very soft. It tried to snuggle in closer, putting its head at his neck, and licking. It made a noise like a soft chanting, "bububububu," not unlike the baby, Earth, Polar Bears made in the documentary he had seen while browsing through an Earth Encyclopedia. Klondike and something...

"Perhaps you would also be interested in purchasing some food and this sehlat kit for beginners?" the shopkeeper offered, with a huge grin.

"We will take a pound of the kitten food, and a half liter of the milk formula," Spock said.

"The kit comes with a leash, and a training book," the shopkeeper said.

"Just the food and formula," Spock said. "Thank you."

With this new burden, Tammias found it a struggle to keep up with Spock as they proceeded to his home and was relieved when they took a cable car up to the top of the mountain. For one, the cable car was much cooler, but also he was doubtful he could have walked much further. They were alone in the car, and so Tammias had his choice of views, all of which were hot, arid desert landscapes, large circular patches describing some form of crop or gardening, and domed habitats stretching as far as the eye could see. He noticed some sulfur springs, and some boiling pits, with water vapor rising, and hoped to go investigate them closer some day. He put it on his list of things to do, which was growing by leaps and bounds. Tammias continued to unconsciously pet the animal the whole while he took in the immediate sights of Vulcan.

"Spock?" Tammias asked.

“Yes,” Spock said. Spock had been observing Tammas as he stared out the window that stretched the length of the car.

“All of this is a waste,” Tammas said.

“Please clarify your statement,” Spock said.

“All of this,” Tammas said, turning to Spock. “All of this energy, help, attention, and resources that have and are being put into my continued existence is a waste. Evolutionary speaking, I would have been abandoned by the hunter gathering tribe, left under a tree with an ostrich egg full of water. And when the water ran out, I would die.”

“We are no longer at the hunter gatherer stage of life,” Spock said.

“Perhaps, technologically speaking, but biologically speaking?” Tammas asked. “I’m requiring more energy than is logical. Just the energy necessary to run the Starship that brought me here is astronomical. There is no balance, no logic...”

“Life is not always logical,” Spock said. “Sometimes the needs of the one outweigh the needs of the many. Indeed, the many will often rally around the one, for there is benefit in it for them as well, even when recognizing that the one can never repay the debt to the many.”

“That just doesn’t make sense,” Tammas said.

“You are operating from several false premises,” Spock said. “You are not a waste. You are, for the lack of a better term, family. Also, resources are only limited by technology, and since our technology gives us tremendous returns, it is only wise that we use them accordingly. We are not wanting.”

“But you were busy,” Tammas protested.

“It was time for me to visit home again. You are not an inconvenience,” Spock said. “And Tammas, I would not lie to you.”

Sarek and his wife, Perrin, greeted them at the door.

“Oh, Spock, it’s been too long,” Perrin said. “Hello, Tammas. What is this that you have?”

“It’s my pet sehlat,” Tammas said, showing it to her as if he had known her all his life, though this was their first meeting.

Sarek raised an eyebrow at Spock.

“It imprinted on him at market,” Spock explained.

“No doubt in a similar fashion that it happened to another young Vulcan I once knew,” Sarek said.

Tammas looked up, thinking he had heard playful banter. Sarek closed the door and took one of the bags of vegetables from Spock, and headed towards the kitchen.

“What is its name?” Perrin asked.

“I hadn’t thought of one,” Tammas said, setting the sehlat on its feet to let it romp around on its own. It never wandered far from Tammas, and it would always look to him before pushing its boundaries or trying something new. If the something new frightened it, it would rush back and hide behind Tam’s legs.

“If I recall correctly, yours was called I-Chaya,” Sarek said.

“Your memory is impeccable,” Spock said.

“I-Chaya,” Tammas repeated. “No. I think I will name him Sparky.”

“Very human of you,” Sarek agreed.



“Tammas, why don’t you take Sparky out back into the garden,” Perrin said. “Sarek, Spock, why don’t you retire to the study. I’ll bring you herbal tea and then start preparing dinner.”

“Thank you, Perrin,” Sarek said.

Spock followed Sarek into the old study. He surveyed the books on the shelf, while his father made himself comfortable in a chair he used primarily for reading.

“You will not be staying long, I surmise,” Sarek said.

Spock nodded, turned and took a seat across from his father. There was a chessboard between them, but he did not offer to play. He merely studied the game in process. “I believe it is crucial that I return to my work.”

“Will the galaxy fall apart if you tarried too long with your family?” Sarek asked.

Spock raised an eyebrow. “I suppose not.”

“However, you feel indebted to the memory of your old friends, and therefore find it compulsory to be a key player in the ending of hostilities between the Romulan and Federation,” Sarek said. “I know you too well, son.”

“It is only logical,” Spock offered.

“Spare me your logic, son,” Sarek said. “I do not consider it an offense when you recognize your human half, and pay tribute to the feelings you have for your past companions. I have adapted to this. I just want you to be certain that you do this because it’s what you want to do, not because you have to repay a debt that can never be repaid.”

“I do this because I know I can, and because I want to work towards this peace,” Spock said. “Are you sure it will not be a burden, leaving Tammas here with you and Perrin?”

“Family is not a burden,” Sarek said. “Yes, I have discussed matters with McCoy, and I know. I have discussed the matter with Perrin, and she is looking forward to having Tammas stay with us.”

Spock nodded. “It truly is best that I not stay with Tammas, for the same reasons McCoy should limit his interactions.”

“If that line of logic is correct, there is no little danger having him associate with me,” Sarek pointed out. “But Perrin and I are capable of misdirection, should it come to that. Besides, I find it highly unlikely that anyone will come looking for him on Vulcan, much less while he’s in my protection. What do you make of the situation on Kelvan?”

“I wasn’t referring to the Kelvan threat, but more to the fact that his telepathic bond with us is rather strong, and our physical presence has the potential to disrupt or further delay the creation of appropriate psychic boundaries,” Spock corrected. “However, I suppose the Kelvan threat is still potentially real, though less likely as time goes on. As for the war, it would appear that the faction supporting the return to original Kelvan form has won. There are still factions for the other two parties, but they are fractured and powerless at this time, limited to terrorist tactics. This new war front has grown to a larger theatre, encompassing three solar systems. The Kelvan have officially severed all ties with the Federation.”

“If I understand it right, they merely had a friendship treaty with the Federation. They didn’t want to share their technology. Perhaps you should focus your attention on ending their war and encouraging them to reconsider their position,” Sarek said. “Their technology could be used against the Federation.”

“I doubt they will ever be a threat, as divided as they are,” Spock said.

“But you do not know this for certain,” Sarek argued.

“I am sure the Federation has people on it,” Spock said. “What they don’t have is a dialogue with the Romulans.”

“Because the Romulan’s do not want to have a dialogue,” Sarek pointed out.

“That is exactly what you said about the Klingons and we are now at peace with them,” Spock said.

“A tenuous peace at best,” Sarek said. “There is always something looming over the Klingons that threatens the peace.”

“None the less, it does not require my attention,” Spock said.

“I think your energies would be better spent closer to home. The Kelvan situation is out of hand, and we’re having an increasing number of conflicts along the Cardassian border,” Sarek said.

“I already offered you my advice regarding the Cardassians,” Spock said. “If you choose not to act on it, I don’t see how my involvement will change matters.”

“Just because I disagree with you, does not mean you have to avoid participating in a dialogue,” Sarek said. “Or help me in that endeavor.”

Spock got up to leave just as Perrin entered, carrying a tray with a two glasses of tea and some sliced fruit. “I’ve already said enough on this. I think it is best that I leave,” he said, and exited.

“But Spock, you haven’t had your tea,” Perrin called after him.

Sarek put a hand on Perrin’s arm. “Let him go.”

## CHAPTER TEN

Time seemed to pass slowly on Vulcan, but then, it was difficult to see the passage of time since the changes in seasons were not as dramatic as they were on the other planets he had lived on. Tammas passed the time well enough, filling it with holosuite games, music, and lots of schooling. He advanced through school so quickly that he found himself at the Vulcan Academy of Science by the age of ten. He performed so well in everything he did that his accomplishments seemed to him to be just one long, monotonous chain of events. Days, weeks, and months blended together, as did the people in his every day life, as there didn't seem to be much variety in Vulcan culture, surprisingly, since the IDIC philosophy emphasized the importance of variety in nature and life. The philosophy the Vulcans seemed to practice more than IDIC reminded him of a saying from Japan, of old Earth, "The raised nail must be beaten down." The Vulcans expected conformity, and held a lot of resistance and hostility to "different" and change, and Tammas felt like he was often the focus of that hostility. He didn't feel like he was going out of his way to be a nonconformist, it just sort of worked out that way.

Perhaps that was why he instantly fell for her. She was a refreshing change, a taste of color in an otherwise world of black and white.

Her name was Persis and following the Vulcan ways of logic, he quickly deduced he had no choice but to be smitten. Persis was Deltan, and Deltans are, by nature, highly sexual. And humans were simply vulnerable to the ways of Deltans! It wasn't just that she was exotic, or that she was bald, or that her nose turned slightly up, or that she seemed to be in a perpetual pout like a Japanese anime brought to life in one of his holosuite games. It was that her biological presence, an almost magical essence, stronger than even pheromones, clouded the air, reducing even the strongest, human male to a whimpering puppy. She would have turned heads even if she wasn't Deltan, wearing that old style Vulcan dress that fell mid thigh level, and had thin straps holding it to her shoulders, branching out to cover her chest but leaving much of her back exposed, revealing no tan lines. The material reflected light with a metallic sheen, sparkling as she moved, breathed. It conformed to her waist, and she wore with it a matching necklace, bracelets, and gleaming metallic boots. Since Tammas was the only human in that particular class, though not the only one at the Vulcan Academy of Science, and his Vulcans classmates were either immune or unimpressed, he naturally assumed that they would be smashingly good friends.

"Tammas Garcia?" the professor called, taking the first role call.

"Tam," he corrected the Professor, pronouncing "Tam" the same as "Tom."

"What?" the professor looked up.

"I go by Tam," Tammas said, pronouncing his name again.

"Tom? It's spelled T A M," the professor said.

"Think short A sound, like ah," Tammas explained. "Tam, as in Uncle Tam's Cabin, Tam Cat, or Tammas Covenant."

"Who's Uncle Tom, and what does his place of residence have to do with the pronunciation of your name?" the Professor asked.

Persis looked at him. Everyone was looking at him.

"It was just an old Earth literary reference that I thought you might know, being human, and well educated," Tammas said, instantly regretting saying it the way he did. The last thing he needed was to antagonize the professor, especially one of the few

human professors at the Vulcan Academy. Well, at least none of his peers would be able to accuse him of being favored by the human professor, he mused.

“I’m a biologist, not a literature professor,” The professor said, moving on through the role.

Persis smiled at Tammas.

Tammas noticed his internal alarms going off, such as increased breathing rate, blood temp going up, his palms becoming sweaty, and he noticed these things before the implant in his head started giving him feedback. The implant’s warning bells flashed, alerting him to his changing state that he was already aware of, as if he were outside himself watching. It was similar to the pangs of desire he had experienced when he first laid eyes on Deanna Troi, only significantly magnified. Before Tammas knew it, the class lecture was over and the bell rang, and he marveled at how fast the time went. He hardly remembered what happened in lecture, which was unusual for him. As everyone was gathering their things and leaving, the professor asked Tammas to approach him, which allowed Persis time to escape. Tammas had hoped to catch her, and speak with her, and he watched her slipping out the door even as the professor was trying to speak at him.

“Tammas Garcia,” Professor Heart snapped. He was well known for being strict, among other things, but Tammas wasn’t sure the professor’s current displays of emotions were appropriate. “Are you paying attention to me?”

“Yes, Sir,” Tammas said, giving up on catching Persis.

“You did read my syllabus prior to coming to my class, did you not?” Professor Heart asked.

“Yes, Sir,” Tammas said.

“Just because you’re younger than the average person in attendance here does not excuse you from following the rules set forth in that document. I expect you to bring a notebook to class and a writing utensil,” Professor Heart said.

“Yes, Sir,” Tammas said.

“Now, I have heard of your proclivity to reference songs, literature and media, but I won’t have it in my class. This is a science course, and I expect you to know the material outside of a literature reference,” Professor Heart said.

“I don’t understand,” Tammas said. “What difference does it make to you how I learn the material, as long as I get the right answers on your tests?”

“First reason, fiction often exaggerates, or flat out gets science wrong,” Professor Heart explained. “A crude example would be space ships having sound in space during a dog fight. There is no sound in space.”

“Well, there’s no sound transfer in a vacuum, but if you’re inside a nebula you would hear sound,” Tammas tried. “And since sound is still propagated through conductance, if we were wearing space suits and I touched the glass of my helmet to yours, you could hear me.”

“You’re missing the point entirely,” Professor Heart said. “You’re in my class, and I expect you to have a good grounding in the biological sciences, and you won’t get the solid base you need from quoting examples from literature.”

“And again, why not? H G Well’s War of the Worlds, beyond showing that man isn’t the ultimate force in nature, clearly reveals the hazards an alien race might encounter if they were not cautious about local viruses and bacteria,” Tammas said.

“Wrong!” Professor Heart said. “The bacteria and viruses that evolved on another planet would have no effect on an alien species because they evolved on two different systems.”

“There are too many examples of that not being true for you to make a statement like that,” Tammias said. “You might as well say Vulcans and Humans can’t mix because they’re two different species. Well, I wouldn’t be here if that were true, now would I? Though I do see your point, and believe what you’re saying should be true, it suggests too me that perhaps we humanoid species are more closely related than scientist currently agree.”

“You aren’t suggesting we all have a common ancestor, are you?” Professor Heart asked.

“No, I wouldn’t suggest a thing like that in a ‘science’ course,” Tammias said. “Statements like that could flunk me out of school.”

“Just keep that in mind when you’re doing your research paper,” Professor Heart said, gathering his stuff to leave.

“I don’t know why we even bother with research if you aren’t going to be open to new ideas,” Tammias mumbled.

“What was that?” Professor Heart asked.

“Nothing, Sir,” Tammias spoke more clearly.

“I’ll expect you to pay more attention to me next class, and less of Persis. You’re dismissed,” Professor Heart said.

Tammias blushed. Had he been that obvious? Because of his talk with Professor Heart, Tammias was late to his next class, and he had been so hopeful of seeing Persis in the hall. He was feeling extremely obsessive about seeing her again, and he knew he should not want to follow the obsessive part of it, but then, he could think of no logical reason not to explore it. He spent his evening at home, surfing the net to see if he could learn anything about her, which he couldn’t without breaking privacy laws. It was two days later before he saw her again. She was by a fountain, standing amongst several other Vulcans, two males and one female. Tammias didn’t hesitate. He walked right up to her, acknowledging the other Vulcans with brief nods, and said “Hi.”

Persis smiled, and returned her focus back to the Vulcan that was speaking.

“My name’s Tammias Parkin Arblaster-Garcia,” he continued, holding out his hand.

“Persis,” she said, not taking his hand.

The Vulcans standing about seemed a bit put out by his interruption, but they didn’t say anything to him directly. Tammias had already been feeling a bit awkward, but when she didn’t shake his hand, he became even more aware of his growing embarrassment. He used his hand to comb his hair back. He pressed on, ignoring the fight or flight response.

“You’re new here,” Tammias stated the obvious.

“Yes,” she said, suppressing a smile. The Vulcans seemed even more annoyed than usual.

“We really should be heading to class, now,” one of the Vulcans said, in Vulcan.

“Okay. Well, nice meeting you, Tammias,” Persis said.

Tammias followed. “I was just wondering, since we’re in the same biology class and all, maybe we could study together?”

“Maybe,” she said, lagging behind her friends who didn’t hide their contempt for him.

“You must be a genius, too, being admitted to the Academy so young,” Tammas continued. “Or, are Deltans just advanced?”

“Humans and Deltans develop about the same rate,” Persis said. “Um, look, Tammas, maybe we can talk later?”

“Okay. Would you like my number or email address?” he asked.

“I’ll look you up,” she said, waving.

Tammas watched her as she caught up with her friends, and suddenly he felt really bad, as if he had done something wrong. “Is that a definite no,” he mumbled to himself, wondering if her elusiveness was due to her company, or she just wasn’t interested in him. Frustrated, he turned around only to discover a Vulcan, and fellow classmate, pressing right behind him.

“What do you think you’re doing?” the Vulcan asked. His name was Sendak, and he had reputation of his own. He seemed just as shunned by the other Vulcans as Tammas felt he himself was.

“Making a new friend,” Tammas said.

“Maybe you should just keep to yourself,” the Vulcan said.

“Or what?” Tammas asked, allowing his frustration to fuel his anger.

Tammas was so surprised that a Vulcan would actually hit him that he didn’t even raise his hands in defense. He sat there, on the ground, completely baffled by what just occurred. Sendak warned him to stay away from Persis and then stormed off. Tammas went to the restroom, confirmed his eye was indeed blue-black, and beginning to swell, and found he was too embarrassed to finish the day of classes. He returned home where Perrin met him as he entered the kitchen.

“My god, Tammas,” Perrin said. “What happened? Sarek, would you come in here a moment, please?”

“It’s nothing. Just a slight disagreement with Sendak,” Tammas told her.

“Are you telling me a Vulcan hit you?” Perrin asked.

“No, you’re inferring a Vulcan hit me based on circumstantial evidence,” Tammas said.

“A black eye is not circumstantial,” Perrin said.

“I will have a talk to Sendak’s parents,” Sarek said, having picked up enough of the conversation to make a reasonable evaluation of the situation.

“No,” Tammas insisted. “I will handle this.”

“Good for you. You have my permission to hit him back,” Perrin said.

“I would rather you find an alternative solution,” Sarek said.

“Honey, you can’t repay evil with kindness, for then what would you repay kindness with? Repay kindness with kindness, and evil with justice,” Perrin began.

“You’re quoting Confucious,” Sarek said. “And I happen to agree with that quote, however, there must be a better solution in this particular instance. Perhaps if you filled me in on all the details.”

“I would like to handle this,” Tammas said.

And so, the subject was dropped temporarily.

The next day in biology class, as Tammas was taking his seat, Sendak came close enough to him to say, “You even look at her, I’ll kill you,” and continued up to his seat.

That sort of threat was criminal, and Tammias knew he could take it to a whole new level if he wanted to, but he wanted to handle it himself. He started to say something, but Professor Heart called him out.

“Tammias, did you bring your notebook?” Heart asked.

Tammias produced the archaic item Heart had requested, along with a pencil. Why anyone would want people to take notes on a lecture when it was possible to record it was beyond him, but he was determined to fulfill the demands as outlined in the syllabus. He opened it up to the first blank page, and took up the pencil as if he were ready to write. As the lecture went on, the Professor walked by to confirm what he had been observing. Tammias wasn't taking notes. Not only did Professor Heart expect Tammias to take notes, but he expected the whole class to be artists! They were instructed to draw each of the micro organisms being studied, including all body structures, such as organelles and vacuoles, and it couldn't be some vague representation. It had to be exact, and detailed, and labeled.

“Tammias, you are going to flunk my course if you don't take notes,” Heart said.

“I'm listening to you,” Tammias said.

“Your listening to me is insufficient. My syllabus requires you to take notes,” Heart said.

“No, Sir, it doesn't,” Tammias corrected him. “The syllabus specifically says to bring a notebook and pencil, it says nothing about actually taking notes. Though technically one could assume note taking is inherently implied by the directive, it isn't necessarily a compulsion to do so.”

The class was quiet. True, Vulcan classes were usually quiet, but not quiet like everyone was holding their breath- quiet. Professor Heart silently steamed. “Are you recording my lecture?”

“No, Sir,” Tammias answered. “The use of any electronic recording devices, or any other technological means, beyond the note book and writing utensil, is strictly forbidden, according to your syllabus.”

“So, why aren't you taking notes?” Professor Heart demanded.

“May we discuss this after class?” Tammias asked.

“You will answer my question now, or leave my class,” Professor Heart said.

Tammias stood to leave.

“Sit down,” Professor Heart shouted. “I don't like your sense of humor, Garcia. I want you to answer my questions. Is my lecture not stimulating enough for you?”

“Is that a new question, or do you want to return to the previous question?”

“Answer me! Is my lecture boring you?”

“Your lecture is typical, less Socratic in method than I prefer, but sufficiently paced to keep my attention,” Tammias said, not wanting to meet his eyes.

“Really. What did I lecture on last class?” Professor Heart asked.

“Do you want me to summarize, or repeat everything you said verbatim since the beginning of class, including role call?” Tammias asked.

“Verbatim,” Professor Heart said.

“No,” Tammias said.

Professor's eyes grew in amazement. “No?”

“I don't want to play this game,” Tammias said.

“Game?” Professor Heart repeated, blinking. “You think this is a game?”

“Of a sort, yes, and one I can’t win. If I summarize your lecture for you, you’ll merely say I wasn’t paying close enough attention, but if I give it back to you verbatim, you’ll only make me out to be more of a freak than I already appear to be and further alienate me from my fellow classmates, whose class time, I might add, you are wasting over a trivial thing as to whether or not I am in compliance with your note taking compulsion. I have an excellent auditory memory, and I will remember everything you say, and if you give me a chance, I can demonstrate my ability to master the material you’re presenting to us,” Tammias said. “Now, do you want me to leave, or are you going to continue to single me out in this fashion, even though it’s a game you’re not going to win either.”

“You will take notes, or you will get out,” Professor Heart said.

“If I’m writing, then I am not listening,” Tammias said. “Just like when you’re talking, you’re not listening.”

“I want to see something written on your notebook before you leave today,” Professor Heart said.

Tammias shook his head in frustration and disgust, but also he felt an overwhelming sense of embarrassment. He noticed Persis was looking back at him, but she turned back to her notes, and then he noticed Sendak staring at him, with a look that very nearly completed his threat of killing him.

Tammias doodled in his notebook, creating a strange set of pictographs that might have resembled a strange, alien script. Professor Heart wasn’t convinced that Tammias was writing in a foreign language, but dismissed Tammias anyway, with threats of contacting his parents. Tammias managed to avoid Sendak the rest of the day. He returned home and slipped into his room with out being seen, or so he thought, and very nearly started to cry. He sat down on his bed, practiced his breathing and neural feedback until he felt calm. Sparky sat beside him on the bed, always his friend.

Perrin had seen him slip into his room, and she knew he was upset. She had considered trying to talk to him, but knew he wasn’t ready. Tammias excused himself after dinner and went to the HoloSuite, which was run by a Ferengi franchise, though the local office was run by an Andorian. He had never even heard of the Ferengi until through correspondence one of them had picked up one of his holosuite games for redistribution, at a small fee which he received royalties. Tammias was a regular, and his holsuite time was now all comp, because the Ferengi that carried his contract was hoping he would continue to create outstanding programs to redistribute through the galaxy. He wondered what the Ferengi looked like, but so far, no human had seen one. Perhaps in his next contract he could make that a stipulation. He wanted a picture of a Ferengi.

Once inside the room, he visibly relaxed. The outside world was so tiring at times. He was tempted to run the aviation program, and go for his next rating, but he felt he needed some music to help relax. He called up an old Broadway musical, chose a character, and played it to the hilt. Being the monster behind the mask felt somehow appropriate. If only life’s answer were as easy as they were in musicals.

After that, he should have gone home, but he was still filling out of sorts, and not tired. He figured instead of playing, he would focus on school work. In order to practice surgical techniques, he re-created a M.A.S.H unit, dressed for the O.R. setting, and fell into his role playing. The holo-characters wheeled in another patient for him to operate on and he got to work.





Professor Heart decided to give an impromptu test. The odd thing was that the test was given in an unusual format. The professor actually passed out a paper test. Tammias felt his temperature rising and a bit of discomfort in his stomach. He looked around, noticed Sendak staring at him, as smug as a Vulcan might look if he displayed such emotions, and then he turned back to his test. Persis was in front of him, which only increased his anxiety. He really hated looking like a fool around her. He took two minutes to push through the letters of his name, handed the papers to the Professor, and headed for the door.

“Excuse me, Tammias,” Professor Heart interrupted his flight. Tammias was finally starting to accept the rumor that the only heart the professor had was his family name. “I want you to sit down and finish this.”

“I am through,” Tammias said.

“You’re not through until you write something down on this paper,” Professor Heart said.

“Then I guess I’m through, because I wrote my name on the paper,” Tammias said. “Other than that, I won’t be complying with your request.”

“You willful, insolent, spoiled, little brat,” Professor Heart snapped. “Sit down and finish this test. Or has the little genius been so coddled by technology that he doesn’t understand the format?”

“I won’t do this,” Tammias said, quietly. The end was coming. He felt like he was going to die and there was no way out. He glanced up to see Sendak again, but instead of seeing Sendak, he saw an actor who was famous for his role of Iago, from Othello, the play by William Shakespeare. Tammias did a double take, but Iago was gone. It was just Sendak.

“Can’t is more like it,” Professor Heart said. “Don’t look away from me when I’m speaking to you. You’ve been cheating, and I will see you punished to the fullest degree.”

Tammias was shocked. “No,” he said, forcing a deep breath. He was going to die, right here in front of everyone, but he met the Professor’s eyes. “I have never cheated.”

“Then how do you explain you only take computer based tests?” Professor Heart challenged. “I will see that you’re thrown out of the Academy, and your Academic career finished.”

“We’ll see,” Tammias said, turning to flee the classroom.

“I’m not through with you yet,” Professor Heart said, following Tammias.

“Sir, I’m walking away from a hostile situation, and your pursuing me is more than harassment. I’m feeling threatened and I will defend myself,” Tammias said, facing Heart, his hands up in an “I surrender” gesture.

Professor Heart reached out to take Tammias by the arm in order to drag him back into the class. “You won’t leave until I’ve dismissed you, and...”

“Never apply a joint lock on a conscious man,” were the words in Tam’s head as he saw the Professor reaching for him. Tam’s arms were already up and ready to strike. He struck once at the face, stunning the Professor more out of surprise than hurt. He flowed right into the joint lock, making it all seem like one motion, strike, joint lock, expert precision. Tammias twisted the professor’s hand around in a controlled joint lock, just as he had rehearsed it a million times. Had he wanted to he could have broken

Heart's wrist, but his intention was not to severely hurt him. He just wanted to extract himself from this situation. The pain and pressure against the professor's wrist should have been enough to drive him to his knees, but instead he staggered, and leaned against the digital chalk board.

"I'm going to let go and walk away," Tammias said. "We can discuss this later with the dean."

Tammias let go, turned to leave, but the professor struck out with a foot, tripping him. Tammias landed, face down, staring at Persis' ankles. One thing he would remember later was having the thought, "what attractive ankles you have." He was flushed with embarrassment, mostly at his thoughts about Persis, and anger at being attacked. Without further reflection, Tammias retaliated against Professor Heart, opening up all the flood gates. At this point, he didn't care if he killed the "good" Professor. Heart grabbed Tammias by the collar and pulled him to his feet. The knee to the groin was probably sufficient to incapacitate the professor, but since Tammias was no longer thinking simple survival and retreat, it was followed by a knee to the face as the Professor doubled over in pain. As the professor collapsed, Tammias spun and kicked the man, pushing him back against his desk. The desk moved several centimeters and the stuff on the desk slid towards the professor. The Professor's coffee cup, closest to the edge, fell off the desk, hit him in the head, and spilt coffee in the Professors lap. Hitting the desk did double damage points, as the professor's head hit the desk. It was either the coffee cup or the desk that rendered him unconscious. Two classmates immediately tried to restrain Tammias. Tammias drove his foot into the closer of the two, scoring just above the knee cap, instantly shattering the student's femur. He stepped around the classmate going for the second, grabbing his punching arm and jerking it forward while striking with the other hand, a two move lop-sau from his practice of Wu Wei Gung Fu. Not only did Tammias manage to pull the student's arm joint out of place, but the punch hit the jaw with the full force of the punch, plus the jerking forward motion pulled the student's jaw into the fist for added momentum. The student fell to the floor unconscious.

Meanwhile, another student had had the foresight to call for help, and had used their personal cell to call school security. Security arrived just in time to see a third student get smashed into the digital chalk board, which left a glowing image of the students face, and a trail of lit pixels as he sunk.

There were three security guards. One held back while the other two approached Tammias, but neither were able to reason with him, much less, restrain him. The first guard to approach tried to administer the Vulcan nerve pinch, but Tammias grabbed the hand, and twirled, breaking the wrist. Still holding the hand, Tammias twisted and kicked the guard in the chest, while pulling the hand. The first guard was on his way to the floor even as the second moved in. Tammias and the guard exchanged punches and blocks, making no head way. Tammias would have continued to attack, but the guard that had held back pulled a phaser out and stunned Tammias and his associate at point blank range. Tammias went down like a sack of potatoes. So did the guard, who gave a curious look to his friend as if to say, "I had this under control."

♪♪▶

Tammias was suddenly awake, and screaming, but no sound came out, and no matter what he did, he couldn't move. He forced himself to relax, and slowly he began to piece together what had happened. There had been a fight, then a light, and then

nothingness. He was pleased to find he wasn't hurting. He thought about the light and tried to reason through it. Lightening? Phaser light? He had been stunned! He smiled inwardly, thinking, that was another item he could check off his list of things to experience. He mentally probed his body looking for sensation, but it was all a black hole of nothing, like what his jaw had felt like when he was having a tooth replanted and the doctor had administered a numbing agent. The tooth had been knocked out during a holosuite game when he fell off a motorcycle. This numbing experience was worse, because it was his entire body that was numb. His whole body felt like dead weight, heavier than he ever imagined himself feeling.

A new sensation pierced through his numbness, and he felt as if there was an ant crawling on his foot, and then it was hundreds of ants, creeping up his limbs, and then thousands all over his body. The tickling began to sting until finally he was able to push through the tingling into a larger, almost overwhelming sense of pain. He was now able to stand, and he began rubbing himself vigorously and shaking out his arms and hands to increase the blood flow. It was like his arms and legs were just dead flesh that was starting to warm up and suddenly turn live again.

The tingling pain went away as the numbness from being stunned faded, and he realized that he hadn't gotten through the fight without some injuries. He was hurting.

The force field which barred Garcia's exit from the cell, should he awaken early, snapped off and three armed security guards walked in. They did not look pleased. Smiling didn't appease them, either. Sakkath, Sarek's personal assistant, entered.

"Tam, are you well?" Sakkath said.

"I guess, Sakkath," Tamas said. "I'm sorry. I kind of lost my temper."

"It's not completely your fault, but I don't have time to explain. We need to go before the judge," Sakkath said. "Come with me."

Tamas complied. He was followed out of the cell by the three guards, and just outside the door, three others joined the escort parade. They were all armed. Tam wondered if they considered him to be that much of a threat or if they were trying to intimidate him. If it were the latter, it worked. He was intimidated. They escorted him to a room where Ambassador Sarek had been waiting. Sitting next to Sarek was his chief of staff, Ki Mendrossen. They stood as Tamas and Sakkath entered. Tamas looked at the floor, feeling quite embarrassed, unable to meet Sarek's eyes.

Across the table from Sarek sat the Vulcan Science Academy's Provost, the Dean of Academic Advising, Professor Heart's immediate supervisor, the biology department chair, and Professor Heart. At the end of the table, sat Judge KarSol.

"Garcia, Tamas Parkin Arblaster," Judge KarSol said quietly. He was obviously a tall Vulcan, which was noticeable even while he was seated. His age was reflected by the white in his hair, the many wrinkles that creased his brow, and the frown lines creeping from his eyes and mouth. He looked neither pleased nor displeased by the task set before him. It was just his job. "Would you please be seated?"

Tamas sat down in a chair next to Ambassador Sarek. Sarek was in a professional mode and made no efforts to console him. Ki at least patted his leg, winking at him as if it was all going to be okay. Tamas really wanted to cry, but knew he would not elicit any sympathy here. In fact, any display of emotion could be detrimental to his position. As it was, he was extremely humiliated at losing his self-control. And it bothered him more that this loss of control was in front of an audience than the fact that

the loss of control had gotten people hurt. The guards that had escorted him took up places around the room.

“I’d like to start with the assault charges,” Judge KarSol said. “One of the students had the foresight of triggering an automated recorder when she called for security, so I have reviewed the tape. It would appear, based on that recording and the testimony of those in class, Tammias, that you did indeed try to extricate yourself from what you perceived to be a hostile environment.”

Professor Heart nearly said something, but the judge only had to look at him.

“Mr. Garcia, do you wish to press charges against Professor Heart for assault?” Judge KarSol asked.

Tammias looked up at the judge, confused. He thought he was to be charged with an assault, not Professor Heart. “No, your Honor,” Tammias said.

“Your Honor is an Earth title,” Judge KarSol said. “You may respond, yes sir, or no sir, or by my Vulcan Title, Ti-Ar.”

“Sorry, Ti-Ar. I do not wish to press charges against anyone,” Tammias said.

Judge KarSol vocalized his conclusions and closed several electronic documents. “Good, then the assault incident involving Professor Heart and Garcia is satisfactorily concluded. Don’t you agree, Professor Heart?”

“Yes, Ti-Ar,” Professor Heart said, obviously biting back a great deal of emotions.

“Very well,” KarSol proceeded. “The next issue, then, concerns possible dishonesty in Garcia’s academic career.”

Tammias wanted to shout that he had never cheated in his life, but he bit his tongue. Judge KarSol had anticipated Tammias refuting the charge with an emotional outburst, but after waiting an appropriate length of time, never even looking at the young man but studying his files and reports, Ti-Ar nodded approval.

“Mr. Garcia, a fellow student came forward with evidence that suggested you have been cheating, and Professor Heart believes he has confirmed as much by your refusal to take the written test he provided in class,” Judge KarSol said. “Would you like to refute these charges?”

“No, Ti-Ar,” Tammias said, looking down at the table.

Professor Heart appeared vindicated, relaxed visibly, and settled into his chair with a smile.

“Tammias,” Sarek said. “I know you. I don’t believe you cheated.”

Judge KarSol motioned Ambassador Sarek to silence. He leaned into the table. “Tammias, these are very serious charges being brought forth against you. Do you understand that if it’s discovered that you cheated, your social standing in this community can be irreparably damaged?”

“Yes, Ti-Ar, I understand,” Tammias said. “I will save the court time by admitting that I am unable to respond to Professor Heart’s test.”

Judge KarSol sat back for a moment and then handed Tammias a book. A real, hard cover, paper based book. There were no electronics in-bedded in the spine, not even an identifying chip that would give him the title, author, and publisher had he queried it with his neural implant. Tammias would have to be able to read it in order to answer any questions about it, other than questions covering its tangible qualities. It was heavy, it smelled old, and the cover was black with gold lettering.

“Tammas, open this book and turn to page five. Read the second paragraph, please,” Judge KarSol said.

“I’m sorry, Ti-Ar, I can not,” Tammas said.

“What can’t you do? Can you not read Vulcan?” Judge KarSol.

“I can’t read period, Ti-Ar. I am illiterate,” Tammas whispered.

“Excuse me?” Judge KarSol said.

“I’m illiterate,” Tammas said loudly, blushing. Tears streamed down his eyes. “I can’t read in any language. I’ve tried to teach myself, but, I just can’t seem to do it. I’m sorry, Sarek. I did not mean to embarrass you.”

“Do you mean to tell me,” Judge KarSol said. “That you have gotten your BA in sociology, a BS in biology, a masters in Psychology, a doctorate in music, and now you’re working on your medical license, and yet you can’t read? How did you reach this level of education without being able to read?”

“I use my neural implant...”

“He cheats!” Professor Heart said.

“Professor Heart, your presence in my court room is being tolerated for the simple matter that you’re filing these charges, however, if you say one more unsolicited word I will throw you out,” Judge KarSol said. “Tammas, continue.”

“I use my neural implant to translate written text into sound, specifically, Morse Code,” Tammas said. “Most of the tests I have taken have been electronic, and I can interface with them using my neural implant. The other tests have been either oral in nature, or were practical, requiring me to demonstrate competency at physical skills, such as music performance, first aid, and or surgery.”

“I was led to believe you were capable of speaking and writing in twelve different languages,” Judge KarSol said.

“I can speak the primary language of 17 different planets, and a dozen specific dialects from various cultures from three of these planets. I can also read and write stories and letters from each of these languages, provided there is an auditory method of processing the information,” Tammas explained.

“Can you demonstrate this for me?” Judge KarSol asked.

“May I use your PADD?” Tammas said.

Judge KarSol passed Tammas his PADD, and Tammas passed it right back to him. “I don’t actually have to see it. I only need to be able to access it.”

After a sufficient demonstration, Judge KarSol turned to the Academy representatives. “I believe Morse Code, and the Vulcan auditory equivalent, can be considered a written language, since, not only does it represent written symbols in an auditory fashion, it also has a visual component of dots and dashes. Would you concur?”

They did so.

“So, can we conclude that Tammas, as brilliant as he is, may be lacking in some specific skills, but a lack of ethics is not one of them,” Judge KarSol asked. Professor Heart’s superiors agreed. Heart chose not to argue. “I’m very relieved you agree. Tammas, to please the court, I would like you to be medically evaluated for specific learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, which may be causing you difficulty in mastering a written language. And though it is a shame that as the degree of sophistication with computers goes up literacy goes down, it is not a crime to be illiterate. You have excelled in your studies because you have sought to learn, and have satisfactorily demonstrated

your learning, until this incident, and so it is not a personal fault of yours, but of our system, that no one, till now," he paused to look at Heart, "has discovered this disparity. I only wish it had been handled in a more civilized manner. This court is adjourned. You are excused." Ti-Ar said to the Vulcan Science Academy personnel. He turned to face Tammas and Sarek.

"Mr. Garcia, please remain seated. We have further business to discuss," Ti-Ar said.

Tammas re-seated himself, inwardly sighing. The party representing the Academy departed, but Tammas didn't make eye contact with them. The door closed behind them and Judge KarSol continued.

"I understand that you were assaulted the other day by a student," Ti-Ar said.

"There was a misunderstanding," Tammas said.

"Mr. Garcia," Ti-Ar said. "I do not think you fully understand the depth of your misunderstanding. Up until now there is an aspect to Vulcan culture that you have not been privy to, and it revolves around how Vulcans select mates. Your reaction, as well as that of Professor Heart, was extremely out of proportion to the stimulus either of you were presented. In certain respects, it was beyond your control, even though, at risk of being paradoxical, it was in your control."

Ti-Ar proceeded only when he was certain that he had Garcia's full attention. "Sendak will soon be going through his second Pon Farr experience, only with out a wife. His mate was killed in an accident. As his biological cycle comes closer to term, without a potential replacement mate, he has become more violent. Professor Heart and you were, unbeknownst to yourselves, being unduly influenced by his anger suppression. This is because you and Professor Heart are both extra sensitive to telepathic projections. The more Sendak suppressed his jealousies, the more the two of you were acting out. The fact that all three of you were brought together by fate into the same place as the object of your would be affection only further complicated the issue."

"Professor Heart is in love with Persis?" Tammas asked, amazed given the age disparity.

"He is, after all, only human," Ti-Ar said. "And Deltans are nearly irresistible to humans, irregardless of will power and socially bound appropriateness. Heart managed his feelings, which he recognized as inappropriate, by trying to suppress them. Unfortunately, when one human suppresses his or her emotions, the other humans present tend to display an increase in emotions. This sort of emotional transference tends to only occur within small family units, but it is well documented. He thought he was equipped to handle the situation, and perhaps, if having a female Deltan in his class was the only thing he had to contend with, he could have succeeded. Instead, it manifested itself as a jealousy and contempt of you, and with Sendak secretly fueling this, in an attempt to eliminate potential suitors, the situation only grew worse. Of course, Heart is in denial of the other facts, and has clung to his belief that you are the cause of all of his problems. As for Sendak, due to the biological factors affecting him at this time, we can not hold him completely responsible for his behavior."

"So, I am confused. Because of my interest in Persis, Sendak is threatened, which in turn inflames Professor Heart, and, I am responsible how?" Tammas began.

"You are responsible for your thoughts and behaviors, naturally," Ti-Ar said.

"We are apprising you of this situation so you can be more aware and develop the

necessary mental skills to deal with this. It is inappropriate for us to tell you how to be sexually, first because you are more Human than Vulcan and different social and biological rules apply, and second because you are an individual and there needs to be some flexibility to allow for diversity. You have Vulcan in you, and you will be influenced, directly and indirectly, more than simple immersion in our culture might demand, and there are potential situations that you may find yourself in from which we can not extricate you. Your status here on Vulcan is that of a guest, and so I am obligated, by law, to apprise you of the potential hazards to your well being. For instance, if Sendak calls you out, and you accept, you will be held to the scrutiny of Vulcan laws, not Human. A challenge could be anything from a mere physical or mental competition to a fight to the death. These are very serious matters and I wish to compel you to research this. Preferably before you are in a social contract that must be upheld. If in the next few weeks you should come to me and ask to be protected from the potential hazard that could befall you while in Vulcan society, I will, but if you find yourself in a situation before you come and declare your intentions to me, you will be on your own. The longer you stay on Vulcan, the more subject you will be to our ways. Ambassador Sarek can advise you more fully concerning the complexities and vagaries that I have touched on here,” Ti-Ar said. “In short, I am warning you to be careful.”

“Thank you, Ti-Ar,” Tammias said.

“Thank you, Ti-Ar,” Ambassador Sarek said.

Sarek was silent on the trip home, and consequently, so was Tammias, Ki, and Sakkath. Tammias didn't fully understand all the cryptic advice Ti-Ar had given him, and Sarek appeared reluctant to speak of it, which only reinforced how seriously taboo the subject of relationships were in this society. He also didn't fully understand how he could be held responsible for his behavior if Sendak was unduly influencing him. Technically neither he nor Professor Heart were reprimanded for the incident, even though quite a few people were injured, which meant something strange was going on, and he would have to study it. Could a person be psychically influenced to behave in a certain way? If so, was it a matter of will power and the stronger will wins out? If Sendak's will was stronger, did that decrease Heart's, or his own, liability if bad things happened?

That didn't sound right. The devil made me do it didn't hold up in the fourteenth century Earth, it surely wouldn't hold up in the 24th century, Vulcan. But then what, he wondered. Ti-Ar emphasized awareness. If he were aware of his motivations, whether it was from his conscious, subconscious, or even someone else's conscious, then he perhaps could choose what outcome he desired. If he was aware of what society's influences were, such as peer pressure, he could choose to participate, or choose not to. He had choices, right? To make choices, he would first need to be aware not only of himself, but also of his options. He would have to investigate options and prepare himself. Of course, it would be nice to know what he was preparing himself for, and the Vulcans seemed a bit stingy when it came to dispensing that sort of information. He frowned and stared out the passenger side window of Sarek's air-car, comparing the complex structures of the cityscape below to the social structure of Vulcan culture.

The only thing Sarek said when they arrived at home was that he was going to meditate, and he didn't want to be disturbed.

“Tam,” Sakkath said. “Would you come with me. We need to talk.”

Ki, Sakkath, and Tammias retired to the sitting room. As they made themselves comfortable, Perin entered with a tray of food and drinks. "How are you feeling, Tam?" she asked.

"A little out of sorts. I'm not completely out of trouble, am I?" Tam asked, picking up one of the vegetable wraps. "I really didn't mean to embarrass Sarek and you like this."

"Relax," Ki said. "The Ambassador's reputation was not affected by any of this."

"We're just concerned for you," Perrin said. "This Pon Farr is very serious, and, in the light of how easily Sendak transferred his emotions to you, we wanted to discuss some options."

"More meditation?" Tam asked.

"No, we were thinking of sending you on vacation," Ki said. "How would you like to visit Oran for a while?"

"The Fabrini system?" Tammias did a double take. "That's practically a month away from here, at warp six!"

"We think a couple months of travel would do you good. It would give this time to blow over," Perrin said.

"I can't leave. I have school. Do you know how far behind a couple of months would put me?" Tammias asked. "I'm only a few months shy of completing my doctorate in veterinarian medicine."

"You are so far ahead of schedule, you can do with the down time," Perrin said.

"No," Tammias said. "I can't leave now. Besides, the Garcia family and I have issues..."

"Your personal boundaries are quite sufficient," Sakkath said. "You can visit the Garcia's without worries for your mental health. Even in your sleep, you will not accidentally reconnect. As for your studies, you can continue on remotely."

Tam searched their faces for some hint of jest. "There's something else going on here."

"You worry too much," Ki said. "Just another sign of stress that proves you really need this vacation."

"I don't believe you," Tam said.

"Tam," Perrin said.

"What's Sarek's opinion on this?" Tam asked. "Does he want me to leave?"

"It's not that we want you to leave," Perrin said. "This is your home. We simply are looking out for your health."

"Sarek has approved and we have arranged passage on the Starship Rutledge," Sakkath said.

"I assure you, you will be back after a couple of months and this whole experience will have seen like a dream. You will no longer be influenced by the emotions of another Vulcan," Perrin said.

"But why so far? And for so long?" Tammias complained.

"The Garcia's would like to see you," Ki said.

"You can test your skills and be more confident around non telepaths," Sakkath said.

"You can see your dolphin friends," Perrin added.

"Are you sure there isn't something else you want to tell me?" Tammias asked.



“The fact that you ask that suggests that you are still being emotionally affected,” Sakkath pointed out.

“Don’t read anything more into this than what we’ve given you,” Ki said. “The Garcia’s want you to come and visit, passage is available, the window is open, and the stars are all in alignment, if you will. Everything is just right for this.”

“When do I leave?” Tammias asked.

“You can report up to the Rutledge immediately. She departs in two hours,” Ki said.

“Two hours! Sarek won’t even be finished with his meditation. I don’t even get to say goodbye?” Tammias demanded.

“You’re not going away forever, Tam,” Perrin said. “You’re coming back. Would I lie about that?”

“No,” Tammias surrendered. “But that’s not the point. Space travel is inherently dangerous. I might die out there without having said goodbye to Sarek.”

“Sarek would not appreciate this display of emotions,” Sakkath said.

“Who will take care of Sparky?” Tammias asked.

“I will,” Perrin promised.

Tammias searched their eyes and saw that he was going on a trip whether he wanted to or not.

“Fine,” Tammias said, standing up.

“Don’t be so doom and gloom,” Ki said, shaking his arm. “It’s an adventure.”

“Oh, please, don’t even go there,” Tammias said. “I saw the Poseidon Adventure. Besides, if I wanted adventure, I would go to the holodeck.”

“You should spend more time in the real world,” Ki said.

“Yeah, you saw where reality got me in class today, didn’t you?” Tammias said.

“Would you like me to help you pack a few things?” Perrin asked.

“Why? I thought I was coming home?” Tammias asked. “Surely they have replicators on the Rutledge.”

“Just thinking of your comfort,” Perrin said.

“I don’t need anything. Just tell the Rutledge I’ll be up as soon as the next shuttle permits,” Tammias said, and stormed out of the room.

The door closed behind Tammias. “Why don’t we just tell him about Sarek’s disease?” Perrin asked.

“Because it is unnecessary to tell him at this stage in its development, and given his bond to Sarek, Tammias might become preoccupied with the condition and that could have a negative impact on it,” Sakkath said. “I’m certain that by the time he gets back, I will have Sarek’s emotions under control, and Tam will no longer be affected.”

“The alternative is to have Tam move out permanently,” Ki said. “We can’t have continued outburst from Tam without suspicion being aroused. We won’t always have a Sendak excuse to fall back on. It was mere fortune that Sendak was a contributing factor to his explosion of rage.”

“I don’t like lying to him,” Perrin said. “I don’t like lying period. Each time one does it, it compounds on itself and it makes that much harder to extricate one’s self from the falsehood.”

“The Legarans have started preliminary talks with the Ambassador, which could eventually lead to a nice end to a long career. Let’s just take this one step at a time and see where it leads us,” Ki said.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Tammas had been provided one of the luxury suites offered to traveling diplomats. It was all very comfortable, but it wasn't what he wanted. He wanted a piano. Not an upright, or a keyboard, or even a baby grand. What he wanted was a full grand. Even more specific, he wanted the Schimmel Grand Piano-Pegasus, designed by Professor Luigi Colani of twentieth century Earth. He had always been in love with its sleek, rakish look; it appeared as if it were floating in mid air. It had a slightly curved keyboard, making it ergonomic as well as functional, an electronically operated top lid, and a stool that could be adjusted in six directions. It was 311 centimeters long, 162 centimeters wide, 112 centimeters high, and weighed in at only 580 kilograms. The problem with that was, when added to the weight of his already existing furniture, it put him well over his room's weight allotment. Consequently, the computer wouldn't allow him to replicate it because of this personal mass restriction.

Garcia did a few calculations and found if he reabsorbed every pieces of furniture in his quarters, including his bed, he would only be marginally over his allotment. Since most crew members never came close to approaching their limits, the computer might allow some exceptions. It did. He executed the command, and the furniture was instantly beamed out of his room. All of it. Gone. It wasn't beamed anywhere, it was just absorbed back into the energy stores. Some of the energy probably turned around and came back into his quarters refigured as his Pegasus piano.

The door chime was barely audible over his pounding the keys in frustration. It was just enough of a clash with his song that he stopped playing, listened to the silence, waiting for it. The door chimed again.

"Come," Tammas said, standing up.

Ensign Miles O'Brien entered, the person that had been assigned to care for Garcia. "I was just checking..." Miles began, taking in the room. "That explains the energy and the mass allotment." He peered into the bedroom. "Where do you intend to sleep?"

"On the floor," Tammas said.

"I see," Miles said, chewing his lip. "Perhaps you would like a hammock? I'd be glad to hang one for you. Might be more comfortable than the floor."

"Thank you, Ensign," Tammas said.

"Not technically an Ensign. You can call me Miles," Miles said. "Figure we might as well be on a first name basis. Might make it easier."

"I'm not here to make friends, Mr. O'Brien," Tammas said. "I'm just merely passing through. Against my wishes."

Miles nodded, holding his tongue regarding spoiled kids and dignitaries. "Is there anything else I can get you?"

"A holosuite would be nice," Tammas said.

Miles laughed. "On a Starship? Not likely. At least, not in my life time. Too much power consumption and the holographic emitters need to be much less bulky if they ever intend to put them on a ship."

Tammas sighed. "I'm sorry, Miles. I'm just out of sorts. Vulcan is the longest I have lived anywhere. I'm homesick. I guess. I'm something. I don't know."

"I can understand that," Miles said. "Perhaps later you'd like to meet me for a game of darts? Or racquetball. We do have a nice recreation room, or an exercise room

is you wish. It'll make the time go a lot more quickly than locking yourself up in here for the next month."

"Alright," Tammias said.

"Also, Captain Maxwell has asked me to extend an invitation for you to dine with him," Miles said.

"Sure," Tammias said. "Whenever is fine."

"There are some other kids on board," Miles said.

"I know it sounds snobbish, but I prefer adults," Tammias said. "Don't worry about me, Miles. I'll figure this out."

"I'll swing back by later with that hammock," Miles said.



Two weeks out and there was a sudden course change. Instead of heading towards the Fabrin system, they turned towards Andoria and accelerated to warp seven point six. Detecting the course change was easy enough, since he had been looking out the window when it happened. Judging the speed was impossible. Miles had to relay the news in order for him to get the full story.

"The Captain sends his compliments. He regrets to inform you that we're going to be bit late getting you to the Fabrin system. There was an alien incursion on Andoria, some people were abducted, and we are being sent to investigate," Miles said.

Tammias blinked. What could he say? Throw a fit? People's lives were at stake and he was just one person. He nodded. "Whatever," Tammias said. After Miles left, he pounded on the piano for a couple of more hours. Then he paced. While he paced he tried to access the IS-Net, but discovered it was too slow to get a reliable download for his homework. Probably because they were at warp, or they were limiting subspace communications. What he wanted was a holosuite.

"Computer, list the components I would need to construct a holographic projection with tangible qualities," Tammias asked, watching the information scroll across his neural interface. "Alright, try again but let's try a smaller scale. What would I need to produce one holographic image? A person and perhaps a few miscellaneous items. Specifically, I want to create a holographic patient to practice surgical techniques. So, I'll need a bed, a body, and surgical tools. List the minimum requirements for such a device. Okay, that seems more reasonable. What's the size of the assembled components? No, that's too large. Can we get it down to the size of at least a coffee table?"

The next time O'Brien came to visit, he found the piano gone, and Tammias laboring over a box the size and shape of a torpedo casing. There were parts strewn about the floor, along with wires, tools, and isolinear chips. Tammias didn't even look up to see who had entered.

"What the devil are you doing?" Miles asked.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" Tammias asked.

"Making a bomb," Miles said.

Tammias looked up. "Don't be stupid. I'm building a holographic projector."

"It's too small," Miles said. "You'll never get anything out of that."

"Oh yeah?" Tammias asked. "Watch this."

Tammias touched a button and the power came on. A cat appeared and walked up to Miles and brushed against his leg. It was a very realistic cat.

“I don’t believe it,” Miles said.

“Its projection radius is limited to five meters,” Tammias said. “That’s the alarm clock cat. It’s for people who hate getting up to music or alarms. The cat comes on at prearranged times and then starts walking on you and rubbing against you. The longer you stay asleep, the more aggressive it gets. It’ll paw at your face, meow louder, and knead you with its claws. It won’t stop until you get up and pet it.”

The cat’s solidity weakened and it became a true hologram and then faded out completely. A few sparks erupted from the torpedo casing. Tammias threw the wrench down and rubbed his forehead.

“Power issues?” Miles said.

“The modified transporter coil has a limited duration for being energized. I think it’s overheating from trying to sustain the Omicron particle field. It’s the third coil I’ve had blow on me,” Tammias said.

“Let me take a look at it,” Miles said, getting down on the floor.

Miles peered inside while Tammias held a light. He reached into touch the coil and jerked his hand back.

“Hot?” Tammias asked.

“No, just doesn’t take long to examine a fried coil,” Miles said.

An alarm Klaxon sounded. Captain Maxwell’s voice came over the intercom: “Yellow alert, people. This is not a drill. All hands, battle stations. Our colony on Setlik Three is under attack. Medical teams prepare to receive wounded. We got six hours till our arrival at Setlik Three at best warp. We won’t know the scale of the emergency until we arrive, but let’s prepare for the worst.”

“Got to go,” O’Brien said.

Tammias nodded and followed O’Brien into the corridor. People were busy hustling about. Tammias frowned. He felt useless, everyone having jobs to do. Of course, he didn’t have to be useless. He took the lift down to medical and presented himself to the chief Doctor, Matsuda Chu. She was busy and didn’t look up at him to acknowledge his presence.

“What can I do for you?” she asked, checking off the list on the PADD she held. She nodded to the nurse and moved to another station.

“I’d like to offer my services as a surgeon,” Tammias said.

She lowered her PADD. “You’re thirteen years old,” Chu said, scowling as if he were playing a practical joke. “And I don’t have time for this.”

“I have a class four medical rating, accredited at the Vulcan Academy of science,” Tammias said. “Which is the equivalent of a Nurse Practitioner.”

“I know that,” Chu snapped.

“And I’m only six months shy of getting my Doctorate in Veterinarian Medicine, and though that doesn’t necessarily qualify me to work on humans, with those two rating combined, the least you could do is allow me to assist in rendering first aid,” Tammias pointed out.

Chu put a hand on his shoulder. “Thank you. I’ll have to run it by the Captain first. Get a communicator badge from the replicator and have it assign you a code so I can call you.”

Tammias did as she instructed him. An hour later he was summoned to sickbay to meet with Doctor Chu and Captain Maxwell.

“The Doctor has informed me that you would like to volunteer your services,” Maxwell said. “I understand that you’re qualified. I’ve also been in touch with your guardians. Ambassador Sarek has responded and given me the green light to use you. I need to ask you, for my own assurances and to fulfill Star Fleet protocols, one question: Are you sure you’re up to this?”

“No,” Tammias said. “But it sure beats the hell out of standing around in my quarters doing nothing.”

Maxwell chuckled. “I appreciate your honesty. Put him to work, Doctor. I’ll make sure Star Fleet compensates you appropriately, Garcia.”

“No worries,” Tammias said.

“I’m going to want you to stay on the ship,” Captain Maxwell said.

“The wounded are on the planet,” Tammias objected. “And since you’ll probably be beaming only the most serious cases immediately up to sick bay, it makes more sense that I’m planet side, rendering first aid, while expediting the more critical cases up to the ship for Doctor Chu to deal with.”

Doctor Chu frowned at the Captain. “He’s right, of course. His skills and experience are limited, so, consequently, he would be best suited for work in the triage. I’ve got to go planet side and set one up. Doctors Pont and Jackson are going down with me, as are ten nurses. We can keep an eye on him.”

“I don’t want to be the one to have to explain it to Sarek how his foster child was killed,” Maxwell said.

“Whether it’s here on the ship, or on the planet, I’m still a target,” Tammias pointed out. “A battle zone is a battle zone.”

“Fine,” Maxwell said, grudgingly. Never argue logic with a kid raised on Vulcan, he told himself. “I’ll assign Miles as your body guard. And I want you fully decked in medical gear. I want it clear that you’re a non-combatant. That means no handling any weapons.”

“And if I need one?” Tammias objected.

“I’m not giving in on this one. No weapons. Now, go get changed,” Maxwell said.

“Yes, Sir,” Tammias said, grumbling as he departed: “Just hope whoever it is that’s attacking us recognizes Federation Rules of Conduct for non-combatants.”

Captain Maxwell shook his head. “He’s a smart kid, but perhaps a bit arrogant. Are you sure you can handle him?”

“I can handle him,” Chu said.



O’Brian, Doctor’s Chu, Pont, Garcia, and Nurse Anthony Carlin were the third Away team to arrive planet side. Garcia was surprised by the coolness of the breeze and the brightness of the sun. Somehow he had expected the world to be a dreary place, with over cast skies and shades of grey. The only marring of the sky was from the numerous fires burning. Sunlight glinting off a fragment of metal in a pile of rubble that used to be a wall got his attention. A surreal reflection of the landing party upside down and backwards could be seen on closer inspection.

An ensign ran up to Doctor Chu. “Some of the colonist have established a hospital in the school cafeteria. It’s this way.”

“Garcia, you’re with me,” Chu said.

O'Brian, Garcia and Chu followed the Ensign back to the school cafeteria. As soon as they were there Chu called the Rutledge and ordered the rest of the medical team to beam down to their current location. Garcia tuned out the sounds of the distressed and wandered over to the first person he found, drawing the medical tricorder out. It was his first, real live "human" patient.

The patient scoffed. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Examining your condition," Tammias said. He set his pack down to pull out a bone tissue generator, while telling the patient his diagnosis. "You have some edema and some superficial ecchymosis due to a simple fracture to the left tibia."

Chu came up to Garcia. "Garcia, we have more serious things to treat than broken legs. Give him something for the pain if he wants it, but move quickly to identify the more seriously wounded."

"Yes, Doctor," Tammias said.

"You're really a Doctor?" the patient asked.

"No, I just play one at a holosuite," Tammias told him. "Can you cope, or do you require an analgesic?"

"I'm fine. Run along and do as your mother asked," the patient waved.

"She's not my mother..."

"Garcia!" Chu yelled.

He grabbed the medical bag and moved to the next patient. The next person he evaluated was unconscious due to a head injury. He called the Rutledge to have the person beamed up.

"Sorry, Garcia. We're in a combat situation and shields are up," came the reply.

Garcia looked to Chu. She heard. "Do what you can for him," Chu said.

An explosion outside the school shook the building and out of a reflex he had gained from playing Doctor in the holosuite, Tammias leaned over the patient. After the dust settled, he treated the head injury, stabilizing the patient and then moved on. A child was crying next to its mother. She was dead. Had he not been quick enough? Could he revive her? She had been dead perhaps four minutes, due to a loss of blood. If they could beam her up, she might have a fighting chance for life. If he had portable stasis unit, she might have a fighting chance. If he only had the right equipment, artificial blood, a surgical kit...

Chu came over gently closed the woman's eyes. She touched Garcia's face. "She's gone, Tammias. Take the child across the street. There's a bomb shelter. Then get some water and come back."

Tammias led the child by the hand away from its mother. He was still crying, and resistant, so O'Brian picked the child up. "I'll take him. You stay here."

Tammias hesitated. Someone nearby was crying. Another woman. She was rocking a dead child. He didn't have to scan it to know it was dead. Chu cried out for a nurse. Apparently they were all busy, so he went to her aid.

"Hold his arm down," Chu instructed.

Blood squirted from a wound, drawing a line across his face. He held the patient down while Chu administered a drug to knock him out. The patient went limp.

"Hold this open while I get the fragment out," Chu said. "Thank you."

"There's another piece, right there," Tammias said, pointing out an obscure fragment.

“Good eye,” she said. “Can you close this wound? Make sure you run a scan for foreign microorganisms. This was not a sterile procedure.”

Tammas nodded. He closed the wounds with a tissue generator, working from the inside out, repairing the artery first. Once the wound was healed he used another device that would look for foreign organisms and destroy them. He was tempted to wash his hands with the same device. Instead, he pulled out a saturated tissue to clean his hand and disposed of it by tossing it to the floor, forgetting about the blood on his face. He moved to the next patient. The next person was burned over seventy percent of his body. He was already tagged as DOA. Tammas felt light headed. He saw O’Brien had returned. He saw Doctor Chu. He saw an Ensign helping to bring another patient in. He saw the door. Sunlight streaming through a broken window. The curtain fluttering in the breeze.

Tammas ran outside, turned to the left, and threw up. O’Brien was suddenly behind him, patting his back.

“You okay?” O’Brien asked.

Tammas wiped his mouth with his sleeve. Turned to go back in, but staggered.

“Hey, let’s take a break,” O’Brien said.

“They don’t get to take a break,” Tammas said.

“Help! Someone help me! My child is wounded,” came a cry from the window across the street, two buildings down.

It was a woman and she was waving at O’Brien. Tammas answered the call.

“Wait a minute!” O’Brien said, running after him.

Tammas was halfway up the stairs when he realized the stairs were unstable. He staggered but made it up. O’Brien followed, sticking closer to the wall. Garcia knocked on the door, and he heard what sounded like heavy furniture being moved. The door opened. “Please,” she said, looking to O’Brien for help.

Tammas went right to the child sprawled out on the floor. There was another woman, perhaps the first’s woman’s sister with her back against the wall, holding a phaser. On closer inspection, the phaser she was holding was just a practice weapon. It wouldn’t kill a roach, much less a human. A Cardassian probably wouldn’t even stop to scratch. Her hands were shaking. Did she know what she was holding? Two other kids looked out at him from underneath their bed. The first woman seemed confused.

“What? You? You’re just a child?” she stammered.

“What is it?” O’Brien asked.

“Stressed induced asthma attack,” Tammas said, guessing about the stress part. He gave the kid a hypo-spray dose of eppy, and then blew two rescue breaths into the patient’s mouth. The kid gasped and sat up. “Whoa, easy. Breathe slowly.”

A noise from another room scared the two kids under the bed and they screamed. The woman with the phaser turned and pointed her weapon at the other door. O’Brien went to investigate, drawing his weapon. Tammas stood, drawing the child he had just saved a little further from that door. The front door burst open and a Cardassian entered, fired one shot at the woman with the phaser, and then another shot at the first woman. She fell ungracefully to the floor. Tammas put himself between the child and the Cardassian.

The Cardassian turned his phaser rifle on Tammas. Tammas squinted at the sound that a phaser makes when being fired and surprisingly felt no pain. He opened his



eyes when he realized he wasn't hurt, and watched as the Cardassian's knees buckled under him and he collapsed in slow motion. Tammas saw O'Brien standing there, weapon ready to fire again at the downed Cardassian. Tammas checked the woman. She was dead. So was her sister. He then checked the Cardassian. He was dead. He didn't have to say anything to O'Brien. O'Brien suddenly seemed much older.

"We need to get out of here," O'Brien said. "If they got troops on the ground, we're in serious trouble. I'll check the hall. Get the kids."

"Come on, kids," Tammas said.

The two under the bed weren't budging. There were the sounds from another exchange of fire out in the hall. Tammas held his breath, tempted to go and get the Cardassian's phaser rifle. The kid who had asthma stood behind Tammas, gripping his leg.

O'Brien entered. "I said, get the kids, let's go."

"What's your name?" Tammas asked the boy.

"Jacob," he answered.

"Tell your siblings to come out. We need to leave," Tammas said.

Jacob yelled at the two and they crawled out. O'Brien picked one up, and Tammas picked the other up. It was awkward carrying the child and his medical back pack, but he did so.

"Stay close," O'Brien instructed.

"Stay close," Tammas repeated to Jacob, who couldn't get any closer without breaking the laws of physics.

O'Brien led them down the stairs and across the street back to the school cafeteria. Their situation was worse than O'Brien had imagined. As soon as they hit the middle of the street, they began to draw fire. Their own side fired a few rounds on them, but as soon as they recognized O'Brien, they turned their focus back to the Cardassians. They arrived at the entrance to the school lunch room and an Ensign approached.

"The ship called," the Ensign reported. "The transporters are out. We did get everyone from the shelter beamed up. There are several wounded over left, and thirteen of our crew. Doctor Chu was looking for Garcia."

"We went to help some people," O'Brien said. "I didn't hear the report over my comm."

"Our com badges are down," the ensign said. "They're jamming them. There's a communication laser dish on the roof which we're using for direct communications to the Rutledge."

"A communication laser dish? That means there ought to be a field transporter around here somewhere," O'Brien said.

"It's in the basement," Jacob said. "But it doesn't work."

"How do you know?" O'Brien asked.

"I was messing with it the other day. I got grounded and they accused me of breaking it, but it was already not working. Ask the transporter's computer, it will tell you the same thing," Jacob said.

"I'm going to go check it out," O'Brien said, handing his kid off to Doctor Chu.

"Check what out?" Chu asked.

"O'Brien, we can't hold this position long," the ensign said.

O'Brien looked about. There were three entrances to the cafeteria. Seven if you counted the windows. He sighed. "Here's what I want you to do," O'Brien said. "Get everyone to the center of this room. Flip the tables up on the sides and get behind them. Fire your weapons at each of the doors, and collapse enough of the structure to block it. Then all you have to do is concentrate on the windows."

"You got to be kidding," Chu said. "That might bring the whole building down on us."

"Would you prefer to surrender now?" O'Brien asked. "I just watched them kill two women. What do you think they'll do to us? Alright then. I'm going down to the basement and see if I can't get that transporter up."

"You won't be able to come back up if we collapse that part of the roof on the door," the Ensign said. "You could be trapped down there for months before someone finds you."

"Then, I guess you'll have to tell someone I'm down there," O'Brien said.

O'Brien departed. Everyone else gathered together at the center of the room, and the ensigns fired at the ceiling at strategic places, bringing a good portion of the building down all around them. Sun light poured into the building from the two remaining windows. The dust stirred by the collapse of the building sparkled in the shafts of light. Jacob began coughing again. Chu told him, and everyone, to breathe through their shirts.

"I told you humans were crazy," came a voice from outside. "They just killed themselves."

The owner of the voice peered in from the window. His silhouette made a nice target. Ensign Sanders took him out. There were shouts in Cardassian language and the sounds of weapons powering back up. A volley of phaser fire hit the outside wall, some streaks filtered through the windows and hit the pile of rubble behind the huddled mass of Federation people. Only two shots hit the upended tables. They would have to come up to the window to actually do any damage to the tables, and no one was willing to do that again.

The firing stopped. "You in there. Surrender now or we'll blow the place up."

Jacob's siblings started crying. Jacob clutched Garcia's arm.

"Think of the children," came the voice from outside. "Do you want their deaths on your hands?"

The ensigns looked to Doctor Chu who was now in charge. She put a finger to her lips, indicating that they were going to remain silent. She rocked the child O'Brien had handed her. An object flew in the window and stuck to the pile of debris directly behind them. Tammis pushed Jacob away and threw himself on top of the device.

The next thing they knew was that they were all alive and well on the Bridge of the Rutledge. Chu immediately walked over and grabbed Garcia's arm and shook him. "You ever do that again, I'll kill you."

"Where's O'Brien?" Maxwell asked, and turned to the materializing form of the man he sought.

"Sorry, I'm late, Captain. I had to come on the second wave," O'Brien said. He sat down on the floor, exhausted. Chu did a cursory medical exam just in case it was more than fatigue.

"Any other survivors down there?" Maxwell asked.

"Not that I could ascertain," O'Brien said. "I believe we got everyone."

“Helm, get us out of here. Warp factor eight,” Maxwell said.



Tammas didn't care about his pet project any longer. He sat against the bulkhead, staring at nothing in his dimly lit quarters. Directly behind his head and beyond that wall was space: black, cold, and the nothingness normally associated with a vacuum. He wished his mind could mirror that emptiness, but the dead were walking that space. He stared at the parts and tools littering his floor. He ignored the door chime three times, after that, the would be guest used their security override to open the door.

Doctor Chu entered. She wasn't surprised by the conditions of the room, because she had heard he had done some remodeling. She carried with her a meal and some drinks, as if she intended to have a picnic. She sat down next to Tammas, putting her back to the wall. She didn't say anything or ask anything. She just started unpacking food. She placed a share in front of Tammas and then in front of her. She then poured them some tea.

She took a bite of her sandwich. It was peanut butter with banana and honey mixed in, and grape jelly, on toasted wheat. For a side snack she had brought prunes with peanut butter on them. She would have brought milk to wash it down, but she knew Tammas was lactose intolerant. At least, that's what he had told her. She suspected that it was more probable that he just hated milk.

“So,” Chu said.

Tammas didn't bite, either the sandwich or the invite to be social.

“The Captain is going to put you in for a medal,” Chu said.

“I don't deserve a medal,” Tammas said, a bit of anger in his voice. “My performance as a medical professional was pitiful.”

“Everyone you treated survived,” Chu said.

“I didn't even treat half of the patients you did,” Tammas argued. “How do you know that someone didn't die because I wasn't moving fast enough, or I because I...”

“Stop,” Doctor Chu said. “You can play that game the rest of your life and you'll never win. You did what you did. You now know what you know. From here, you move on and endeavor to improve upon what you know. That's the way it is. Do you like peanut butter? Try one of the prunes. I love peanut butter and prunes.”

Tammas looked at her as if she were an alien. She shrugged and ate one of the prunes, smiling with delight.

“Ever been to Andoria?” she asked.

“We're still going there?” Tammas asked.

“It's the nearest Star Base. The ship needs repairs and the crew needs some R and R,” Chu said. “Plus, we still have an investigation to do over that abduction.”

“We're still two weeks away from Andoria?” Tammas asked.

“Roughly,” Chu said.

“I got sick,” Tammas said, his mind returning to his performance on the planet.

“I know,” Chu said.

Tammas stared at the food. The front corner of the torpedo tube that he was making into a holo-emitter reflected the streaming stars shining in through the window. He saw this in his peripheral vision. Chu touched his shoulder compassionately.

“I remember the first time I performed surgery,” Chu said. “It was a heart patient and I was to assist the Doctor. I thought, on my own, that it would be nice to get to know

the patient before the surgery. So I visited him in his hospital room. I spent an hour with him each morning, for about three days. On the day of the surgery I was there with him before they sedated him. He was in his usual good humor mode and making jokes. He died on the operating table. After ten minutes of trying everything, the Doctor in charge coded him. Six minutes before the code I was immobilized by tears, five minutes before the code, I was sobbing. I had to leave the operating room. I sat down there, I vomited into a waste receptacle, and I cried some more. I seriously considered not becoming a Doctor.”

Chu put down her sandwich. She sipped her tea.

“I guess you’re going to tell me it gets easier?” Tammias asked.

“No,” Chu said. “After we took care of all the wounded from the colony, I retired to my quarters, I threw up, and I cried myself to sleep. The next morning, I got up, and I went right back to work.”

“So, what are you telling me?” Tammias asked.

“There’s a time to laugh and a time to cry,” Chu said. “If you continue to be a Doctor, you’re going to have to figure out how much time to allow yourself to do those things. And most the time, patients prefer to hear a laugh and see a smile. And I think that is why we do it. As a health care professional, there is nothing better that we can give than warmth, comfort, and happiness. Especially to the terminally ill or wounded. They’re under enough stress. They don’t need the extra burden of knowing that we’re suffering with them, or because of them. You follow your procedures, do all you know to do, with confidence and a smile, and mourn later.”

Tammias wiped his eyes. Chu kissed him on the forehead, stood, and walked to the door. She looked back to Tammias.

“I’m glad you were with us yesterday,” Chu said.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

“That should do it,” O’Brien said. “Try it now.”

The cat materialized and walked right to Tammas. It looked like a real cat and it felt like a real cat. Now, the test would be how long the fake cat could maintain that illusion of reality. As they watched it run through its antics, a call came through for Tammas. It was from Vulcan.

“You want this in private?” O’Brien asked.

“Nah,” Tammas said, waving O’Brien to make himself comfortable.

O’Brien sat on the floor and petted the cat. A holographic pet made more sense to him on a Star Ship than a real pet. He and Tammas had agreed to share in the contribution to the upgrade to holographic technologies, putting both their names on the list of work cited, along with a copy of the blue prints on the IS-Net for public use. Someone else, better at engineering than they would no doubt take their work and improve on it even more. There was no reason, O’Brien had come to the conclusion, that holographic technology couldn’t be employed on Starships within his life time.

Sarek and Perrin appeared on the screen. After the ritual greetings, Sarek spoke. “We have notified the Garcia’s that you will not be visiting due to the circumstances you find yourself in. They send their compliments.”

“I sent them a letter,” Tammas said. “I guess they’ll get it in couple of days.”

“Indeed,” Sarek said, and then he moved directly to his reason for calling. “I would like to ask you to do something for me.”

“Anything,” Tammas agreed.

“I know you do not prefer to give live, public, musical performances,” Sarek said. “But I would like you to consider doing so while you are on Andoria. The Andorian Consulate is a fan of your work and a friend of mine. I did not anticipate you meeting him on this journey, or I would have prepared for you some tokens of my esteem to present to him. I would consider it a great complement to me if you would perform for him and his guests.”

“I’m honored to do this for you,” Tammas said. “I’m also anxious to be home.”

“And I am eager to have you return,” Sarek said. “The house is empty without you. Sparky misses you.”

Tammas chuckled. “Yeah,” he said. That was as close as Sarek would ever get to admitting he himself missed Tammas.

“I’m glad you’re alright,” Perrin said.

He wanted to express anger at her for sending him out here, but he put that in check. He had nearly made a self fulfilling prophecy come true when he had told her he might die without seeing Sarek again. His anger seemed out of place now. Time and distance from home seemed to help. Time to let it go, he thought.

“Thank you,” Tammas said. “I’ve been informed we have to make one more pit stop before heading back to Vulcan. We’ll be taking some Andorians and their supplies to a city called Stratos. Can you imagine how many anti-gravity lifts have to be functioning in order to keep their city in the air? Apparently they just finished a fourth floating city. Some Andorian engineers are taking up residence on it. Why hasn’t Vulcan ever considered a floating city?”

“Because we are well grounded,” Sarek said.

“Well, I guess I will see you both in about four weeks,” Tammas said.

“Be safe,” Perrin said.



After the concert, which Captain Maxwell, O’Brien, and Doctor Chu all attended along with the Consulate and his guests, Tammias forced himself to mingle. He usually withdrew to a private place after performing live, to erase the intense feeling of having had so much attention focused on him. He hated public appearances. He would much rather put together a video and release it, not just because less people, but also because it was much easier to control the quality. The performance had gone off better than he had hoped, and he attributed that to being able to sense the Andorians emotional state. He hadn’t realized that Andorians had some latent telepathic abilities until he had started the concert. He could feel them emoting, sharing the experiences with each other. Consequently, he had had to raise his personal shields a notch or two to avoid being distracted, but even this helped add to the general aura of his music. The Andorian Consulate and guests were so sincerely honored by the concert that Garcia could do no wrong, which made it easier in the sense that he felt at ease and less worried about making mistakes. Not that anyone generally noticed when he made mistakes. He felt honored and humbled being so graciously received.

The Consulate took the most of Tam’s time, asking if he would be willing to carry a package back to Sarek on his behalf. It seems that he and Sarek had a game of one upping each other on their tokens of admiration. The business of the abduction took place privately with Captain Maxwell and O’Brien, who was now the tactical officer for the Rutledge. Chu was trying to extract herself from a conversation from an ambitious, young male who had just had the realization that he was no longer going to live life as a gender- neuter. It was conversational approach was odd, blabbering something about a dream from god changing his biology and that he was suddenly, and strangely, attracted to humans. It was a bit much for Tammias to follow as he concentrated on blocking out the persons psychic waves. The Andorian was broadcasting his intentions and expectations so loudly that Tammias was surprised everyone in the room wasn’t gawking at him. Perhaps adults were use to it, he mused.

“You’re a human?”

Tammias turned to discover an Andorian behind him and was startled by her physical attributes. Specifically, she was white as a ghost. “Are you an albino? I didn’t know Andorians had the albino trait in their genome.”

“My people are called Aenar,” she said. “We’re still Andorians. This is our natural color. I suppose the humans would understand me to be of a different race, but same species. I’m surprised by your height. I thought humans were taller.”

“Well, we’re not born tall,” Tammias said, and grimaced at the sarcasm. “I meant, I’m young.”

“So am I,” she said. “My mother is here to speak with your Captain about the abduction. Seventy of my people were taken.”

“I’m sorry,” Tammias said.

“Forgive me, but I’m very curious about you,” she said. “You have a mental construct surrounding you that is quite solid. I didn’t know that humans could do such mental projections.”

“I’m only mostly human. And I’ve been trained to do that. I was not taught appropriate psychic boundaries when I was younger and I probably over do it a bit now and then.”

“A telepath?” she asked, tilting her head one way, her antennae going the other. “No. Maybe. Strong empathy for sure.”

Tammas waved his hand in front of her eyes. She smiled.

“Yes, I am blind,” she said.

Tammas raised an eyebrow. “But you saw me pass my hand in front of your face?”

“I felt the movement of the air, heard the sound,” she said. “And, I can sense things with my antennae.”

“What is your name?” Tammas asked.

“Kors,” she said.

“Would you be interested in going for a walk with me?” Tammas asked.

“Sure,” Kors said. “Would you like to see anything particular?”

“Yes, actually. I’d like to see the surface. I’ve never experienced snow,” Tammas said.

“You’re joking,” Kors said, sounding appalled. “How can that be?”

“There’s no snow where I live,” Tammas said.

“What a horrid place,” Kors said. “We must rectify this situation at once. First we’ll need to get you some warmer clothes. And some ice skates. Oh, but you don’t know how to ice skate, do you?”

“Will you teach me?” he asked.

She took him by the hand and dragged him from the concert room, as if time was of the essence. Kors insisted on using a transporter to take them to her favorite place, so he went along without complaint. They arrived at frozen lake. The sky was blue and crisp and cold, but Tammas found he could maintain his body warmth without the heavy coat, and so he shrugged it off. His mental disciplines had taught him how to maintain his body temperature, similar to a technique that the Tibetan Monks used, called gTum-mo Yoga. He wasn’t sure how long he could maintain his body temp under these conditions, which got his curiosity up and started an impromptu science project. He made a game out of seeing how long he could go without his coat, knowing it was nearby if he needed it.

The lake wasn’t a true lake. Kors explained that it was only half a meter thick at its deepest. It was run off from a warm spring that had frozen at the surface. There were arches of pure ice where geysers erupted and froze connecting in two. There was a tree completely frosted over, and another dusted with snow from a recent fall. The first had fruit frozen in place, with ice crystals hanging from the branches. The sun was sparkling off of the tree, shining through the ice arches, refracting into its full spectrum, which was finally mirrored in ice they skated on.

Kors taught him how to ice skate. He mastered it pretty quickly, but he pretended to stumble a few times to make her feel good about teaching him, and, so he could be a little closer to her. She laughed as she helped to support him.

“You are pretty good for a human,” Kors said.

“I have a good teacher,” Tam told her. “You know, you haven’t asked my name.” She smiled and sighed. “I was wondering if you were ever going to volunteer it.”

“Is that the custom?” he asked. “Well, my name...”

Kors put four fingers to his lips to make him stop. “Not with your mouth. Will you let your shields down with me? May I share your thoughts?”

Tammas hesitated.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have asked. If you were comfortable with such a thing, you would have already done so,” Kors said. “Forgive me.”

“Kors,” Tammas said. “You’ve done nothing wrong. You can share my thoughts. Do I need to do something? Touch your face?”

“No,” Kors said, giggling. “Unless you want to. The only thing you need do is give me permission. That and lower your shields.”

“I invite you to share my thoughts,” Tammas said. Letting his guard down took conscious effort. He touched the side of her face, brushing a strand of hair back with his thumb.

Kors’ smile faded and she put her hand to his chest. “You aren’t what you seem. No. This is wrong somehow. I don’t understand.”

Kors trembled and turned to leave. Tammas grabbed her arm. “What is it? What do you see?”

“You’re hurting me,” Kors said, twisting her arm to escape.

Tammas lightened up on his grip. “I’m sorry. I just want to understand.”

Kors touched his face with one hand, placing the other over his heart. “You really don’t understand. But you don’t see it by choice. A paradox. I’m sorry, Tam. I can’t reveal to you what your conscious mind is not ready to see for itself.”

Angry, Tammas pulled away and skated over to an arch and sat down. A moment later Kors joined him.

“I’m sorry,” Kors said, sitting next to him. “I had to sort through some things. I’m sorry about your past. The trauma. You will understand when you’re ready. I’m certain of this. It is not right for me to reveal it before its time. It only increases the trauma.”

“Am I a monster?” Tammas asked her.

“Oh, no,” Kors said, lifting his face with both hands. “You’re not a monster. I understand. Jovet called you this, but you’re not. You are you. Unique. Beautiful. You are full of music and love and passion. There is so much to you I can’t even begin to process it all. I would need a life time and that may still prove inadequate. Don’t hate yourself so.”

Kors kissed him on the lips. He closed his eyes and melted into her.

“What are you two doing?!”

Tammas and Kors stood suddenly. O’Brien, Doctor Chu, Captain Maxwell, the Andorian Consulate, and Kors’ mother were standing behind them. Kors’ mother, Adalene, stepped forward.

“What are your intentions towards my daughter, human,” she asked.

“Now, don’t be so hasty,” the Consulate interrupted, worried about potential scandals.

“Didn’t you hear us calling you?” Maxwell asked. “Where’s your communicator?”

“On my coat,” Tammas said.



“And where is your coat?” Doctor Chu asked, putting the back of her hand against his forehead, the old way of checking body temperature. “My, god, you’re burning up!”

“Burning up with my daughter?” Kors’ mother pressed.

“Mom, it wasn’t like that,” Kors pleaded.

“Really?” she asked, tapping her anger out with her foot. “Then what are you trying to conceal from me? Give me your thoughts, young lady.”

“I can’t,” Kors said. “Not this. Not now. It’s a privacy obligate situation.”

Kors mother fumed, her antennae flattened out against her head, and she stared ominously at Tammias. He was beginning to think he would be safer staring down a mother polar bear from Earth.

“Consulate Myers,” Kors’ mother finally turned. “I need this made right.”

“What would you have me do, Adalene? Marry them?” the Consulate asked.

“Um, excuse me?” Tammias asked.

Captain Maxwell started to intervene, the Consulate was hemming and hawing, but Adalene was adamant: “The rules are very clear. You know human males think it is okay to go around kissing every female that crosses their path, but not with my daughter,” she said.

“Mother!” Kors shouted. “You’re making a scene. There is nothing here to be alarmed about. Tammias and I are friends.”

And to prove that point, Kors took Garcia’s hand in hers. Her mother raised her right antenna.

“Give me your thoughts, human,” Adalene said. “It’s the only way to appease me.”

“Mom. Please. Don’t,” Kors said, stepping in front of Garcia as if to protect him.

“You may have my thoughts,” Tammias said.

“You don’t have to do this,” Kors told him. But it was too late.

Kors watched her mom as her anger dissipated. She began to silently weep, tears streaming down her face, freezing before they hit the ground. Her tears made tiny plink sounds as they hit the ice, a sound that only Tam could hear, even though the air was still. It stirred music in his mind. Tammias became even more puzzled by Adalene’s reaction than he had been by Kors.

“I told you,” Kors said, shedding her own tears. She looked to Garcia but addressed her mother. “Isn’t the music beautiful?”

Adalene got down on her knees and humbled herself before Tammias. She took a vial from her bag, scooped up her frozen tears, sealed the vial, and offered this up to Tammias as a gift. He hesitated. Kors took the vial, added her own tears, broke the tip of an ice crystal from the near by tree, placed it in the vial, and resealed it. She took his hand, opened it, put the vial in it, and then closed his fingers around it.

“Carry this with you,” she said. “It’s more than a souvenir. It’s an expression of our love. Remember me, every once in a while.” And then she leaned in closer and kissed him once more.

Tammias was blushing as he took his place next to the Away Team. Chu handed him his coat. Maxwell and O’Brien made no secret that they were studying him. He nodded to the Consulate, Adalene, and finally to Kors. “Thank you for showing me snow. And teaching me to ice skate.”

“Thank you for the music,” Kors said.

“You are always welcome here,” the Consulate said, opening his arms in a welcoming gesture. Adalene spoke nothing, but she offered the same gesture.

“Rutledge, four to beam up,” Maxwell said.

The world changed.

“What the devil was that all about?” O’Brien asked, stepping down from the transporter.

“And just who do you think you are?” Chu asked. “Captain Kirk? Kissing aliens can only get you into trouble.”

“And I suppose you’re my parents now?” Tammias asked, defensively.

“While you’re on board my ship,” Maxwell said. “You bet’cha.”



Stratos was everything the rumors said about it and more. In order to get a better view, Tammias rented an aircraft. After taking in the city from various positions, he went on a joy flight, using VFR rules, and setting a course towards the new cloud city that had just opened up to the public. Half way there he had to stop in order to take on fuel. The fueling platform was a floating aircraft carrier. It hovered nearly a kilometer above the ocean surface. There was a second plane being fueled and a man arguing with a female. Probably his wife, Tammias thought, imagining their situation as he briefly observed the two along with the context clues. While the attendant filled his aircraft, he was tempted to check in with O’Brien but found that he didn’t need to. O’Brien was hailing him.

Tammias activated his comm. badge. “Garcia here.”

“You staying out of trouble?” O’Brien asked.

“Yes, Dad,” Tammias said. The male and female were arguing much louder. Neither of them paid any attention to the little girl that had climbed out of their aircraft.

“Not kissing any girls, I hope?” It was Maxwell’s voice, which suggested to Tammias that O’Brien was paging him from the Bridge. Aren’t I important, Tammias thought. As for the kissing the girl thing, Tammias chose not to dignify that with a remark. A number of people on the ship had openly teased him about it, and he wasn’t feeling as good humored as they were. The little girl started wondering towards the edge of the carrier.

“Stand by one,” Tammias said, moving towards the kid. “Hey?” Tammias yelled. “Hey?! O’Brien, lock onto me with a transporter and wait for a text message.”

“What’s going on?” Maxwell asked.

The girl looked over the edge, looked back towards the arguing couple and stepped backwards off the edge before Tammias could reach her. Tammias didn’t hesitate. He followed her over the edge.

Tammias had never experienced free fall, outside of an aircraft, before. He was passing through the air at such speeds that he wouldn’t have been able to hear himself yell much less tell O’Brien his needs. O’Brien no doubt was confused by the sound of air flowing over the open communicator, but his heart was no doubt passing through his throat as he followed Garcia with the transporter sensors. Tammias had at least anticipated that he wouldn’t be able to use the communicator and even as he fell he was cuing a text message to send with his neural implant. He streamlined his body and accelerated towards the girl. He knew what to do because he had seen it in video simulations. He needed to reach her as quickly as possible just in case O’Brien didn’t

wait for the text message. He plowed into her so hard that he was afraid he might have killed her. But he got her. And they tumbled. He sent the message.

“NOW O’BRIEN! TWO TO BEAM UP. M R GN C.” Tammias sent.



O’Brien had been on the bridge familiarizing himself with his new station, when Maxwell asked if the “prodigal son” had checked in. The fact that Tammias was given permission to explore on his own was a sign of the trust he had earned. Besides, how much trouble could a boy get into, O’Brien has posed.

“Just a moment, Sir, I’ll call him,” O’Brien said.

“Garcia here,” Tammias answered.

“You staying out of trouble?” O’Brien asked.

“Yes, Dad,” Tammias answered, not a little sarcasm bleeding out of the intercom. Maxwell smiled.

“Not kissing any girls, I hope,” Maxwell said.

Lt. Johnson at the helm shook her head. “Ya’ll need to stop teasing him,” she said with a heavy Georgian accent.

“Stand by one,” Tammias said over her. And then, more urgent sounding he added: “Hey? Hey?! O’Brien, lock onto me with a transporter and wait for a text message.”

“What’s going on?” Maxwell asked.

“Tammias is falling!” O’Brien said. “I need helm control to match his fall velocity.”

Maxwell didn’t even have to give the order, but he did come out of his chair at O’Brien’s words. “Helm is yours,” Johnson said.

“Matching speed,” O’Brien said. He had the lock and he began engaging the transporter beam just as the words scrolled across his screen: “NOW O’BRIEN! TWO TO BEAM UP. M R GN C.” “I’ve locked on to two people. Energizing.”

“Directly to the Bridge, O’Brien. I want to know what’s going on,” Maxwell ordered.

Tammias materialized on his back, holding the little girl. His screams faded and morphed into laughter as soon as he fully materialized. He laid the girl down as he got up, placing his communicator on her. “Site to site. Emergency. Sickbay,” Tammias gasped.

O’Brien locked on to Garcia’s badge and sent the girl to sickbay. Tammias took a deep breath and stood.

“What in the world is going on, Garcia?” Maxwell demanded.

“My perception of the situation is that the girl attempted suicide because her parents were arguing,” Tammias answered, breathlessly. His statement was pure speculation, but he was having trouble seeing it any other way. There were a dozen alternative answers, but it fit with his understanding of sociology and psychology. No matter where you go, people are people, and life can be down right difficult at times, especially for children.

“Doctor Chu to Captain,” came the Doctor’s voice over the Comm.

“Go ahead,” Maxwell answered.

“I’d like to report a possible abuse case. That girl you just sent to sick bay had two broken ribs, a broken arm, and a broken leg,” Chu said.

“I hit her pretty hard. Factoring in my body mass and my momentum at the time of collision,” Tammás tried.

Maxwell nodded. “Take care of her Doctor,” Maxwell said. “I’ll explain later. O’Brien, contact Stratos authority and apprise them of our situation.”

Captain Maxwell sat down in his chair. “Are you okay, Tam?”

Tammás thought about it, his eyes tracking up and to the left as he accessed his neural implant. Everything was elevated. Heart, blood pressure, serotonin levels... A smile grew across his face. “Yes, Sir,” Tammás said. “That was quite exhilarating.”

“Tammás Garcia, go to your quarters and stay there until I calm down,” Maxwell said.

Tammás raised an eyebrow, but obeyed. As soon as he was off the bridge Captain Maxwell sighed.

“I told ya’ll you don’t give the kid enough credit,” Johnson said.

“He’s going to get himself killed!” Maxwell snapped. “I just want to return him to Vulcan in one piece. Is that too much to ask?”

“I’m glad I don’t have any kids,” O’Brien said.

“He did save the girl,” Johnson said. “He had a lot of trust in you, O’Brien. I might not have made that leap.”

Maxwell sighed. “He reminds me of when I was a kid. I was always jumping off things. Once I jumped off the third story balcony thinking my mother’s umbrella would carry me safely to the ground. My mom fainted and I reversed the umbrella, and broke both legs.”

“If you ask me, Sir,” Johnson said. “It sounds like that old karma thing has caught up to you. You know, what goes around comes around? You’re mama must have said, just wait till you have kids.”

“Let’s get this girl to the authorities so they can figure out what’s going on,” Maxwell said. “And let’s wrap up the Andorian delegates situation so we can be on our way. I want to get Garcia home as soon as possible. I’ve never had so many incidents in such a short span of time.”

“You’re not saying the kid is bad luck, are ya?” Johnson asked.

“No,” Maxwell said. “I’m not saying that. Not saying that at all.”

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Tammas was feeling ambivalent about being home. Sure, he loved being home, but at the same time, he wanted to be else where. It was actually kind of nice being on the Star Ship, and other than Perrin, no one here seemed to notice that he was gone. At least, you couldn't tell based on their behavior. He wondered if being safe at home and bored was causing him to romanticize his trek on a starship. He didn't have enough fingers to count up all the bad things that could have happened, even subtracting the dangerous situations he did encounter. He focused on his feeling of isolation and boredom, and used it to drive his medical simulations, resisting his urge to recreate the best part of the whole trip, meeting Kors. He had even dreamed of her a couple times.

To distract himself from thoughts of Kors, he threw himself fully back into his school routine. School hadn't changed. It was the standard game of politics, as far as he could see. Perhaps even more so. Living on the Starship had changed him and he had come to appreciate learning in the field as opposed to in the class room. Unfortunately, life experiences didn't count much in academics. He wasn't going to get credit for assisting Doctor Chu during her medical emergency.

Professor Heart was technically on a leave of absence, but it was quite likely that he would never teach at the Vulcan Academy of Science again. Consequently, Tammas was taking some fall out from the students that were fans of Professor Heart and who were also surprised to see that Garcia had returned. There had been cold, distant stares before, as if people were looking at him as if he were a big-headed alien, but now he imagined animosity in their eyes. As he traveled between classes, he counted those who openly stared at him as the enemy and he had no idea what form the potential retribution would take.

The one thing that hadn't changed during his sabbatical was his attraction to Persis, but he was able to function better and within a week of being home his grades had returned to their normal perfect scores. He achieved the highest test score of all the medical students in a simulated emergency surgery exercise. The scores had been publicly posted, but since he never checked the postings, he was the last to know. He was sitting in the cafeteria suffering through a text that he was trying to read without using his Morse Code translator, when Persis and several Vulcans approached him.

He looked up at them, saw their faces, and wondered, "Crap, what did I do now?"

"May we speak with you?" Persis asked.

Tammas shivered. Her voice still got to him. Perhaps thinking of Kors would help. The way Persis asked, coupled with the fact that she had her Vulcan posse with her, made him think this was one of those intercession-group therapy meetings, as opposed to a friendly welcome back committee. Thinking of Kors became easier. After all, his thoughts of Persis were simply fantasy. Kors was real. She liked him. He liked her.

"I'm not stalking you anymore," Tammas said. He had given up even trying to talk to her, even walked right past her a couple of times without any hint of whiplash. He was still very much infatuated with her, but he was now in control of his impulses towards her. Mostly because he was substituting compulsions using the holosuite as a relief and a demystifying tool. Not that anyone needed to know that, he thought.

Persis actually smiled. "It's not about that," Persis said. "May we sit?"

Tammas made a hand signal that told them to sit and then he consolidated his study materials and food so as to provide his guests more space. Persis sat directly across

from Tammas, with a Vulcan on either side of her. One Vulcan chose to stand behind her. The one standing was a female by the name of M'Shaw. She had that classic Vulcan look, a frailness in appearance belying her great physical strength, hour glass figure, long, dark hair, and pointed ears that the hair parted to reveal, like a water fall around a flower. She reminded him of one of the Elven characters in one his holosuite adventures. He blushed realizing just how familiar she suddenly seemed to him. Persis' companion on the right was named Koshant, and he was a short, husky Vulcan, with beady little eyes in a fat face. To her left sat Hilar, who was very tall and thin. Put side by side with Koshant they might make the Vulcan equivalent of old Earth's Abbot and Costello.

"How did you do it?" Persis asked, obviously chosen to speak for her group.

Tammas wondered if she was chosen to initiate the contact because of his weakness for her. It was definitely no secret that he had feelings for her. And, he considered it a remarkably good strategy. Had to be M'Shaw's idea. "How did I do what?" Tammas asked.

"Don't play this humble game with us," M'Shaw said.

"M'Shaw, please," Persis interrupted her. "Tammas, are you not aware that you got the highest score on yesterday's surgical exam?"

"Really?" Tammas said. "That would explain the extra hostility today."

"You really didn't know?" Koshant asked.

"I don't ever look," Tammas said.

"You have the second highest Grade Point Average in class next to mine, and you don't follow the postings?" M'Shaw asked, incredulously.

"I am not my GPA," Tammas said. "I'm a human being."

"As if that is something to brag about. I examined your work," M'Shaw said.

"The quality did not warrant the highest grade in class. I believe there is a mistake in the grading process."

"You missed the point of the exercise," Tammas said. "It wasn't about quality, it was about quantity. It was an emergency situation, meat ball surgery if you will. There was an abundance of wounded and time was of the essence. You don't have time to worry about cosmetics. Focus on removing debris, repairing organs and tissues, close the wounds, and pass the cleaning and dressing over to the nurse, leaving you free to work on the next patient. Scars can always be removed or fixed up later."

"I think we understand that, Tammas," Persis said. "But still, you did twice the number of patients that we did. This just seems, well, quite frankly, impossible."

"It is impossible. I should be able to outperform you in every aspect of surgery," M'Shaw said. "How did you pull this off?"

"Practice," Tammas said.

"Practice?" Persis asked.

"Since I've returned from my vacation, I've spent the last couple of months immersed in emergency surgery simulations," Tammas said. "I recreated the setting of a M.A.S.H unit, an acronym for mobile army surgical hospital. It's a war scenario, and I've been playing the role of one the chief surgeons. I have literally performed thousands of simulated emergency surgeries, even forgoing sleep, so that I could better understand the role of my character and what he, and other doctors in that sort of setting, went through."

"You did this to improve your surgical technique?" Persis asked.

“Yes,” Tammias said. “As well as to better understand the social structure of health and illness as related to emergency medical attention in a war setting. I used this role playing as field experience to write a sociological thesis. The surgery time was simply extra.”

“I find this difficult to believe,” M’Shaw said.

“Perhaps all of you would like to join me. I’m scheduled tonight from 1900 to 2350 hours,” Tammias offered.

“May we?” Persis asked.

“Absolutely,” Tammias said. “I’ll email you the costume requirements, so you can be prepared, though I just typically wear the holosuite clothing, and change back into my outfit when the simulation is finished.”

“Alright, I guess we’ll see you later then,” Persis said, standing up. “Thank you for speaking with us.”

“Sure,” Tammias said. “Um, anytime.”

Persis smiled and headed off with her friend. Only M’Shaw looked back with somewhat of a scowl on her face. He wondered why Vulcans found it so much easier to display signs of contempt and displeasure, as opposed to the simple neutrality that would encompass a true lack of emotions.



M’Shaw arrived early, but decided to wait on her friends. Several times she had thought perhaps they had already entered the suite, but they finally arrived five minutes late. Only Persis was dressed according to the profile Tammias had provided them. They entered the holosuite and found Tammias washing up, preparing for surgery.

“You’re late, we have lots of wounded, with more choppers on the way. Get prepped, now!” Tammias said.

“What are choppers?” Hilar asked.

“It’s an archaic cutting utensil,” Koshant answered.

“This is barbaric,” M’Shaw said. “No one could operate in this sort of environment.”

“Tammias, it’s freezing in here,” Persis said.

“It’s winter. Get prepped and join me in the O.R.,” Tammias said, following a nurse through the double doors.

M’Shaw and Persis peered through the windows on the door, their breath fogging the windows. “He really goes all out for this, doesn’t he,” Persis said.

“Overkill would be an understatement. I can’t work in these conditions,” M’Shaw said. “Look! He’s using metal instruments!”

“Choppers?” Hilar asked.

“It’s just a simulation and if it makes us better surgeons, by god, I’m going to play along,” Persis said, and started scrubbing up.

The posse began to dress. They were all equally having trouble figuring out how to don the appropriate medical clothing. A nurse appeared and said, “Let me help you with that, doctors,” and began the tutorial for surgical wear of this time period and culture. She then ushered them into the operating room where tables and patients awaited them. As they took their place at their respected tables, the holographic doctors that were there disappeared so that they could take over.

“So, Tammias, this is what you do for fun?” Persis asked.

“It’s not like I have a whole lot of offers from others to engage in social activities,” Tammas said, blood squirted across his face. “Nurse, hold this clamp.”

Hilar examined the patient before him. “This is my first time to visit the holosuite and I am amazed at the continuity of details,” Hilar said, palpating the patient’s abdomen. “This is much more advanced than the holographic interface at the University’s medical lab.”

“I can barely feel my fingers it is so cold in here,” Koshant complained. “I doubt I will ever have to work under these circumstances and, consequently, do not see the point of this exercise.”

“Do you want to improve your scores on the simulated surgical field exams?” Tammas asked.

“I concede the point,” Koshant said, and got to work on his patient.

“Surely you have some friends,” Persis said, taking a scalpel from the nurse and hesitating before cutting. Though she knew it was a simulation, her senses told her that she was about to cut into a real person. “You can’t really spend all of your time here.”

“It would explain why he is so awkward, socially speaking,” M’Shaw noted.

“Hey, this is my primary tool for practicing social skills,” Tammas said.

“I rest my case,” M’Shaw said.

“Speaking of social engagements,” his nurse said. “Is it my turn tonight, or Nurse Kelley?”

The mask didn’t hide Tam’s embarrassment at the Nurse’s question. “Not in front of the guests,” Tammas said.

“What, no friendly banter?” the nurse asked.

“No unfriendly banter,” Tammas corrected.

“That’s right, we’re just all one, big, happy family here,” the nurse said. “No rivalries or sarcasm in this group.”

“Nurse,” Tammas warned.

“Did you call me, doctor?” she asked.

“Why would I call you doctor? I’m the surgeon,” Tammas said.

“So, what’s your nurse friend’s name?” Persis asked.

“Terra Tarkington,” the nurse answered.

“Interesting,” Persis said, eyeing Tammas mischievously. “Where did you get that name from, Tam?”

“An obscure sci-fi novel, titled the Adventures of Terra Tarkington,” Tammas admitted. “The best space nurse I could find reference to at the time.”

“Why, thank you,” Terra said, with a bit of a drawl.

“Hey, can you minimize the talk,” M’Shaw said. “I’m trying to concentrate here.”

“I’d rather you do more than try for a change,” Tammas said.

M’Shaw looked up. “Did you just disparage me?” she asked.

“Sorry, part of the game,” Tammas said. “Close this up, Terra.”

“Sure thing, Doc,” she said, winking at him.

“What? You’re just going to turn that over to the nurse?” M’Shaw asked.

“She’s competent,” Tammas said, being helped into new gloves by another nurse. He walked over to M’Shaw’s table to inspect her work. “No! You’ve done human anatomy before. You just can’t cut like that. Here, look.”



“It’s my patient,” M’Shaw said, holding her scalpel as if protecting a toy.

“You’re going to kill him, now let me demonstrate,” Tammias said. He took a scalpel and demonstrated how the procedure was done correctly. “There, computer, reset this patient to his pre-op condition. Now, try again.”

M’Shaw emulated Tam’s precision cut exactly, if not a little better.

“Excellent, but remember, don’t spend a lot of time on this. We’re not aiming for aesthetically pleasing results. We got more patients out there, some who might die before we get to them. If you want, I can alter the programming so we get a variety of species, Vulcan, Andorian, etc.”

“Yes,” Koshant said. “That would be good.”

By 2300, they were exhausted and Koshant was the first to complain. “Do they just keep coming?”

“The war machine can turn out an endless supply of wounded,” Tammias said.

“How are you doing, Hilar?”

“I’m holding my own,” Hilar answered.

Persis sighed. “I am embarrassed that I find the heat escaping from my patients of such comfort that I can’t wait to cut into the next one.”

“You should practice separating your emotions from your work,” Koshant said.

“My emotions tell me I need a hell of a lot more practice before I will be at a place where my emotions aren’t affected by all of this,” Persis argued. “I just can’t imagine how people did this, in a war, everyday.”

“I do this every night,” Tammias said. “Feel free to join me.”

“May I also continue to attend?” M’Shaw asked.

“Sure,” Tammias said. “All of you are invited.”

“I’m tired of this game. Can we quit now?” Persis asked.

“We still have patients,” Tammias said.

“This is a simulation,” Persis said. “Just save and we’ll come back to it.”

Tammias felt some discomfort ending the program. He was used to playing surgeon for much longer time stretches, but also, he knew that when he ended the program, his company would leave soon after. It felt kind of nice to know that not all of the people in this suite were simulated for a change.

“Yes, we’ve had enough of this for now,” M’Shaw said. “Computer, end program.”

Nothing happened, so they all looked to Tammias who was finishing up on a patient.

“Oh, alright,” Tammias said, handing the tools over to the Nurse. “Here, Terra. Close for me. Computer, save program, and end.”

“Good night, Tammias,” Terra said, before disappearing. “I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

Everything in the Holo-suite disappeared, leaving only the holographic projection grid behind. Even their O.R. uniforms, the blood stains, and the smells dissipated so rapidly that it was hard to believe that they had just a few moments ago been almost hip deep in blood and guts. Tammias collected the sweater he had left in a corner.

“Thank you for this,” Persis said.

“You’re welcome. Will I see you again?” he asked, and suddenly wished he hadn’t.

“We’ve already establish that we will be joining you again,” M’Shaw said.

“Would you like to join us for dinner?” Persis asked, knowing what Garcia had meant. He wasn’t ready to quit the social gathering yet, and, neither was she.

“Really?” Tmmas asked.

“Of course, silly,” Persis said. “There’s a restaurant nearby called the Laughing Vulcan. Have you ever eaten there?”

“No,” said Tmmas and all three Vulcans simultaneously, meaning “no” to eating at that particular restaurant.

“It’s a tourist trap,” M’Shaw said. “If it weren’t for the tourist, the place would have been closed long ago.”

“Ah,” Persis complained. “But I like it!”

“I guess it’s not bad if you like eating dog,” Tmmas said.

“That’s disgusting,” Persis said.

“And inaccurate,” Hilar said. “Vulcans are vegetarian.”

“Well, there’s an Andorian restaurant across the street,” Tmmas offered.

“Is it true that the head cook puts her tears into the soup in order to guarantee her customers fall in love with her food?” Persis asked.

“That would be criminal,” Hilar said. “I am sure it is just rumors.”

“Started by humans, no doubt,” Koshant said. “Vulcans do not gossip.”

Tmmas laughed out loud and judging by the look on the three Vulcans, he could see he would have to explain it to them. “Please,” Tmmas said. “Vulcans are subject to the same social conditions that all social creatures are privy to. You may be able to argue degree, but you can not, to my satisfaction, eliminate the rumor or gossip phenomena from Vulcan culture. Structurally speaking, rumor and gossip are social tools for isolating an individual or a particular group from society at large. It is a tool that has been quite affectively used against me ever since I started school on Vulcan.”

“Did it ever occur to you that perhaps you are just an isolationist, as opposed to blaming your loneliness on the Vulcans?” M’Shaw asked.

“No,” Tmmas said.

“If you would spend half the time you do in here socializing in the real world, perhaps you would have more friends,” M’Shaw said.

“And maybe, if you Vulcans were more warm and accepting,” Tmmas said, “I might have some friends.”

“We Vulcans are neither warm nor cold, for that would require an emotional component which is unacceptable,” M’Shaw said. “As to being accepting, I believe we are very tolerant of differences. If there is any issue with accepting diversity it is coming from your inability to accept our suppression of emotion. If you have limited your social interactions with us because you haven’t felt warmly accepted, then it has been based on a misperception on your part.”

“You’re full of crap...” Tmmas argued, badly.

“Any organism with a digestive system will have waste accumulation...” Hilar began.

“Trilo Ay!” Persis cursed. “Can we just go get something to eat before I faint?”

“You are not going to faint,” M’Shaw said. “I don’t know which species is more prone to exaggeration, Humans or Deltans.”

“Are you coming?” Persis asked Tmmas.

Tammas wanted to go and sulk, but he decided to go and eat with them instead. It was possible, he conceded, that M'Shaw may be right.



Persis was on Vulcan because of her parents. Her parents were Fleet, and had been stationed there by request. They had requested the Vulcan assignment because they had wanted their daughter to attend the Vulcan Academy of Science, which had previously accepted her based on her academic rating. Her side of the story was her parents were afraid of taking her to a learning institute that was primarily bodied by humans because they were afraid she wouldn't pay attention to her studies, but rather would focus mainly on boys. Persis had been greatly relieved to find Tammas in her xeno-anatomy class, because she had found the Vulcans rather stuffy to talk to. Why she waited till after the blow out in Heart's class to confide this little secret with him he would probably never understand. He only saw it as another game or ritual that females universally play to frustrate the opposite sex. From his perspective, she hadn't started expressing interest in spending time with him until he had stopped pursuing her.

"So, you befriended me because I was the only human male in class," Tammas repeated back in his own words what he thought she was saying.

"Oh, no, Tammas," she said. "I would have talked to you no matter what. You have the highest grade point in our initiation group and I like to be around smart people. I think it bothers our Vulcan classmates that you consistently have the highest scores, and I sort of like that, too. Seeing them irked is fun."

"I've noticed," Tammas said. "For peoples without emotions, they sure can get out of sorts. But your friend M'Shaw may have a point. Maybe we're misreading them."

"I honestly don't know how you do it," Persis said.

"What? Antagonize Vulcans?" Tammas asked.

"No," Persis said, smiling at the "by passing," the term used for their miscommunication. "Um, maybe it's better to ask why you do it. You already have a Doctorate in Musicology, and are wrapping up a Doctorate in Sociology, while simultaneously going for your Veterinarian license. Why? Are you that bored?"

"The music was just for fun," Tammas explained. "It comes very easy. Sociology is just a hobby, but because I love animals, I'm hoping the Veterinarian license will help me get into Star Fleet."

"The sociology should cover Fleet, if that's your goal," Persis pointed out.

"Yes, but it seems most Fleet people are double qualified in something," Tammas said. "I just find sociology fascinating. I enjoy it much more than I did psychology. Why do people do the things they do? You can't simply reduce it all down to biological and psychological factors. There is more to us than that."

Tammas paused for a moment, smiled as he thought back to some pleasant memories, and then turned back to the electronic book he was accessing with his PADD. His lunch went untouched. The cafeteria, though crowded, primarily of Vulcan patrons, was not as loud with conversation as an equally crowded human cafeteria would have been. Tammas had long observed that the faculty and students sat separate, and the students themselves had formed their own eating groups. These groups tended to meet at regularly scheduled times and would sit in the same place, unless Tammas, more out of social curiosity, would arrive there first to occupy their preferred space. This would force them to either sit with him or adjust their seating arrangements. More often than not,

they would simply move than sit with him, and it was funny to see just how many people were displaced from their preferred arrangements because of his “scientific curiosity.” He had been accused of purposely upsetting the natural order for no logical purpose several times, but he had never been out right confronted about his casual seat hopping. The other way to trip up the Vulcan regularity was simply to join them, meal in progress. Mostly, they would ignore him until their meals were finished. If he tried speaking to them, they would answer politely, but would keep conversation to a minimum. He had never really been sure if it was because they didn’t like him or this was just their way. Only M’Shaw had offered him an alternative to his paranoia. Either way, he never shied away or became intimidated by the game, he simply played along and observed.

Since Persis and posse had been joining him at the holosuite, three Vulcans had started regularly sharing meal time with him, provided he was already seated and eating when they entered at their regularly scheduled lunch break. He wasn’t sure if it was because Persis or her Posse had said something, or that they were simply comfortable sitting with him. He hadn’t asked. He merely enjoyed the silent company, even though he couldn’t help but wonder if they were as frustrated with his lack of consistency in his eating habits as he was by trying to get them to be more flexible in theirs. He still didn’t know their names. When Persis was sitting with him, as she was now, no one but her or her posse would join them. And today, it was just the two of them.

“You fascinate me,” Persis said.

Tammas brought his focus back to Persis. As always, Tammas seemed puzzled by her flirting, as if he didn’t know how to respond. “Thank you,” he said, and then pushed on with his work, mentally punishing him-self for allowing his tangent to take him so far a-field. He was going to have to reread the last paragraph. “I managed to get reservations for the holosuite so we can practice our surgical techniques for the upcoming final. I asked D’Pau and T’Sha to join us. This time, next week.”

“I think you’ve been on Vulcan too long,” Persis said.

“Why’s that?” Tammas said, not looking at her as he spoke.

“Don’t you miss the moon?” Persis said.

“Vulcan has no moon,” Tammas said, actually meeting her eyes this time.

“I know, but Earth does. Didn’t it inspire romantic evenings, walking along the beach?” Persis asked.

“I’ve never been to Earth,” Tammas stated.

She sighed in frustration. “But you’re human. Your species evolved in the presence of a moon, right? Your genes must be crying out for a moon. Don’t you recall ever having any wistful longing that you can’t vocalize, but the thought of a beautiful woman walking beside you on a deserted beach seems to quell your need? Don’t you ever want to just go look at the stars, not that you can see them very well from the surface of Vulcan with all the light pollution and atmospheric distortion due to the heat, but haven’t you just wanted to fill an emptiness?”

Tammas thought about it and blinked. “No,” he said. He read something important and decided to transfer it to his notes, logging the source and time.

“Don’t you think about love?” Persis asked, deciding to move right to the point.

“What about love?” he asked.

She leaned in closer to him. “Did you know Vulcans do it only once every seven years?”

“Do what?” Tammias asked.

“Love,” Persis said, feeling exasperated.

“Oh,” Tammias thought about it. “Are you using the word love as a euphemism for sex?”

Persis rolled her eyes.

“Because sex is very different than love and though a mating cycle can vary from species to species, that doesn’t mean that there isn’t a bond during the intervals where mating isn’t taking place,” Tammias said.

“You’re too clinical. I don’t know why I even bother talking to you sometimes. What I’m saying is that I couldn’t wait seven years for love,” Persis persisted. “Or sex,” she said, emphasizing sex to see if he would look up at her.

“It’s a good thing you’re not Vulcan,” Tammias said, his eyes never leaving his book. He became aware that his pulse rate had increased and his skin temperature was rising. He started to take inventory, looking for unusual stressors to explain his growing agitation. He started practicing one of his biofeedback techniques. It was possible, he supposed, that he had come into contact with a virus.

“Neither are you,” she pointed out, smiling. He didn’t respond until she kicked him under the table.

Tammias looked up, noted her smile, and reconstructed her last comment in his head. Again, he noticed a subtle increase in temperature and pulse, thanks to his neural implant. “Are you still talking about sex?”

“Could be,” Persis said, once again trying to be coy about it. “You’re not like, bonded to a Vulcan girl, are you?”

“No!” Tammias said, appalled at such an idea. He noticed he got some attention from other patrons on that, and lowered his voice back to a reasonable level. “Hell no. I couldn’t do the seven year thing, either. Well, I guess I could, considering my age and the fact that I haven’t yet, unless you count, um, ignore that... Anyway, I’m hoping it won’t last my entire life...”

“No, what were you going to say?” Persis asked. “You wouldn’t be referring to Nurse Tarkington, would you?”

A group of Vulcans at a nearby table decided they had had enough of Persis and Tam’s conversation and relocated to the other end of their table. Tammias gave her a sharp look.

“Please, it’s not like it’s a mystery to me,” Persis said. “She’s rather cute.”

“Do we have to discuss this in public?” Tammias asked.

“You’re not embarrassed, are you?” Persis asked, taking pleasure in his discomfort.

“The seven year thing just doesn’t interest me,” Tammias said.

“Thank you,” she said, as if she had won. “And, it’s not like you’re seeing anyone, right? No visiting human dignitaries or someone in Fleet? At least, no one real.”

Tammias put his electronic pencil down. “Are you trying to tell me,” he began. She was nodding before he concluded. “That you,” he continued, watching her nod a little more vigorously. He swallowed, “And me?”

She leaned across the table. “Yes,” Persis said.

Tammias sat there with a surprised look on his face and then the ramifications of what she was saying hit him like a falling piano, full melodic crash included. He blushed

and all the alarms in his biofeedback program started flashing alerts, wanting him to return his biochemistry to a calm state of being. Even his fight or flight response hadn't ever triggered as many internal alarms. "Okay," he said, standing up. "Let's go."

Persis grabbed his hand and pulled him back to the table. "Not now," Persis said.

"What?" Tammias said. "I thought..."

"You thought right," Persis said. "But tomorrow."

"Why tomorrow?" Tammias asked.

"Because, it's your birthday," Persis said.

"So?" Tammias asked.

"Tomorrow we can celebrate your birthday together," Persis said.

"If we accept the premise of relativity, we can celebrate it together right now,"

Tammias insisted.

Persis laughed. "Tomorrow evening, my parents are going to be out of town. We'll have the house to ourselves, have a nice candle lit dinner, a little bit of synthehol, and then we'll open a couple of presents, and then... Well, we'll just see how the night goes."

Tammias got up and gathered his things.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"Home," Tammias said.

"Why?" she asked, a little concerned.

This time he leaned into her and whispered, so as not to announce his intentions to all the Vulcans in the cafeteria. "To get a cold shower."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“Tammas?”

The voice startled Tammas and he spilled a dish of honey-roasted almonds. He hurriedly scooped them back up and put them back in the dish before Sparky had a chance to get to them. Sparky whined none the less. Tammas looked up and smiled at Perrin standing in the doorway.

“You seem a little bit jumpy today,” Perrin said. “Everything okay?”

“Yes. Why do you ask?” he asked.

“Because, you seem a little bit jumpy today,” Perrin said, a little slower to emphasize she had just said that.

“Oh, well, yeah,” Tammas said. “Final exams are coming up, you know.”

“May I come in?” she asked. She saw through Tam’s deflection, but didn’t comment on it. She understood when humans wanted a little privacy, all too well- being human herself, and sometimes they used a little misdirection to avoid having a conversation. She found it interesting observing Tammas cycling through phases of being more human than Vulcan, some days being logical and days of being defiantly anti-logical.

“Of course,” he said, petting Sparky as the sehlot grew more insistent on a treat. “No, Sparky. You don’t like almonds. You’re not a vegetarian.”

“I think he likes the honey salt taste,” Perrin said.

“Yeah,” Tammas said, patting him roughly until it sat down against his feet.

Tammas had been sleeping in Spock’s old room since he arrived on Vulcan in 2342, by the Earth Calendar. Sparky slept on a mat beside his bed and this was one of the rare times that his sehlot wasn’t asleep and snoring loudly. Tammas had never known an animal that slept as much as Sparky, but then, it was under six years old, and in sehlot years, that was pretty old. He wondered if Sparky was vicariously excited because of his own anticipation of his birthday party with Persis. Animals were often quite perceptive of their master’s emotional state.

Perrin was dressed in a Vulcan robe, revealing her arms, neck and hair, her hair down, a stream of black down the center of her back. The material of the robe was such that it kept her cool when outside in the garden, and warm inside the house, where the temperature had been brought down for Tam’s and her comfort. Though the words were never spoken, Tammas considered Perrin and Sarek as grandparents. They had provided him an extremely stable environment, and their age and wisdom had helped him through the difficult assimilation process in school, as well as learning to master his psychic boundaries. Not that he needed help with the school, per say. He excelled in every subject and had finished his first college degree before his tenth birthday, and had two masters before he was twelve. The only reason he already had a doctorate in musicology was due to his extraordinary talent. He might have had his Doctorate in Sociology finished before the music had he not been constantly distracted by his own interest in various academic opportunities and had stuck to one or two majors earlier on.

He had nearly pursued a career in astronomy, but the possibility of him being stuck on a remote mountain observing the sky, or stuck on some interstellar telescope dropped off in some remote sector of the sky, or teaching, was all too real a possibility. He enjoyed archaeology, but really didn’t want to study past cultures to the depth that that subject would have taken him. That, and again he would probably have ended up

being a teacher. He did get a degree in psychology, with an emphasis in crisis counseling, but he found that way too draining for any potential long term career. He was too easily caught up in the emotions of his clients, which were all humans who were currently residing on Vulcan because they were in Fleet, or because family members were in Fleet. Very few non-Vulcans lived on Vulcan to simply be immersed in the culture, as Perrin did. The fact that his older clients were reluctant to open up to someone so much younger than they had also contributed to his decision to avoid psychotherapy as a career. By the time he would be old enough to be perceived as credible, he would be old and too much time would have been wasted. So he had to stick with counseling adolescents, who at least accepted him as a peer, a potential friend trying to help them as opposed to a “real” doctor trying to fix them. And of those, they were mostly humans having trouble adapting to their parent’s constant reassignments.

No one questioned the fact that Tammias was smart beyond his years and that no matter what he finally settled on, he would master. The main goal was ensuring that he found something that would hold his attention. For most of his Vulcan peers, his indecisive and flighty character was a detriment to any potential scientific career, or true academic standing, but he consistently proved them wrong. For them, his intelligence and academic standing was comparable to a Vulcan of equal age. This created some rivalry tension, and a lot of competition between his mental peers. Even without the competition issues, it was difficult for him to socialize with people, and he had made very few friends in school. Sarek had confided in Perrin that it was very much like watching Spock grow up all over again. Tammias found it hard to believe that Spock had ever had trouble with anything. Especially making friends. It was no secret that the bond he shared with the Enterprise Crew transcended the definition of friendship. They would have given their lives for Spock.

“So, do you want to talk about it?” Perrin asked, sitting on his bed.

“Uh?” Tammias asked. “Oh, not really.”

“Are you worried about your final thesis for sociology?” she asked.

“No,” Tammias said. Thinking about that, as opposed to his upcoming date, had a calming effect. He knew Perrin would continue to talk to him until she was satisfied that he was well, so he chose sociology as a line of discourse. “There are a couple things I have thought about doing, like, introducing my modified game theory of sentient interaction and how it creates structure through boundary fortification. But lately I’ve been thinking about raw intelligence.”

“How so?” Perrin asked.

Tammias relocated the dish of almonds, placing them in Perrin’s reach, took a handful for himself, and leaned back, propping his feet up on the bed. He munched on one before answering.

“Consider human populations,” Tammias said, setting up conditions. “How many brilliant people would you say there are?”

“I would say there are quite a lot,” Perrin said. “Do you mean like geniuses, like yourself?”

“I’m not a genius,” Tammias waved off, as he always did. “I mean really, super smart people.”

“I don’t know,” Perrin said.



“Okay, going with that, let’s narrow it down further. How many people have degrees?” Tammas said. “Out of the people you know personally, how many with degrees versus certificates?”

“Fifty, sixty?” Perrin guessed. “But my circle of friends and associates is probably quite different from the norm, and, I feel compelled to point out, a degree is not necessarily a sign of intelligence.”

“Agreed,” Tammas said. “But why so low a number? You know quite a lot of people, right? And we all have access to the same learning technologies. And a graduate education now is the equivalent of what a high school education was worth three hundred years ago, at least on Earth. On Vulcan, getting a Doctorate is like finishing elementary. Their expectations for learning far exceed humanity’s expectations, but that may be due to the fact they live much longer than Humans. Anyway, we, Humans, don’t have an abundance of people with Doctorates running around. Why is that? I’ll tell you why. The technology which was intended to help improve us, make us all equal and smarter, has indeed made us more equal, but not smarter. Everybody knows a little bit about everything, but not enough to be an expert in any one thing. And why would you want to? Computers are experts in everything. Come upon something you don’t know, you ask your computer, and later, when you no longer need that info, you forget it. And why not? Why carry useless information in your head that you don’t use every day. We should have billions of experts, but most people are satisfied with just knowing enough to get by with their daily activities. They are rarely faced with a crisis that would require a person of such highly trained technical expertise, like someone in Star Fleet, to resolve an issue. High-risk careers, such as Star Fleet, are the key exceptions. They need warp core experts, and medical experts, and military experts. And among these people, you will find that most have been cross trained so as to be double utilized in a crisis. But for society en mass? They’ve gotten dumber!”

Perrin chewed on her lip. “I was under the impression the average person is smarter.”

“Of course, comparatively, everyone is marginally smarter than they were a hundred years ago. We’re all more computer savvy, that’s for certain,” Tammas said. “Almost any one can figure out what button to push to turn on an auto pilot, or activate a replicator in order to get food or clothes. But that’s simply emulation. Any three year old kid can operate a computer these days simply because computers are so simple, and so abundant. Ninety percent have voice recognition systems, so if you can speak, you’re well on the road to developing a general knowledge about technology. As we agreed, just because a person has a college degree doesn’t mean they’re intelligent, just as a person who is computer savvy doesn’t mean they’re brilliant. It simply means they have learned how to pass the test, regurgitate information, and emulate society. Most people in college still cram for tests. Cramming utilizes short-term memory only, and so 90 percent of the stuff they learn is forgotten right after the test. Now, if they ever need that information, they know where to go look it up, which is good to know that they know where to find information, but again, any moron with a computer is capable of getting at that same information.”

“But there are different types of intelligence,” Perrin said. “Musical intelligence is a different type of intelligence than say kinesthetic intelligence.”

“Indeed,” Tammias said. “Maybe we need a whole new way of thinking about intelligence, which means I need to do more research. There’s tons of literature debating that subject. The one thing that science has consistently demonstrated is that genetics does not determine intelligence. You can give me someone’s genome and I can yell you everything about that person, from height, to hair color, the best diet for his particular biology, but I can’t tell you how smart he is. The two most important variables determining intelligences is nutrition and stimulus. You can have the best genes and the best nutrition, but if you were to sit in front of a blank white wall from birth till you were five, you would be as dumb as a box of rocks. Or, you can have all these wonderful experiences, but if you don’t have proper nutrition, your brain can’t make the connections, and, consequently nothing sticks. The interesting part of this equation now is that everyone has access to good nutrition, and everyone has access to stimulus. In fact, many scientists say we have access to too much stimulus. They say we have too much information available to sort through. Perhaps that’s a factor. A distraction factor.”

“Well, what do you want for society?” Perrin asked. “Do you want everyone to be as brilliant as you?”

“That’s just it,” Tammias said. “Everyone should be equally as talented as I am. We all have access to the same technology. Assuming biology is not a factor, which is the major flaw in classical sociology, the question is what motivates a person to excel and master a skill or knowledge set? If all our needs are met, what’s the incentive to push on to bigger and better things? If our intelligence evolved out of need and necessity, because our environment challenged us, then we should expect to see that children being raised on fringe worlds, colony worlds, or in highly stressed environments like aboard a Star Ship, have higher rates of success at mastering skills and knowledge.”

“And do we?” Perrin asked. “Do all successful people, or at least, people society labels as successful, come from harsh environments, or had difficult obstacles to overcome?”

“That is indeed the question I need to research,” Tammias said. “There is no reason why I shouldn’t be able to find actual data, as opposed to doing open surveys, considering how much of every day life revolves around some sort of computer, recording indirectly how we manage our lives. Perhaps if I wrote a program to sample the general population by visiting every computer in a network. Vulcan certainly wouldn’t mind, because they don’t hold the privacy concerns humans do. Humans might find such a program released on the net intrusive.”

“Maybe we should forget about sampling and statistics and simply redefine how we define success,” Perrin proposed. “Perhaps life is not about shooting off to other stars on a whim, but rather, just being comfortable and self reflective, and enjoying life, as opposed to the over production and commercialization that we came from in the past, or that we see in societies such as the Ferengi.”

“Perhaps,” Tammias agreed, so enthusiastic about the discussion they were holding that he had lost track of time. He jumped up out of his chair and grabbed his backpack. “But I don’t see commercialization and over production as being an issue since the advent of replicator technology. All people get what they want and need, and recycle their waste, thereby eliminating excess. I would like to work from a perspective that doesn’t necessarily involve an economic framework.”

“Is that possible?” Perrin asked.

“I don’t know,” Tammias sighed, pushing his feet into his boots. “All human interaction that I can observe seems to have some sort of exchange rate, or imaginary currency, which again returns me to the perpetual game state that we seem to live in. It’s always trade offs, compromises, maintaining balance and status quo, or flat out ruthless competition. Oh, look at the time. I know you want to argue that last point, but I’m late. I’ve got to go. I actually have a date and I don’t want to use a transporter.”

“Really?” Perrin said. “You have a date? Not a holosuite novel, gaming session, or a study group meeting, but an actual, full fledged, live, person to person date, like a movie and chocolate malts at the corner store, date?”

“Okay, Perrin, we’re on Vulcan, not Earth, and we’re like way past the fifties thing. And why is it so strange that I have a date?” Tammias asked.

“Oh, no reason,” Perrin said. “It wouldn’t, by chance, be Persis, would it?”

“No,” Tammias said, heading for the door. “Not by chance.”



Persis had created an incredible dinner, completely from scratch, but she and Tammias didn’t get to that part. Tammias didn’t even get the opportunity to comment on how wonderful the food smelled, or even praise her appearance. The moment the door closed behind him, she kissed him. He dropped the package he was carrying. She laughed and dragged him into the other room. Not that he needed to be dragged or otherwise convinced. He went along like a little sehlot on a leash.

“Happy birthday,” she said.

“Uh?” he asked.

“Shhh,” she said, keeping him from saying anything by kissing him again as she pushed him into the couch. She began to unbutton his shirt.

“Wait,” Tammias said, pushing her gently away.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

“Um, nothing, I just want to give you something first,” Tammias said.

“You brought me something?” she asked. “Why?”

“It’s customary to give presents at birthday parties,” Tammias told her, and it appeared he had to convince her. “I looked it up.”

“I’m supposed to give you a present,” she pointed out.

“One in which I have waited for all my life, I’m sure,” Tammias agreed. “And which I will gladly accept, only after you see what I got you.”

“Alright,” she said, sitting back on his knees, her legs folded to either side of him. “What is it?”

“You have to let me up,” Tammias said.

Persis sighed and got off him. Tammias retrieved the package he had brought, and handed it to her. Before she could un-wrap it, he stopped her.

“You have a balcony, right? Facing East?”

“Yes, why?” she asked.

“Let’s go out there to open it, shall we?” Tammias encouraged, this time dragging her

“Okay,” she said, laughing.

Persis opened the sliding glass door and they stepped out onto the balcony. They looked down over the Vulcan city from the high-rise apartments where most non Vulcans

lived while staying on Vulcan, her arm around his waste. There was a breeze, but the temperature was still hot. City lights seemed to waver and blur as the heat rose off the land. The sun had just set, but there was still a light shade of orange on the horizon. There was a small table, a matching chair set, and a beanbag type lounge. She sat the box on the table, and pulled the ribbon free. There was enough light spilling from the apartment that Persis could see as she opened the package, careful to catch the ribbon before the wind could take it from her. She tied the ribbon to the back of a chair on the porch, and then lifted the top to the box. There were two items in it. She lifted the first one out, which was a bottle of sand. There were tiny bits of star shaped objects that sparkled like glitter. She smiled, looking quizzically at him.

“Sand from a beach,” Tammias said. “From Betazed. There was a girl there I had a crush on. Ah, no, I was in love with her. Still am. My first true love. She had promised me that someday, somewhere, there would be someone else. Anyway, she had taken me to the beach, and I lifted some of the sand. Not suppose to do that, you know. Take pictures, leave foot prints, that sort place.”

“Oh, Tammias,” Persis cooed. “That’s so wonderful. I can’t accept this.”

“Nonsense,” Tammias said. “I figure, this way, when ever I think about this sand, I’ll know right where it is.”

“What are these stars?” Persis asked, turning the bottle, watching how they each caught the light and each refracted and reflected a different wavelength.

“They’re the shells of tiny sea animals,” Tammias explained. “There called, appropriately enough, star fish on Betazed, but you can’t confuse them with the star fish, or sea stars, of Earth, which isn’t really a fish, if I remember correctly.”

Persis opened the bottle, closed her eye, and sniffed. “It must have been beautiful. I can smell the ocean.” She closed the bottle, and set it on the table. The next item she retrieved from the box was a computer PADD. On the display screen, there were three words: “Activate Moon Program,” and a small moon shaped icon for her to touch.

“What is this?” Persis asked.

“You were talking about beaches, moons and stars, with big emphasis on the moon, so, I thought I would give you the moon,” Tammias said.

She kissed him, arranged her chair so she could lean into him, lifted the PADD so they could both see it, and then she touched the moon icon on the screen. The screen went blank.

“So, where is it?” Persis asked.

“Lower the PADD,” Tammias said.

Persis lowered the PADD and gasped. Not only was there a moon in the sky of Vulcan, there were three moons! Specifically, three holograms of Earth’s moon at three different phases were being projected above the skies using the satellite arrays in orbit as the imaging devices. She stood up, her hands raised to the largest moon and cried.

“Oh my god, Tammias!” she marveled. “You said the moon, but my god! Oh my God! How is this possible?”

“Well, I can’t take credit for the actual program,” Tammias said. “Someone else wrote it.”

“Wrote what?”

“About a hundred years ago, about the time that V’Ger showed up requiring Kirk to save Earth for the umpteenth time, if you believe all those legends, there was this human who had been stationed here on Vulcan. Specifically, the date was um, 2270, and Spock was here partaking of the Kolinahr.”

“The purging of all emotions ritual?” Perisis asked, a little disgust creeping into her voice. Emotions were a great thing, and she just couldn’t understand anyone who would want to completely rid themselves of them.

“Yeah, that’s the one. Anyway, it would seem, according to the news report, at the same time as Spock was purging his emotions, this Earth guy was growing ever more homesick. He then stayed out in the sun a bit long one day, wrote a computer virus that would cause all the satellites in orbit around Vulcan to collectively collaborate on these moon projections, and released it onto the Vulcan Net,” Tammias explained. “Suddenly they had three moons, and a lot of angry Vulcans, minus the emotions, of course.”

“Oh my god,” Persis said.

“That’s what I said,” Tammias agreed. “The Vulcans, not having a great sense of humor and all, were not pleased about the little computer virus, or the fact that their moonless sky had suddenly been marred by not one, but three, large, holographic images of the Earth’s moon. They ruthlessly hunted down all traces of the virus, over a two week period, and finally managed to eliminate it from their computer networks.”

“Oh my god,” Persis said.

“Yeah, that’s what I said,” Tammias said. “Knowing how thorough Vulcans can be when it comes to eliminating innocuous programs, I thought, there’s no way I would ever find a copy of it, and even if I did, there would be no way I could modify it so that it would get past the new safety protocols that were installed and surely designed and put in place to prevent such an incident from ever occurring again.”

“Oh my god,” Persis said.

“That’s what I said,” Tammias said.

“So, how did you do it?” Persis asked.

“Well, where I am staying, there is a small collection of antique tricorders. Just so happens that there is one that could have been, and actually was, activated and linked to the Vulcan Net, during the V’Ger crisis, and had been infected by the virus. It being innocuous and all, the owner of the tricorder, whose name I must protect, must not have noticed it. So, I took the little moon virus, changed a few lines here and there, nurtured it, helped it to grow, and released it into the local Vulcan computer network. And, with your help, you brought my little Frankenstein to life.”

“Oh my god!” Persis said, clapping her hands, and giving a little jump.

“That’s what I said,” Tammias agreed, looking up at the moons. Though they appeared solid, they were merely illusions of laser lights. “I wasn’t sure that it was going to work. The virus has to coordinate with about twenty different satellites capable of projecting holographs, for each moon, and I was pretty certain that the firewalls would be impenetrable, but, I guess I got lucky.”

“You sure will,” Persis said. She spun around, grabbed Tammias and kissed him with such force that they fell to the beanbag chair, where her joy and excitement became a mutual sharing of passion and affection. During the heat of the moment, Tammias let his guard down and bonded telepathically with her. Part of him wanted to do it on purpose, but another part of him warned him not to do it. That voice warning him not to

was easily squashed in favor of the voice that wanted to be with Persis so badly that it felt like dying to deny it won out. They shared each other's rapture, and joy, but because she was a Deltan, and partly because of his Vulcan telepathy genes, the equivalent of a feedback loop was created which began to cycle between them. Each time it passed through them, the joy intensified until it finally reached Tam's threshold for experiencing pleasure. The pleasure became pain and then he began to have seizures.

A seizure was not fun in any circumstance, but feeling the on set, Tammias realized he was about to be incapacitated in the most compromising position a human would ever manage to be caught in. It didn't occur to him that their lives were in danger as well. His last thought before losing consciousness, was "do I have time to dress?" He never even managed to stand up.

Fortunately, Persis was still of sound mind and recognized that Tammias was in some sort of mental distress. Her problem was she couldn't find the strength to get up, much less break the telepathic bond. She had never experienced telepathy and this joining of minds exceeded her coping skills. She wanted to stay in the warmth of his mind, the sharing of pleasure, but that was over and it was becoming increasingly more uncomfortable. She tried to focus on why she couldn't stand. At first she had thought it was Tam's weight, but then she noticed a tremor in her hands and she knew they were both in serious trouble. Her next thought was that she had killed him and she could actually hear her parents' admonition, "We told you to avoid human males. They can't handle being around Deltans."

"Computer," she yelled. "Medical emergency. I need medics, possible heart attack, and seizure."

The first intern on call to respond was a young, female Vulcan, named Selar, and her aid Melzac. They transported in and began to assess the situation. Melzac began sending telemetry from his scans back to the central computer at the medical center, requesting analysis and more information. He found their identity through DNA verification and their personal histories started scrolling across his PADD.

"We were just... and then he..." Persis tried to explain, gasping for air. Her words faltered as she too began to have seizures. She decided not to fight it, wanting to be with Tammias wherever he went, even into death, which, for her, was a very clear indication of just how bad she was suddenly feeling.

By the time Persis' eyes closed, Selar had managed to assess the situation, and decided on a course of action. The quickest way to administer aid from a mind meld gone awry, she decided in the heat of the crisis, was for her to administer another mind meld. And if she didn't do it soon, both her patients would die. She fell to her knees, put a hand to Tam's face, a hand to Persis' face, and mind melded with both of them simultaneously.

Tammias stopped shaking immediately and Persis became quiet, her breathing returning to a normal pattern. It was now up to Selar to break the telepathic link without killing either of them. The problem was, she discovered, that she couldn't do it, at least not without one of them dying. She had known before initiating the mind meld that she was not following procedures, but now her own overconfidence had presented her with a moral dilemma. Which one should she save? Their telepathic bond still existed, only now it ran through her, she was the conduit, and if she let go of either, the other would die.

After a moment of silent contemplation, she came to the realization that she could save them both, but it would cost her dearly. There was really no other way, and since she had already committed to saving them in the manner she had, she was now morally bound to follow through. It wasn't the greatest solution, but it would work, and would give them time to think about alternatives later. She put all of her energy into that one option, and separated her mind from the girl's mind. She didn't need to see Persis to know that she was now sound asleep, because the bond she created with Persis would never be completely severed. It might grow thin with time and lack of use, but never completely gone. The bond with Tammias, on the other hand, would require more maintenance over the next couple of months. She could sense that part of her mind was currently regulating parts of his autonomic nervous system and probably would continue to until his brain damage healed.

Selar stood up for a moment, gave into the vertigo that took her back to her knees, and then she passed out, sprawling across her patients.

About the time Selar fell unconscious, Star Fleet Security transported in, weapons raised and set for stun. One of them circled with his tricorder and picked up Garcia's PADD. "This is the activation source for the computer virus. Everyone here is under arrest."

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Traveling aboard the Stargazer, Admiral McCoy was on his way to planet Vulcan to meet with Ambassador Sarek over his potential break through dealing with the Legaran situation. Sarek was the only one in Star Fleet that the Legaran's consistently spoke with when it came to border issues between the Federation and their system, and McCoy was invited to be a part of the current dialogue. They were very concerned at the rate of expansion and believed that at the rate the Federation was growing there might not be anything remaining for them to explore and colonize when they advanced to the equivalent technological footing. They were perhaps still years away from sitting down at a negotiating table, but at least they weren't shooting at each other.

Five light years out from Vulcan, the Stargazer was diverted from Vulcan by Star Fleet. To keep McCoy on schedule, a Captain Jean Luc Picard, agreed to escort the Admiral via the "captain's yacht," Stargazer's only long range shuttle, the rest of the way to Vulcan. Picard was confident that his crew could handle their assignment and return to retrieve him without too much difficulty, and it was a pleasure escorting a living legend, even if the Admiral was determined to sleep the whole voyage away. The Admiral arose from his nap as they entered Vulcan space and joined Picard at the helm, taking the co-pilot seat.

"Can I get you something to drink?" Picard asked.

"No," McCoy said. "Thank you. You could turn up the heat."

"Sure," Picard said, adjusting the environmental controls. "You should notice a difference in a moment."

"How long till we get there?" McCoy asked.

"I just got clearance from STC," Picard said. "They've just expedited us straight to Vulcan prime. Well, they did that after I told them who I was escorting. Thirty minutes to orbit. Another twenty five minutes from there to space-port."

"You didn't have to do this," McCoy said, yawning. "But, thank you. Brother, I'm getting old."

Picard didn't know how to respond. He could argue, which was a human custom, or he could agree with McCoy's observations, or he could give some trite saying about you're as old as you feel...

"It's good to have someone not argue with you every time you say something," McCoy said. "Yes, I am old. Not complaining, mind you. It beats the alternative."

"Yes, I suppose it does," Picard said, glad he hadn't jumped right in with a comment. "Should I arrange for accommodations for you at the Earth Embassy?"

"No, I will be staying with Ambassador Sarek," McCoy said. "I'm kind of their adopted family, so, they would be insulted if I did anything less. I'm looking forward to it, actually. There's a young man, Sarek's foster child that I'm really looking forward to meeting. It's been a long time since I've seen him. I need to change that. You never know how long you got. Anyway, he's proven to be quite a genius."

Picard nodded. "Sounds like he's important to you," Picard said.

"More than I let known," McCoy said. "That's another thing I'm going to have to change." McCoy leaned forward in his chair to scrutinize the planet growing in front of them. "It looks the same as always."

"It'll be my first visit, actually," Picard said.



“Well, I’ll make sure you get the grand tour. I’m sure the Ambassador will put you up as my entourage,” McCoy offered.

“I don’t want to be a bother. I can sleep on the shuttle,” Picard said.

“I can sleep in the shuttle,” McCoy mimicked. “My god, man, do you think I would allow that? You start sleeping in shuttles, you’ll be doing it for the rest of your life. I insist.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Picard said. “It’s really an honor...”

“Don’t blow it so soon,” McCoy said, patting him on the shoulder.

An alarm went off.

“Brace your self,” Picard said. “Collision alert...”

Picard’s reaction was almost instantaneous, spinning the shuttle about and applying full thrust. There was no way to avoid collision, his only hope was to sow them appreciatively enough to survive the impact. It was when he started to turn the shuttle that he realized the moon in front of them had no mass and that there was no need to burn out the engines. Had the moon had any substance, their course would have already been skewed by the new gravitational forces. McCoy grabbed the console in front of him.

“Pull up,” McCoy ordered.

“It’s a hologram,” Picard said.

“It looks pretty solid to me, pull up!” McCoy said.

Intruder alert alarms sounded and Picard turned to survey their shuttle compartment. There were obviously no intruders. He ran a quick diagnostic on the ship board computer.

“We’ve been infected by a computer virus... It’s a holographic program designed to produce the illusion of moons by hijacking communication-laser projection equipment,” Picard said.

The shuttle passed through the lower end of the moon, clipping the point of the sliver.

“You had to be pretty confident in yourself to fly through that,” McCoy said. “I would have steered clear of it.”

“Had it had any mass, we would have been pulled off course by its gravity,” Picard said. “Um... Oh, dear. Admiral, you gave me an order to pull up and I didn’t do it. I’ll turn myself in for disciplinary action as soon as we land.”

“Nonsense,” McCoy said. “I wouldn’t have listened to a back seat driver any more than anyone else would. Besides, it is adventures like these that keep the heart pumping.”

“Aye, Sir,” Picard said, smiling.

“Don’t do it again,” McCoy said.

“Aye, Sir,” Picard said, his smile fading.

“And stop calling me sir, Captain. And find out what’s going on,” McCoy said.



Tammias woke to find himself in a holding cell. His head hurt so much that he couldn’t sit up. He rolled off the bed so that his feet hit the floor, but his chest stayed on the bed. He stayed in this position until he was sure he wasn’t going to be sick. Having decided he was indeed going to be sick, he fell to the floor, and went through the motions, arms barely able to hold himself. There was nothing in him to sick up. He leaned against the bed, and wondered what that horrible sound was that was filling his ear

like a cicada. He squinted in the direction but couldn't see anything specific, his vision blurred with pain. He closed his eyes. For a brief moment the sound stopped and then he felt hands on his arms lifting him up

"Easy, Son," came the old, country draw. "Nurse! Captain, help me get him on his feet."

Picard took Garcia by the arm and lifted him up.

"Pa Pa?" Tammas asked, trying to look up, but the sound returned, and he grimaced, drawing his hand up to his forehead.

Picard looked to McCoy for instructions, but he was busy reading his medical tricorder.

"Damn it, would you turn that force field off," McCoy snapped. "Nurse, the hypo. Damn Vulcan mind melds. And you, don't call me Pa Pa in mixed company."

An analgesic was injected into Tam's arm and the pain reduced enough that he didn't have to squint. His posture improved, but he didn't release his grip on the man holding him. He realized now that the fierce humming that had been torturing him was the shield harmonics of his cell. The sound quit when the guards turned off the shield, further alleviating his pains.

"Lucky for you, the family Doctor just happened to be in the neighborhood," McCoy told him.

"Just happened to be?" Tammas asked.

"What, don't want to see me?" McCoy asked.

"So, I'm not dreaming?" Tammas asked. "You're really here?"

"I wish you were dreaming, boy," McCoy said. "Why did you go and pull a damn stunt like that for? Surely you've been around enough Vulcans to know they ain't got a sense of humor. And I'm getting too old to come pull your ass out of the slammer every time you get in trouble."

"I didn't mean any harm," Tammas said

"Not intentionally," McCoy said, patting his shoulder. "But when that little virus of yours broke through the security safeguards, it set off intruder alert alarms on every ship in the Vulcan system."

"Ooops," Tammas said.

"I'll show you oops," McCoy said, indicating that he wanted him back on the medical bed. Picard assisted Tammas with that endeavor. "Neither Sarek or I will be able to white wash this one for you. You're going to have to do some time. A year of public service, probably."

"I understand," Tammas said. "Um, there was this girl with me. Is she alright?"

"She's fine," McCoy said, his voice even softer than usual. "We'll talk about her after you're feeling better. Right now, I'd like to take you home and get some food in you, if you can tolerate the journey. Sarek should be finishing up the paper work for your release."

"I'm sorry," Tammas said, nearly calling him Pa Pa again.

"If your headache is anything like mine, well..." McCoy began, and when he was certain the guard was not paying much attention, he leaned over and whispered to Tammas, "If you ask me, Vulcan needed a moon or two. Brightens up the place."

Tammas laughed, coughed, and rolled to sick up. The nurse brought a container.



The next time Tammas awoke, he was on his left side, on his bed. Spock's old bed. And Sparky had climbed up to lie beside him. The sehlot generated so much heat that Tam's entire back was soaked with sweat. He sat up, carefully, mindful of his prior headache, and scratched Sparky behind the ears. He hugged the big bear like dog, very happy to be home. Every muscle in his body ached, as if he had had the flu, but hunger was driving him so he forced himself to his feet and clumsily made for the door. Sparky got up on his old sehlot legs and followed. The two of them walking together was an interesting spectacle. Admiral McCoy, Sarek, Perrin, and a Vulcan female Tammas had not formally met were present in the family room. They appeared to be waiting for him.

"Did we call a family meeting?" Tammas asked.

"Come in and sit down," Sarek said.

Perrin got up as he entered and headed into the kitchen. There was an uncomfortable silence, where he was certain everyone was scrutinizing him beyond normal. "What?" Tammas asked. Perrin returned with a bowl of tomato soup and a grilled cheese sandwich cut into quarters. She sat the tray of food in front of him and asked him to eat. She didn't have to ask for he was starving. He couldn't remember ever being so hungry. He dunked a slice of grilled cheese in the soup and ate a bite. He looked around waiting for someone to start the conference. He ate two quarters of the sandwich, before giving up on them to start.

"Okay, who wants to go first?" Tammas asked, his mouth still full. He wiped his hands on a napkin.

Sparky barked.

"Do you remember the discussion we had with Ti-Ar?" Sarek asked, giving Sparky a treat that he kept on the table beside him. "Well, one of those situations where you will be held to the scrutiny of Vulcan laws has occurred."

"And, so, are you my probation officer?" Tammas asked, directing the question to the new girl.

"I am not," she said. "I am Selar."

Okay then, he thought, as if that was supposed to mean something to him. The room returned to silence. He ate another quarter of a sandwich. "Alright, I think I can handle whatever you need to say. Should we start with my punishment?" Tammas asked, starting on the third quarter.

"Your punishment has not been decided, yet," Sarek said. "We've been asked to present ourselves to T'Pau later this day. She will decide what is to become of you."

Tammas swallowed his bite of sandwich wrong, coughed. "Was my crime so egregious that I must see T'Pau?"

"You are being charged with creating, harboring, and unleashing an intrusive and disruptive computer virus, as well as hacking into the Vulcan Central Computer Network," Sarek said. "All of which are serious crimes."

"I didn't actually write the program," Tammas said.

"So Persis told us," Sarek said. "You will be required to disclose the origins of the virus to T'Pau."

Tammas cringed. "And if I refuse?"

"Why would you refuse?" Perrin asked.

“I found it in one of Spock’s antique tricorders,” Tammias admitted. “I assume he had been accessing information, perhaps about V’Ger, and it had become infected. Then it was turned off, and sat on that shelf until I reactivated it.”

“It is okay to disclose this information,” Sarek said.

“I don’t want to implicate Spock,” Tammias said.

“It is your choice, of course,” Sarek said. “However, I am sure Spock will not be implicated.”

McCoy had dozed off and woke with a start at hearing the name of his companion. “Spock? Oh. Sorry,” he said. “What time is it?”

“We were just about to discuss Tam’s relationships with females,” Sarek said.

Tammias blushed. “Is this really necessary,” Tammias asked.

“No one is more uncomfortable verbalizing these issues than I am,” Sarek said. This hesitancy didn’t come from a fear of speaking on the subject, but rather, as a telepathic race, they chose to leave the more intimate exchanges private. There was no need to discuss that which everyone knew, and often Vulcan mates knew each others thoughts and desire better than any other coupling of species. “As you have learned, Vulcans are extremely conservative when discussing matters of reproduction.”

“You are not in trouble, Tammias,” Perrin said. “You just need to know a few facts. Facts related to your special biological situation.”

“What are you talking about?” Tammias asked.

“Tammias,” McCoy took over. “To make a long story short, you are a Human Vulcan hybrid. More human than Vulcan, but none the less, a hybrid, and the chemistry gets a little out of balance once in awhile. Your friend, the Deltan and you biologically clashed. Your attempt at a mind meld didn’t help matters, but basically, the analogy is you had an allergic reaction that nearly killed both of you.”

“Okay,” Tammias said. “So, you can give me allergy shots or something that fits your analogy to cure this?”

“No,” McCoy said. “If you have another intimate encounter with any Deltan, you will die.”

“Are you saying I can’t see Persis anymore?” Tammias asked.

“Listen to me very carefully, son,” McCoy said. “If you are intimate with any Deltan, you will die.”

“Is Persis okay?” Tammias demanded.

“Persis is in perfect health,” McCoy assured him.

“So, I can see her?” Tammias asked.

“No, honey, you can’t,” Perrin said.

“It was more than just an allergic reaction with you and Persis,” McCoy said. “There was a telepathic bond created between you and her and we are concerned that if you were to come into physical contact again at this time, you might have another physiological reaction that could result in your immediate death. You can’t even as much as breathe her air without risking endangering yourself.”

“Surely you’re over reacting. I can’t even see her?” Tammias demanded. “Ever?”

“We’re not sure about ever, but for now, there’s no question. You must avoid contact with her, or risk certain death,” Sarek said.

“This is unreasonable,” Tammias said.

“Oh, you’re just getting the half of it,” McCoy said. “Selar, would you like to tell him the rest?”

Selar looked to Admiral McCoy and it almost seemed that she actually frowned. She turned her attention back to Tammias, brought her hands together, and thought for a moment on how to proceed.

“On discovering you in your condition,” Selar began delicately. “I violated procedures and Vulcan law.”

“So,” Tammias said, shrugging it off. “It sounds like you saved my life.”

“And Persis,” Perrin added.

“So, there you go, then,” Tammias said. “You did what you had to.”

Sarek repositioned himself in his chair as if he were uneasy. Sparky laid his head in Sarek’s lap and looked mournfully at him. Perrin put her hand on top of Sarek’s hand.

“Tammias,” McCoy said. “Do you know anything about Vulcan biology?”

“Of course,” Tammias admitted, not wanting to be specific about how much he did and didn’t know. “I’m a Doctor.”

“Then you know,” Selar said. “When we are seven, we are telepathically bonded to a mate and that we are drawn together for rituals every seven years.”

“Yes,” Tammias said.

“You were never bonded in this fashion, even though you could have been,” Selar said. “Certain Vulcan genes in your genome were activated during your... ritual... with Persis. The specific Vulcan genes activated to couple you and Persis for life.”

“Are you telling me, that every seven year, Persis and I will be drawn together for rituals?” Tammias said. “Even though, as McCoy just told me, if I ever participate in a ritual, your word, not mine, with a Deltan I will die?”

“In order to save you and Persis, it was necessary for me to sever that bond,” Selar explained. “Unfortunately, probably because you were not bonded at the appropriate age of seven, there were complications. I could not sever the bond without killing you.”

“I wish you had!” Tammias said.

“Tammias!” Perrin snapped.

“What do you expect?” Tammias demanded. “You’re telling me that I can never see the girl I love, the first girl I ever kissed, okay, the second girl I ever kissed, but the first girl I ever... participated in a ritual with, and you want me to be happy about it? And then, in seven years, like it or not, I am going to be compelled to be with her, which I can’t, which means I will go mad, and probably die. What’s the difference of me dying now, or seven years from now?”

“Had you died at this time, Persis would have died,” Selar said.

“This is great,” Tammias said. “Just great.”

“Tell him the rest,” Sarek said.

“Oh, there’s more?” Tammias asked.

“Because of the issues concerning severing the bond, and because you were both facing eminent death...” Selar began.

“Okay, I get the death part, you don’t have to keep bringing it up,” Tammias interrupted, sounding a lot like McCoy. McCoy repositioned himself in his chair.

“I redirected the telepathic bond between you and Persis so that I was, and am now, the recipient of that link,” Selar said.

Tammas blinked. He looked at Selar, then Perrin, Sarek, McCoy, and then back to Selar. He opened his mouth to say something, and then closed it. McCoy chuckled. Tammas looked at McCoy sharply. So did Selar and Sarek. Perrin hid a smile.

"I'm sorry," McCoy said. "I'm not laughing at you, Tammas. I don't approve of mind melds in general, and this is just another example of why." Then he laughed again, not sure why exactly it was so humorous to him.

Tammas turned to Selar. "You and I..."

"Will be drawn together, roughly every seven years, from the time of our initial bonding," Selar said. "As well as an unspecified number of times over the next couple of weeks while our bodies and mind seek to return to their previous balance."

"You've got to be kidding me," Tammas said.

"I am a full blooded Vulcan," Selar said. "I do not participate in expressions of humor."

"Oh, good god, Pa Pa, you've got to be able to do something for me," Tammas pleaded.

"I'm a doctor, not a match maker," McCoy said. "Believe me, if I knew a cure for mind melds, I would have already patented it."

"This isn't going to work," Tammas said. "No disrespect to you and all, I'm sure you are a wonderful person, but I don't love you."

"Love is irrelevant," Selar said. "We will be compelled biologically and psychically to reunite. And soon, judging by your temperament."

"This is unreasonable," Tammas protested.

"This comes at no little cost to me," Selar said. "My seven year cycle has been disrupted, my former bond mate will no doubt be looking for a new partner at the close of his cycle, and I'm facing sanctions for violating medical protocol and Vulcan customs. I think, given the circumstances, you can be a little more tolerant. Being bonded to a human is not my ideal situation." She looked to Sarek and quickly added, "No disrespect intended."

"None taken," Perrin answered for her husband, not ashamed to show she didn't like Selar's choice of words.

Tammas felt a little embarrassed by Selar's suggestion that he was not being reasonable. "So, what do we do?"

"There is a compulsory ceremony the two of you must attend," Sarek said. "T'Pau will be residing over that as well."

"Um, what sort of ceremony?" Tammas asked.

"A marriage ceremony," Sarek said.

"Excuse me?" Tammas asked. "And this is binding?"

"No," Selar said. "You do not have to accept, but that will not change our condition. We will still be drawn together. If you do not accept the marriage, at our reunion seven years from now, you will have the right to challenge and request another arrangement. I will not obstruct you in your choice at that time."

"Tammas," McCoy said. "What they won't tell you is that this challenge typically ends with a death. You would only know this if you actually attended a ritual where this particular challenge occurs, for it doesn't happen often."

"This is just..." Tammas began.

"Unreasonable," McCoy said for him

“This is our way,” Sarek said. “It has always been, and because of your genes, you must face this. This is life. You are heir to this peculiarity.”

“There’s got to be another option,” Tammias said. “Another way for us to resolve this, break the cycle and bond.”

“There is,” Sarek said.

“Well, let’s do that, then,” Tammias said, enthusiastically.

Sarek nodded his head. “Your other options will be made available to you in seven years.”

“The seven year interval is compulsory to allow our physiology to find its new set point. We have been irrevocably changed,” Selar said. “Most of our balance will be restored slowly over the next few weeks, through rituals, but we will never be the same again.”

Tammias moaned. “I don’t know if I can do this,” Tammias said. “I like sex. Well, except for the whole brain seizure and all. I mean, I don’t know if I can wait seven years before being intimate again...” Though Persis was the first “real” girl that Tammias had participated in rituals with, he was reluctant to share that some of the activities he engaged in on the holosuite were less than innocent. Tam knew that Perrin was aware of Nurse Tarkington program, but did she know that when he was playing Doctor and Nurse that sometimes he was playing *Doctor and Nurse*? He shuddered at the thought of anyone knowing.

“You went fourteen years before Persis,” Sarek pointed out.

“That doesn’t count,” Tammias snapped. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to snap. Perhaps I’m still suffering from Pon Farr and I am not satisfied enough to wait seven more years. In fact, I’m feeling...”

“Like I said, we will be drawn together an unspecified number of times over the next couple of weeks,” Selar said. “I believe we can make it till after the marriage, though. Do you agree?”

Perrin and McCoy laughed. Sarek and Selar did not.

“As for the seven year interval, arrangements can be made to satisfy your human libido,” Selar said.

“Again, nothing personal against you Selar, but I don’t feel anything for you,” Tammias said.

“You will in seven years,” McCoy said, a mischievous smile.

“You are just having way too much fun at my expense,” Tammias protested, giving McCoy a look that suggested there might be a fight.

“You and I can negotiate other arrangements for the long term,” Selar repeated. “But our current situation is inescapable.”

“Tammias,” Perrin interrupted. “Finish your soup. You’re going to need your strength. And we’re all going to have to leave soon. T’Pau won’t be kept waiting, and we need to meet with some of Selar’s family before T’Pau. And the longer we delay, the more likely you and Selar will be out of sorts.”

Tammias sighed. “My life sucks,” he said.

McCoy laughed. “I’m going to go change,” he said. “It’s been a long time since I met with T’Pau. And even longer since I’ve attended a Vulcan marriage ceremony.”

Tammias groaned.

“Don’t worry. They assured me there will not be a fight to the death,” McCoy said. “This time.”



“Leonard McCoy, son of David,” T’Pau said, turning her attention from Sarek to the human male she had met on two separate occasions now. “You also stand with the accused?”

“I do, T’Pau,” McCoy said. “It is good to see you looking so well.”

T’Pau raised an eyebrow. “You also appear to be in good health, for a human.”

“Good diet and exercise,” McCoy said, patting his stomach.

T’Pau nodded and turned her attention to Tammias. “Tammias Parkin Arblaster Garcia, come closer.”

Tammias took a breath and approached T’Pau, probably one of the oldest and most respected Vulcans still in existence. Though he was guarded with his emotions and thoughts, he knew there was no way he could completely hide his uneasiness from her. It was probably best to just completely open himself up to her and allow her to scrutinize his every fault. He figured she didn’t get to be the oldest, wisest person on Vulcan being easily moved by the small things that creep about in the minds of Humans and Vulcans. She motioned and he fell to his knees

“I have heard of you,” T’Pau said. “You are well regarded at the Academy by your Professors.”

Tammias simply bowed his head, respectfully, instead of arguing the disparity of his perception of his academic career with hers. T’Pau looked down on him from her high chair, studying the creature before her.

“It is said you are human, but that you inherited Vulcan blood,” T’pau said. “What are you? Human or Vulcan?”

Tammias swallowed. “The humans I associate with treat me as if I were Vulcan,” Tammias said. “And the Vulcans I associate with treat me as if I were human. I feel that I am neither.”

“But you are accepted within our culture and by the humans,” T’Pau said. “Standing here with you today are patrons of great character and respect, from both our communities.”

“I’ve truly been blessed by these people,” Tammias admitted.

“And so, to these charges of dispersing a computer virus, hacking into computer networks, and the inappropriate use of public property, the satellite systems and the afore mentioned computer network, creating havoc to a number of systems that threatened the safety and well being of the members of our society, how do thee plead?” T’Pau asked.

“Guilty,” Tammias said, bowing his head.

T’Pau waited three minutes, as if expecting Tammias to start rationalizing what he had done, or perhaps that he would plea bargain. Perhaps she was aware that he wanted to try a defense. He had thought of saying he was doing society a favor by revealing a vulnerability to his particular method of hacking. He decided that it would not go over well and so he kept it unspoken. Watching the time program on his neural implant click the seconds away, it struck him how long three minutes can be when waiting for punishment.

When T’Pau saw that he was fully intending to wait for her counsel, she nodded. “Though I believe your intentions were to cause mischief, not out right harm, the



seriousness of this crime demands that you reimburse society for the man hours spent undoing what you have done,” T’Pau said. “I believe balance will be restored if you were to provide fifteen years of community service.”

Tammas bowed, touching his hands and forehead to the ground. Seeing how it could be worse, he decided not to protest. Still, he wondered if T’Pau had heard him mentally screaming, “fifteen years?!” So much for applying to Star Fleet Academy and hoping to beat Kirk’s record as the youngest to make rank of Captain.

“Selar,” T’Pau said. “Step forward.”

Selar stepped forward, bowing appropriately.

“You violated medical protocol,” T’Pau said, and with a wave of her hand, Selar fell to her knees as well. “I would usually not be involved in such matters, except that this particular breach has disrupted several lives. I understand there were extenuating circumstances, however, it is necessary to remind you of the seriousness of this violation. You have initiated this human into a Vulcan lifestyle without his prior consent, and in doing so the bond between you and your husband has been put in jeopardy. Voltak, what would you have me do in this matter?”

Voltak stepped forward and bowed. “I choose not to pursue my legal grievances,” Voltak said. “I only request, on behalf of my family name, that this situation be kept from public knowledge. Selar and I have agreed to carry on as before, and I accept Tammas as her second husband until such time that matters can be altered civilly.”

Garcia imagined he saw Selar sigh. Was it relief? T’Pau nodded, apparently satisfied that the day would not end in blood shed, which was one of Voltak’s options had he chose to pursue it. “This sort of thing is unusual, but not unheard of in Vulcan history. Selar, only time will reveal, when the calling of Pon Farr brings the three of you together, whether or not you are truly free of Voltak’s demands, or if a ritual will be needed to decide the matter. Though I sense a burden to Voltak’s heart, I believe you were fortunate to be matched with someone so understanding. I only hope his understanding is as great during the call of Pon Farr.”

“He is very logical,” Selar agreed.

“Indeed,” T’Pau said. “However this goes, you are not free of me or the demands of society.”

“Arblaster-Garcia,” T’Pau said. “I can not sever the bond between you and Selar at this time, not without endangering your life. In my view, it is not worth the risk. I am fully prepared to punish her to the full extent of the law, but before I make my final decision, I would like to hear your opinion in this matter, since you will, due to her indiscretion, be affected by my decision.”

Selar and Voltak exchanged glances. There was so much Selar wanted to say but couldn’t. Voltak seemed neither curious, or in any other way compelled to query into the matter. They had been drawn together for one cycle, the first Pon Farr seven years after their bonding ritual. It had seemed so silly and juvenile at the time, and they were both glad to put it far behind them, as most Vulcans do once the fever has passed. She felt a little sadness for Tammas, and perhaps for all humans, for they were never completely free of the madness. She would not be able to resist the inclination to be with Tammas much longer, and was slightly amazed that he was holding up as well as he was. The thought occurred to her that his libido may rub off on her and decrease her mental acuity.

She had not coached Tammias on what to say, so she waited, now, wondering what words he would actually use, and what course the rest of her life would take.

“T’Pau,” Tammias said, choosing his words very carefully. “I asked that you show her the same mercy you have shown me. As a Doctor, she has chosen to save lives, even to the point of risking her own well being. I believe this sort of behavior should be rewarded, not punished. It is true, I did not choose to bond with her, but what Vulcan among us truly ever chooses their first bond? Aren’t our marriages always pre-arranged? I submit to you, I may not be full Vulcan, but I carry its heritage, and I have been touched by its greatness. I probably would have been better off had someone arranged my marriage when I was seven, for stability’s sake, but what family would have permitted an arrangement of their daughter and me, because, as you have noted, I am too human. Selar saved me, and in doing so, corrected something that my Vulcan biology required of me and, to some degree, what society expects of me, and which could not be fulfilled due to life circumstance. If you will spare her, I will gladly accept her bond, and will participate in whatever ritual is compulsory to restore balance to her and Voltak’s lives.”

Selar couldn’t help looking at Tammias. She had not expected him to be so reasonable. She returned her gaze to the ground, wondering if her attraction to him was due to the growing imbalance or the simple fact that she liked him. She looked to the sky and then around at the faces in attendance. So many people she thought she would never meet: T’Pau, Sarek, McCoy. It was a very surreal day.

T’Pau brought her hands together so that each of her fingers touched. “You are young, and you are mostly human, and I think you do not fully comprehend what you ask,” she said. “However, you speak with reason, a perverse sort of logic that has its own appeal. Selar, you have already chosen this path. Both Tammias and Voltak have agreed to walk it with you, for now. I will release you of any further debt to society for your breach in protocol. You understand that should Pon Far call you to both of these men, even if at separate callings, you will be responsible for answering their needs?”

“I am aware of this possibility,” Selar said.

“Arblaster-Garcia,” T’Pau said. “Interspecies marriages can be difficult. Are you willing to adapt and accommodate your Vulcan wife? Will you be able to compromise with her first obligation? And further, will you seek to better understand your Vulcan heritage?”

“I will,” Tammias said.

“Since there are no objections, I see no reason why I should prevent this union to continue unfolding as time and fate has seen fit,” T’Pau said, waving her hands indicating Selar and Tammias should both stand. T’Pau took Selar’s hand in one hand and Tam’s hand in the other, bringing them together. “Before the acceptance, it is customary for you both to recite your lineage, so that the three estates joined here will know what they are entitled to.”

Sarek looked to McCoy and McCoy nodded in anticipation.

“T’Pau,” Sarek interrupted. “I know it is compulsory for the betrothed to exchange this information and that the families be present so that each knows what they have claims to, but I request a private audience.”

“Why? Is there some shame associated with the name of Arblaster-Garcia?” T’Pau asked.

“There is no shame,” McCoy said. “We stand as his family, and ask that you grant us this request.”

“Is this a standard human custom, or one invented by McCoy?” T’Pau asked. “Never mind. I have accepted this peculiar arrangement this far, so I will permit this to be a private ceremony between the betrothed, their immediate family, and Voltak’s immediate family. Everyone but the marriage party is excused. We will now retire to my palace. That is all.”

Selar looked to Tammias for an explanation. He merely shrugged. If Selar’s parents had any qualms about his being a part of the family for the next seven years, T’pau’s invitation to her personal home must have eased their concerns. From their point of view, Tammias had no dowry, no family, and only his reputation of being eccentric, if not down right flighty, and he would not be able to offer them any full-blooded Vulcan grandchildren. Not that he intended to offer them any grandchildren. Though he anticipated treating Selar with respect, he could only see their marriage as one of convenience. For him, it was no different than an arranged marriage. It was not a marriage of love, and Voltak was being too damned understanding for Tam’s tastes. Didn’t he have any jealousies?

Living around humans early on, Tammias had always anticipated selecting his mate. His first choice would have been Deanna Troi. He had given up on that, logically so. Persis was still in his heart and thoughts, but apparently that was doomed from the start. He realized had he been left to his own devices, he would have been sulking in his room, but their running around meeting with families before finally meeting with T’Pau had kept him very well distracted. He took a casual look at Selar, who walked several feet in front of him. Beside her walked Voltak. They were both exchanging information, in a low whisper, and they both looked back simultaneously at him, and then looked forward. They might as well be attending a funeral, he thought. His heart sank.

Tammias wondered if perhaps his life was meant to be without love. Selar would offer him none. No, that wasn’t quite true. In roughly seven years she would display symptoms of love, a very intense love. Something more akin to an obsessive, stalking sort of love. This would last, what, about a day? A week at the most? He sighed. It might not even be for him. It might be for Voltak. She already had a history with the man. Did he really surrender to this outrageous situation out of logic, or was there something else he was hoping to gain. What would Voltak want? A new mate? One that wasn’t heading off to join Star Fleet in a week’s time.

Tammias looked at her. He could see that she was Star Fleet material, but how did he know that was her intentions? That would certainly explain why her husband might be so readily eager to get rid of her. Star Fleet careers often played havoc on even the best of relationships, so perhaps the seven year interval made it that much more difficult. Tammias thought it should be the opposite, though, considering missions rarely extended past three years or so, minus an overall ship objective that could extend it to a maximum of five years. Still, there was no use in being speculative, except, perhaps to entertain another novel. If he needed to know, she would tell him. Of course, knowing Vulcans, it was unlikely she would confide in him, unless he specifically asked. He talked himself into believing it just didn’t matter and returned to inwardly sulking.

No family, no love, and no life for the next fifteen years... Seven years waiting for Pon far... Two consecutive sentences! His life was the Poseidon Adventure, alright.

Upside down, fire, brimstone, and flooding, only, he didn't know which way was up and out. He noticed his body temperature was elevated, not quite a fever, but higher than his norm. He found himself staring at Selar unconsciously from time to time. Each time she stared back, a chill went up his spine.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

As part of his community service, Tammás Garcia, son of Leonard, biologically speaking, found himself doing community service on the Vulcan Star base, Planar. He was working a communication station inside Space Traffic Control, at the upper most section of the base. His primary function was to record and update AIDAS messages, alerting traffic to potential hazards such as solar flares and magnetic variances, but he also took incoming calls not dealing with navigational issues. After years of amateur sub space radio, directing communication to and away from Vulcan was a piece of cake, and he really didn't mind the monotony because it usually meant he could multitask. The communication service mostly took care of itself and he just monitored. A monkey could do his job, some might say, but he always added, "Sure, provided that monkey was genetically altered and tied to a chair in front of a terminal all day." During low volume hours, he could answer emails or compose stories, but mostly he observed the other workers and learned everything he could about Space Traffic Control, or STC.

Tammás tried not to think about his identity but he found it difficult not to examine every nuance of his behavior and thought patterns, looking for some abnormality that might identify him as Kelvan. He was only Kelvan in an esoteric sort of way, for genetically speaking, Tammás was as human as any human, minus the Vulcan genes he had inherited. "I am not my genes," he kept trying to remind himself, a variation of his "I am not my grade point average." But he was, wasn't he? Sure, he could get metaphysical and think of himself as the sum of his biochemistry and psychological makeup, but couldn't it all be reduced back to his genes? To some degree, yes, because that was the way the rest of the world still looked at it. Just saying you were the son of McCoy would make people look at you differently, as if being the child of a legend meant you were destined to be a legend. But for all his human qualities, he was also Kelvan. If people knew he was descendant of Kelvan, they would really think him strange, and scrutinize his behavior much more closely than it was even now. True, he didn't even qualify as a modified Kelvan, since his mother was human, and McCoy came from a long line of humans, as far back as humanity on earth could be traced given the state of technology.

His mother, Lorena, was human by birth, tracing a line back to the first modified Kelvans over a hundred years ago, mixed with the genetic material stolen from the Enterprise crew. In order to continue to create genetic diversity, Lorena had been directly inseminated with genes stolen from Leonard McCoy. Because of all the unauthorized use of genetic material, Tammás could actually claim a genetic heritage relating him to four of the original Kelvan colonist, including Kelinda, Rojan, Raya, and Hanar, whose bloodline mixed with combinations of James T Kirk, Spock, Montgomery Scot, Uhura, Sulu, Chekov, Rand, Chapel, Martha Landon, Lt. Masters, Mira Romaine, Dr. M'Benga, Marlena Moreau, Mr. Kyle, Ann Mulhall, Carolyn Palamas, Lt Watley, Angela Martine, and Yeoman Thompson. McCoy had been a witness to Yeoman's Thompson's death, and so in a way he was happy to hear that she was not totally lost, that her genes live on in the Kelvan colony. Her death had been senseless. The Kelvans had killed her in an attempt to break Kirk's spirit, dehydrating her to her essence, and then crushing the remains and throwing her dust to the wind. The fact that McCoy had found tracers of her genes in Tam's genome suggested that the Kelvan had taken the necessary reproductive

cells from their victims long before the Enterprise had even sent down an Away Team to investigate.

The thought of someone being reduced to their essential essence, a dehydration process utilizing the Kelvan transporter technology, brought back vague memories. He believed he had witnessed such events, but beyond K7 his memory was clouded. It gave him a headache to even try and remember his early years. Perhaps it was just another one of those dream stories of his, no doubt a fake memory which he had picked up vicariously through telepathy, or reading fiction off the IS-Net.

The Kelvan's goal had been to increase their population size as fast they could. One of the problems was there were only five remaining members of their original crew, two of which were women. That's one reason why they borrowed from the gene pool aboard the Enterprise. Further, they were forced into creating artificial wombs to start the first couple of generations, working towards the goal of eventually creating a Kelvan Human hybrid. Though the Kelvan intelligence could reside in the human body with minimal loss of capacity, that small loss still came with a price, human elements they had not been prepared for, such as emotions, desires, and physical vulnerabilities. The Vulcan emotional suppression seemed like a good counter defense to the emotions donated by the human factor, but Spock was the only sample of Vulcan blood they had. They could, of course, easily adopt a Vulcan form as opposed to a human form, and did so to get enough genetic material to get started, but they weren't as pleased with the results. It took them fifty years, but they did finally get a stable population with a large enough genetic diversity to remain viable, without having to have more outside infusion. Still, by this time, a culture of multiple partners had been established, and old habits were hard to break. In other words, Kelinda was not only his grandmother, but also his great grandmother twenty times removed. Genetic markers for Raya came up four times in his genome map. There were also specific patterns that suggested couplings of specific genome pairs. Examples of specific coupling were noted between Spock and Chapel, and Chekov and Landon. A combination for Scot came up twice: once with Palamas, and then again with Romaine.

Tammas didn't remember his mother. He only knew what McCoy had been able to tell him, which is everything he learned from Guinan. She had been killed, along with her mate. Tammas wondered if he would have called him father, had there not been a war, or did they not use those types of pronouns. This man may have even been a clone of McCoy, for no one could say with any degree of certainty that he came about through artificial insemination, or artificially through cloning. His grandmother, Kelinda, was possibly still alive, but there was no way to determine that since the Kelvan had not been in communication with the Federation since the war started. Given his age, and the fact the war seemed to be over, based on the fact no one had heard anything from the Kelvan in the last ten years, everyone in the marriage party, including T'Pol seemed to agree that he was no longer a threat to the Kelvan society, what ever was left. It was further decided that it was no longer necessary to conceal his identity, but even so they didn't go flaunting it. And in this regard, Tammas couldn't have been happier. There was no way in the world, in any world, that he would willingly disclose his genealogy. First, no one would ever believe it without a DNA scan to prove it. Second, people already treated him like a freak, so it wouldn't help him win any friends. In fact, it would probably create even more animosity. Third, though there was no evidence of genetic

manipulations, given his intelligence and the genealogy, there would always be that suspicion.

Tammas also learned that his original name was Jude Kelinda, Kelinda in recognition of his formal line started way back when the Kelvans first colonized. He had no intentions of ever going by the name Jude, so he promptly dismissed it. Besides, he had gone by Tammas for so long that he thought of himself as Tammas, not Jude. He had no conflict about who he was. All those years of building appropriate psychic boundaries had paid off, in that respect, he decided.

“Hey, Tammas.”

Tammas looked up in time to see Melinda as she reached out to brush his shoulder with a hand as she continued towards her station. She had a little bounce to her walk, which he suspected she did on purpose to attract his attention

“Hey,” Tammas responded, watching her as she took her post. He would have watched her without the bounce, he thought.

Melinda Ortiz was Star Fleet, assigned to Vulcan STC division. From the perspective of Space Traffic Control, the Vulcan Solar System was basically divided into quadrants, with an upper and lower division. The upper division handled incoming traffic, while the lower section handled out going traffic. On top of that, there were STC personnel for Vulcan prime, which also included the Star Base, as well as personnel that controlled space around a number of lesser stations throughout the Vulcan system. Melinda was in control of upper section A.

Tammas could do his job in his sleep, and, consequently, he had increased the frequency ranges that he monitored, without permission, just to prevent himself from dozing. He tuned into Melinda’s frequency to monitor her station, sending the audio to his headset. He found that the headset he wore was much more comfortable than the standard earpiece. The weight of the earpiece had always bothered him, and so he had chosen the headset because of its comfort, but also, because of its sleek design. He could usually handle more than one call at a time, using one channel for his voice, and sending text messages using his implant, leaving his hands free to surf the net, or change frequencies. Most of the humans found his station dizzying with the amounts of information dancing across his monitors, where as most of the Vulcans considered his work average.

Melinda was one of his “multitasking” priorities, which made work bearable. He saw a small block at the lower left hand side of his screen start flashing. He touched it and it grew to a window, showing a text message from Melinda.

“I thought you told me you were going to the Science Fair,” Melinda said. “I didn’t see you.”

“I’m sorry. I got caught up in a story and forgot all about that,” Tammas wrote.

“I’m beginning to think you’re avoiding me,” Melinda wrote.

“I would never do that,” Tammas assured her.

So,” she wrote. “Did you pass the STC test?”

“Yes,” Tammas wrote back. “A perfect score. I earned a class one rating.”

“That’s great!” she wrote, including a little animated icon that exploded into party hats and confetti. “So, did you apply to Vulcan STC?”

“Yes,” Tammas responded.

There was a pause while Melinda waited for more, and then she finally wrote, “Well, what’s the word? Queue that, stand by one,” she wrote.

Tammias delayed transmitting his response as he listened in to the chatter. On days when she was extremely busy, they kept the chat to a minimum. Typically work frowned on the chat, but here it actually helped to keep people alert and so was tolerated to some degree. Arriving ships would drop out of warp and hold at the heliosheath, the boundary of where the solar wind became virtually undetectable. It was an arbitrary declaration of where interstellar space began and the solar system ended. From there, ships would signal STC of their arrival and request computer guidance into the system. In heavy traffic system like Vulcan, STC was essential for facilitating ship traffic through the system. In truth, the computer controlled all traffic, but most races still demanded a sentient being as an interface, so they could have personal attention and potential overrides, everyone hoping to have their passage to and fro expedited. The computer’s flight path recommendation was overruled by the incoming ship on Melinda’s screen, forcing Melinda to give pause to her chat window in order to deal with the customer.

“This is Vulcan Center,” Melinda said. “Go ahead AND2245.”

Tammias ran a check on the call letters and an animated graphic of the Andorian Freighter appeared in a small window on his screen. It was registered to an Andorian pilot by the name of Bisten. He was bringing in raw dilithium ore to a processing station.

“I had requested a faster flight path,” the pilot said.

“Yes,” Melinda answered. “But you are four minutes over due, and the window for that path has closed. The computer controlled orbital path you have is the quickest routing available at this time.”

“This flight path will take an hour. I request a more direct route,” the pilot returned.

“You are welcome to hold until a more direct route is available,” Melinda informed the pilot. “But hold times are currently at fifty minutes. Your window for this orbital path will be closed in one minute thirty seconds.”

“The price of ore will drop two tenths of a percent before I get there,” the pilot complained. “You are unfairly influencing economic exchange in your favor.”

“STC is a division of Star Fleet and is an unbiased organization...”

“Damn it, Vulcan, give me a faster route,” the pilot said.

“I will not tolerate verbal abuse,” Melinda told him. “Do you want this routing or not?”

“I accept,” the pilot said, grumbling something which Tammias would have to use deciphering programs to fish out the meaning.

“Great. Please release your ship over to our computer guidance system.”

“I will fly it manually,” the pilot said.

“Okay,” Melinda said. “Report to Ore Station on frequency 340, at 900 KM out. Good day, AND2245.”

The pilot repeated the information back, and waited to within five seconds of his window closing before accelerating along his flight path. Had he waited past his window, Melinda would have politely asked him to hold until the next window became available. The next ship that reported in accepted the computer flight path and control, and began its descent sunward towards Vulcan without any aid from Melinda. None the



less, she gave her signature approval, accompanied by her personal welcome to Vulcan Center.

“Okay,” she wrote back to him.

Tammas released his answer to her last question. “They told me the same thing that Star Fleet Academy said: apply again after you’re off probation.”

A frowning face icon popped up. “How long do you have left?” she asked.

“Three years, seven months, one week, two days, three hours, seven minutes, twenty two seconds, mark,” Tammas replied. “But who’s counting?”

“LOL,” Melinda wrote.

Tammas leaned back and pivoted his chair in order to view Melinda at her station. She was not laughing out loud, as suggested by the messenger vernacular. Her posture was just as strict as any of the Vulcans working STC. The floor supervisor didn’t approve of slouching. “Well, my shifts up,” Tammas wrote. “If I hurry, I can catch the shuttle down.”

“Why don’t you just use the transporters like everyone else?” Melinda asked.

“Didn’t you hear?” Tammas asked.

“Hear what?” Melinda asked.

“The 22<sup>nd</sup> highest cause of death is transporter accidents,” Tammas reported.

“Whatever,” she typed.

“CYL,” Tammas typed, which was catch you later.

“Hey, wait,” she typed. “I noticed your name at the holosuite the other day. You go there a lot?”

“I’m heavily addicted to gaming,” Tammas admitted. No one that was really addicted ever admitted they were addicted, so he felt he was safe telling her. He justified his addiction by telling himself, “it’s better than drugs.”

“Really?” she typed. “I have some time scheduled tomorrow afternoon. Would you like to join me?”

“Sounds like fun,” Tammas said. “Email me.”

“Alright. It’s a date,” Melinda typed. “Better not miss it.”

Tammas closed out his windows and looked up to see his shift replacement waiting. He smiled at the Vulcan who still hadn’t volunteered his name. Tammas could have easily learned his name but he was giving the Vulcan his privacy. Tammas caught the shuttle down and took the tram over to his home, only stopping to get food for Sparky, and an assortment of vegetables for dinner. Sarek and Sparky were both waiting for him when he arrived. It was not unusual to see Sarek petting Sparky. Sarek stood as Sparky rushed over to greet Tammas.

“I have heard you turned down the invitation to visit the planet El,” Sarek said.

Tammas frowned and headed towards the kitchen, trying to avoid a conflict. Sarek followed, waiting for a confirmation of the statement. Tam felt like he was having more and more conflicts with Sarek, and consequently was trying to avoid him. He had considered moving to a place of his own, but as soon as he would leave the house, he felt much calmer and so always decided to return to the only home he had known since moving to Vulcan. Tammas began unpacking the groceries, ignoring Sparky’s whining.

Sarek said, “I would appreciate a response to my question.”

Tammas realized he wasn't going to get away with practicing the Vulcan silent treatment. He forced himself to breathe, wondering what the source of his anger was. It wasn't like Sarek was being unreasonable in his questioning.

"I didn't exactly turn it down," Tammas said, sighing.

"Explain," Sarek said.

Tammas set the can of dog food down hard on the cabinet. "I spoke to my probation officer to get permission to go. I explained how important this was, and that I would be representing Vulcan and that I would only be gone two weeks. Six days to get there, six days back, leaving me two days for the entire ceremony, which includes a hike up a mountain and down a mountain, so it's not like it's a complete pleasure trip."

"And?" Sarek asked.

"L'Nora, my probation officer, quite politely informed me that as a criminal, I should not be receiving any awards, to say the least about representing planet Vulcan," Tammas explained. "So, I sent El my apologies, and thanked them for the invitation."

"I will speak to T'Pau concerning this matter," Sarek said, turning to walk away.

"No, grandfather," Tammas said, following as far as the entry to the kitchen.

"You will not."

Sarek turned to face Tammas, raising an eyebrow.

"Look, I'm sorry," Tammas said, wishing he hadn't raised his voice. "It's not that I think L'Nora is being reasonable in this matter. Very few people get called to El to climb the Sacred Heart and touch the Living Rock. Since their induction into the Federation, how many Vulcans have been called? Two? And maybe one human? I understand how much of an honor this is and what a tremendous opportunity is being lost."

"Then why won't you let me speak on your behalf?" Sarek asked. "Most of my life I have been an Ambassador, a negotiator. Let me do this for you. The Ambassador of El has asked me to convince you to go."

"No," Tammas said. "Please. I do appreciate it. I really do, and I know you can't feel that, but you have to understand. Every time you or McCoy steps in to help me I lose credibility as a person. People think I have it easy, that everything is just given me. Why do you think I keep such a low profile when it comes to the success of my music and my lines of fiction? Why do you think I don't brag about my intelligence and my academic standing? People get strange ideas in their heads about people like me and they treat me different. I don't want to give them reason to believe that's true."

"It is illogical to allow what other people think rule your life," Sarek said.

"I agree," Tammas said. "And I don't care what people think. I care what I think. I just want to live as normal a life as I can manage."

"You are my blood," Sarek said. "I want to help."

"You help me every day, grandfather," Tammas said, wondering if Sarek thought his voice as whiny as he imagined it to be. "Do you know there is gossip about me staying here, under your protection?"

"My reputation is solid," Sarek said. "You should not be concerned about gossip."

"None the less, I'm aware of it," Tammas said. "I'm legally an adult and should move out on my own. I stay because I like the feel of family I have here."

“Perrin is worried about you,” Sarek said. “You do not get out enough. You are not on house arrest.”

“I get out,” Tammias said.

“Yes,” Sarek nodded. “The holosuite. This is not significant social interaction.”

“So?” Tammias said. “I interact with people at the Academy and at work.”

“You need to interact with real people,” Sarek said. “Outside of the academic field. Outside of your work at the animal clinic and STC. It is normal for humans to have friends.”

Tammias dished out some food for Sparky, waited for Sparky to give a paws up sign. Tammias rewarded the sehlot with petting before putting the bowl down.

“I interact with people all the time on line,” Tammias said.

“Again, I say you should interact with real people, not virtual,” Sarek said. “Pen Pals are good, but it is no substitute for personal interaction.”

Tammias nodded. “I got an email from Selar.”

“How is she?”

“Apparently, she has adjusted quite well to the Enterprise,” Tammias said. “She’s made some new friends.”

Sarek nodded. “As should you.”

“I’m going out with Melinda, a girl from work tomorrow. Human, fleet,” Tammias said.

“You can bring her home to meet us if you like,” Sarek said.

“I’ll invite her,” Tammias said.

Sarek nodded.

There was a call and Sarek excused himself to answer it. A moment later, Sarek called Tammias to the family room. On the screen was T’Pau. Tammias bowed.

“The Elanian Ambassador on Vulcan has come to visit me,” T’Pau said. “I would like to compel you to accept their invitation. You will travel as my personal envoy and deliver tokens of my esteem to Chancellor Drosh. ”

Tam’s mouth dropped and he looked to Sarek. Sarek indicated that he had nothing to do with this, with an almost human shrug. With a personal request from T’pau, there would be no way he would miss the El opportunity.

“Of course, T’Pau,” Tammias said, bowing. “It would be an honor to serve you.”

“I’ve asked L’Nora to personally accompany you to ensure that you do not violate the terms of your probation,” T’Pau said. “She will not beam down with you, of course, as she has not been given an invitation, but she will see that you arrive and return safely.”

Tammias sucked in air. L’Nora would not have been pleasant company in the best of circumstances, but with T’Pau compelling her to travel, no doubt as punishment for her wrong decision, she was going to be a bear. And Tammias was not about to argue with T’Pau. He nodded.

“My personal shuttle is awaiting your arrival. Can you be ready to go in ten minutes?” T’Pau asked.

Tammias looked to Sarek. Sarek didn’t have to say the words. He would care for Sparky in his absence and he should jump when T’Pau spoke. Ten minutes was a courtesy, but she meant immediately. Tammias turned back to T’Pau. “I am of course at your disposal even this instant.”

“Very well, stand by to beam up,” T’Pau said. “My shuttle has your coordinates. Travel safe, Tammas Garcia.”

“Live long and prosper, T’Pau,” Tammas said, and she nodded, lifting her hand, echoing his sentiments. Garcia turned to Sarek. “Grandfather...”

“Live long and prosper,” Sarek said.

Once on board, Tammas was shown to his quarters. The shuttle Sarran left shortly after he arrived. The only reason for its delay was that L’Nora had not been as willing to depart empty handed as Tammas had been. She had preferred to gather some personal affects, and she might have had more time to do so had Tammas requested a few minutes to gather some things of his own. The way Tammas saw it was that the ship’s replicators would supply him with everything he needed for the trip, so why waste time packing? Besides, he could not carry any personal affects with him to the top of the Sacred Heart, so it would be illogical to waste T’Pau’s time. L’Nora simply had not anticipated Tammas being so logical, which only further antagonized her.

As Tammas had guessed, L’Nora was not a pleasant companion. They met each morning for breakfast because that was the way she wanted it. She read from the news displayed on her PADD as she drank her Keta, more similar to hot chocolate than coffee, but a refined Vulcan drink. Sometimes Tammas would talk to T’Pau’s cat, who lived on the Sarran. T’Pau’s pilot had adopted the cat while ferrying T’Pau’s personal envoy to Earth, or, as the pilot spoke of it, the cat had adopted them. L’Nora hated the cat, especially hated the fact that T’Pau gave it free range over the Sarran, letting it come and go as it pleased. Apparently, T’Pau considered it to be a good omen to have been chosen in such a manner and by such an animal. L’Nora considered it archaic, magical thinking at its worst.

“I don’t know,” Tammas told her, two days out from Vulcan. “I think the cat likes you. Haven’t you wondered why it always comes up to you?”

“No,” L’Nora said, trying to focus on her morning rituals.

“Cats like Vulcans, in general,” Tammas explained. “They’re attracted to calmness. If you attend a party, and there’s a cat present, they always tend to go towards the cat haters. This is because they’re the only ones not speaking to it, or waving their hands trying to attract it. Cats prefer the quiet types.”

“If you don’t mind, I am trying to read this article on the kidnapping at Betazed,” L’Nora said. “I don’t care to understand the biopsychosocial behavior of cats.”

“What kidnapping?” Tammas asked.

“Perhaps if you spent less time in the holosuites you could devote more attention to the news,” L’Nora said.

“I read the headlines,” Tammas said.

“Then you should know that two months ago there was a mass kidnapping on Betazed. There are still no clues about the abductors, nor have there been any ransom demands,” L’Nora said.

“I hadn’t heard about it,” Tammas said. “What do you mean a mass kidnapping?”

“Perhaps the cat will tell you about it,” L’Nora said.

Is it any wonder, Tammas thought to the cat, that I prefer the company of animals to people? The cat looked up from the chair it was occupying, before returning to its nap. The Sarran arrived at El after six days of travel at warp eight. Tammas beamed down, where he was immediately greeted by Chancellor Drosh. Tammas paid his respects and

passed along T’Pau compliments and gifts. The Chancellor seemed pleasantly surprised, and asked Tammas that he return to visit with him after his journey, so that he could send some tokens of his esteem back to T’Pau.

Tammas wasn’t completely prepared for the climb up the Sacred Heart, but he made it before the sun set, which was one of the requirements. A monk greeted him, brought him to a designated spot where the mountain was weathered and the internal stratum was exposed. There was a small ceremony where the monk officially welcomed him to the Heights, a ritualized hand cleaning, and then the monk instructed him to place his hands on the rock, with fingers spread and his palm towards the rock. It was as if he were to initiate a mind meld with the mountain itself.

Tammas touched the rock without hesitation, or concern. With all the drama that it took to get him here, he wasn’t about to return with this task uncompleted. Touching the Living Rock, as it was called, was like touching an electric fence, only marginally more pleasant. The sensation was sustained, as opposed to cycling. And he was surprised that it was more comparable to a mind meld than he had expected. His mind interfaced with the living rock just as easily as it could to a computer using his neural implant. He now understood why he had been summoned to meet the Rock, and for a moment he wondered if it was a giant computer. It was just hard for his mind to get around the idea that a rock might be alive, but then, the Federation had encountered such before. Kirk and Spock had encountered a species of living rocks, well, they were more lava than rock, but they could somehow solidify into rock and still maintain their living status. If he wasn’t mistaken, President Lincoln was also involved in the incident. Star Fleet histories were often quite unbelievable, he thought.

“We are related,” the Living Rock responded to Tam’s mental tangent. “We all are. Even you, mostly water and carbon, are essentially rock. Dust to dust, as your Earth saying goes. The elements that comprise us both are merely bones of dead stars.”

Those thoughts were very clear, but other thoughts that Tammas felt emanating from the Living Rock were a bit more nebulous. Apparently it had heard a sample of his music from a previous guest and so the Rock had wanted a direct sampling. Tammas saw his life from the perspective of the rock, and to it, Tam’s whole life was a song, a story still unfolding, and his story would now be woven into the rock. The mind meld left him with such peace that he had to be guided away by the monks. He woke the next morning, refreshed, but without a clear memory of what had transpired between him and the mountain. When he tried to think on it, he just remembered an easy little tune. On seeing him awake, a monk presented him with breakfast. When he had finished eating, he was given two items. One was a piece of the Living Rock. It was warm to the touch, but he could discern no apparent heat source, and it was not, he later discovered, radioactive. He was instructed never to let the stone be transported. It was wrapped in a ceremonial cloth and placed in a leather pouch, similar to a Native American medicine bag. The other item they presented him with was an Elanian Singer Stone. He touched it and was pleasantly surprised by the tonalities it emitted. It came with no instructions. With that, they bid him fare well, and sent him on his way.

The trip down the hill was easier, so he took it in leisure, absorbing the tranquil, picturesque setting. About half way down, he came upon a strange fellow, taking a break at one of the rest area. The area was a step off the path, which over looked the valley below. Tammas found the man strangely compelling, but was unsure why. He sensed no

emotions and smelt no identifying odors that living beings naturally produce. The other odd thing was his skin color. Tammas approached cautiously.

“I will not harm you, if you wish to join me,” it said, without looking back.

“I’m sorry,” Tammas said. “I did not mean to sneak up on you. I was merely curious.”

The man turned his face to him, the light giving his skin a hint of a golden hue. Stark yellow eyes stared at Tammas “My name is Data. Please join me.”

Tammas went and sat down next to the man with yellow eyes. “My name is Tammas Arblaster Garcia.”

“Ah,” Data said. “You are the child genius composer.”

“Why, yes,” Tammas said. “Well, at least, I was, for I am legally an adult now. You’ve heard of me?”

“I have am familiar with all of your recordings that are publicly available,” Data said. “And though I have never seen your image, it seems obvious that someone of your talent and ability might be called to climb the Path. I am still curious as to why I was called.”

“It must be due to the fact that you are unique in some way,” Tammas said. “I’ve never met anyone like you. What species are you?”

“I am an android. And the only unique quality would be that I am the only one of my kind,” Data said, thinking: minus his brother Lore. He didn’t feel the need to be that precise at this particular encounter.

“Really? I thought the Enterprise, under the command of Kirk, was once hijacked by an android named Norman, under the direction of a Mudd, Harcourt Fenton, or Harry. The android was from a clan of sophisticated androids, originally from the Andromeda Galaxy,” Tammas objected. (These particular Androids had actually fled a Kelvan occupation of their origin planet.) “And there were also the androids from Exo Three. Using the ancient, alien technology found on that planet Doctor Brown and Archaeologist Roger Korby were turned into androids. They were even going to make a Kirk android.”

Data reflected over this bit of history. “Indeed,” he finally said. “Perhaps I should endeavor to be more specific in this instance. I am the only android constructed by a human...”

“No,” Tammas interrupted. “Rayna Kapec, named for the Czechoslovakian writer Karel Capek, who coined the word slash term ‘robot,’ was created by a human named Flint, aka Methuselah, aka Solomon, aka Lazurus, aka Johannes Brahms... I’m sorry. You must think I’m being adversarial.”

“Not at all,” Data responded. “Actually, I am intrigued and pleasantly challenged by your efforts to communicate so precisely. It is not a trait I have found common amongst humans. In fact, I have found that many of my associates, and even friends, often display frustration, and or boredom, should I tarry too long in details. Eliminating verbosity, recognizing the difference between substance and extraneous information, and knowing with whom and at what times more particulars should be forthcoming, has been one of my struggles in my efforts to emulate human behavior. Your sudden silence and lack of participation in this conversation suggests to me that perhaps I have strayed too far from the intent of our dialogue.”

Tammas smiled and shook his head. “No, Data. I was just listening to you,” Tammas said. “I was also thinking how nice it is to be around someone who isn’t

emoting. I feel strangely at ease with you. Even more so than with Vulcans. They can have a bit of an edge to them sometimes.”

“I am glad I do not scare you,” Data said. “Can you share with me your experience with the Living Rock?”

Tammias frowned. “Not really, and not because I don’t want to. There was a connection I made, with another planet, and a past President... It escapes me now. I do remember hearing music. It was like hearing a song from my past, and yet, something I haven’t heard yet. It was odd. And I apparently passed out.”

“I lost consciousness as well,” Data said, tilting his head as he processed the information. “Interesting. You have two gifts as well.”

“Yes. May I?” Tammias asked, holding a hand out for Data’s singer stone.

Data handed him the stone. It emitted a number of tonalities, in an odd sort of cadence, and then repeated the cycle. It was different than the tonalities his stone made, so he had to wonder if it was due to the difference in shape, or the variation in its coloring.

“Interesting,” Data said. “I bet Doctor Pulaski will want to examine this. It somehow responds to living organic tissue.”

“Kind of like biofeedback,” Tammias said. “Mine produces different tones.”

“Perhaps each stone has its own harmonic structure,” Data offered.

“Do you suppose the heat from my hand activates it?” Tammias asked.

“I do not believe this to be the case. By design, the circuitry in my hand generates the equivalent amount of heat as that of a human hand,” Data said. “May I hear yours?”

Tammias handed Data’s stone back to him and then brought his out of the pouch. Data listened for a moment and then thanked him.

“I must be getting back,” Data said.

“Yeah, me too,” Tammias said. “I just don’t know how I am going to get this back without transporting. L’Nora will probably balk at bringing the Saran down.”

“I would be willing to take you up in my shuttle,” Data said. “If you like.”

“Thank you, Data. I must meet with Chancellor Drosh. Would you mind joining me?” Tammias asked.

“Indeed,” Data said. “I have not met with the Chancellor.”

“Great,” Tammias said. “It would be my pleasure to introduce you.”

As they walked, Data and Tammias exchanged small talk, and they soon discovered they were both into amateur radio. They traded call signs. Then Data asked him about his music, noting that he had observed a pattern of it evolving over the last seven years. It was now much more complex in its rhythms and chord structures. “In the piece, Reflections on Dante, for example, you had several elaborate key changes that can be very difficult to perform.”

“Yeah,” Tammias said. “I’ve only heard three people, other than myself, who can do it the way I wrote it. Most people modify it. As to the evolution, well, I’ve evolved, Data. I think my years on Vulcan have changed me. But then, I suppose I would change no matter where I was, it would just be a different vector. Different sets of people, different equation, different results. The people we meet and associate with really can make a difference in our lives.”

Data nodded. “In addition to being an accomplished musician, you are also a philosopher.”

“Not usually, Data,” Tammias said. “I’m just having a very good day. I don’t remember ever feeling so at peace. No, that’s a lie. I felt strangely at peace with my godmother, but I haven’t seen her since she sent me to live with the Garcia’s.” He hadn’t thought of Guinan in years, and now she was prominent on his mind. He savored it and smile, knowing she had touched his life.

“I do not believe today is any different than any other, for I have no emotions in which to gauge such variances,” Data said, unaware Garcia was lost in memories. “However, I have noticed that the number of mental tasks I typically run seem fewer today than usual. I will note the observation of your feelings, and bear it in mind when I reflect on this event in the future.”

After Tam’s business was concluded on El, Data escorted Tammias up into orbit. Tammias hadn’t made the connection with Data and the Enterprise until he saw the writing: NCC ENTERPRISE 1701 D written on the shuttle, just under the shuttle’s designation of Galileo. He took a deep breath in through his nose, wondering if Selar had ever been in this particular shuttle. If she had been, any remaining atoms from Selar were now too diffused to notice. He imagined what it was like to be on board the most famous ship in the Fleet. He held his questions back, though, as Data and he had decided to sing a song. They sang an old Earth song, “The Road to Morocco.”

“It beats the bus,” Data sang

“It beats me,” Tammias sang.

“This is strange, I do not understand it,” Data said, interrupting the song.

“You’ve never ridden a camel, then, have you?” Tammias asked.

“No,” Data said. “Have you?”

“Not a real one, but I have ridden a holographic camel,” Tammias said. “Data, would you do me a favor?”

“It depends on the nature of the request,” Data said.

Tammias laughed, and then had to explain to Data what it was about his response that he found humorous. Most people would have said “Sure,” not knowing what the favor was, and Data was not willing to so readily be caught in a social contract not knowing what the parameters might be. Data still didn’t understand why that was humorous, seeing his position was surely logical.

“Would you give my complements to Doctor Selar,” Tammias said.

“Of course,” Data said. “Is that all?”

Tammias thought about it. “No. Would you give her this?”

“Are you sure?” Data asked.

“This way, I’ll always know where it is,” Tammias explained, handing his Elanian Singer Stone over to Data.

“Interesting concept,” Data said. “You find comfort in giving your possession away, not just because it will bring joy to another, but because it lightens your load. It’s like acknowledging your ownership of it even though you never truly have ownership of it.”

“It’s not original, though,” Tammias admitted. “I saw it in a movie once. Harold and Maude. He gives her a ring, and she immediately throws it out into a lake. Very good movie. Lovely sound track.”

“I will make a note of it,” Data said.



As the Galileo approached the Sarran, Data asked for permission to dock. At first they refused, but when they heard Tammas was on board, they capitulated.

“Thanks, Data,” Tammas said. “Feel free to email me. Or, who knows, maybe I will catch you on subspace radio one day.”

“I will be listening for you,” Data said.

L’Nora was waiting on the other side of the airlock. Tammas waved at Data, who waved back, putting on a sincere and at the same time awkwardly artificial smile on his face. It was so comical Tammas couldn’t help but laugh as the air lock door closed between them. L’Nor wasn’t pleased, but whether it was because Tammas was enjoying himself or because she was ready to be home was not immediately verifiable.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

In his haste, Tammias had forgotten all about meeting with Melinda. She had sent him two emails, one to remind him of the date, and the second to ask if he was okay. He sent a message three days out from Vulcan, but didn't get a reply. He sent a second message a day out, and on arriving at Vulcan he still hadn't received a reply. Tammias was to report directly to T'Pau's palace to discuss his trip on arriving, and give her word and gifts from Chancellor Drosh. As they were having their meeting, Tammias thought it was very similar to what having a private tea with the Queen of England might have been like, centuries ago, plus or minus some ceremonial necessities. It was going to make a nice chapter in a book someday. In addition to the gifts, Tammias presented her with his piece of the Living Rock.

"I believe this should remain with you as well," Tammias said, handing the item to her. "They only ask that it not be transported. I'm not sure if it's because of their myths, or because it might ruin some of its harmonic qualities. The scans just show it as a rock," Tammias said.

"And what do you believe it to be?" T'Pau asked.

"If you will suffer my imagination," Tammias asked more than said, and continued when she nodded. "I believe it to be a seed of the Mountain. Perhaps if you plant it, a million years from now there will be another Living Heart here on planet Vulcan."

"Then I shall be careful where I plant it," T'Pau said.

"May you live as long to see it grown," Tammias said.

"I hope not," she said. In that, she reminded him of McCoy.

T'Pau's great, great grand-daughter entered and bowed. T'Pau introduced her. He name was Simone, pronounced "See-ma-ney," and when she spoke to T'Pau she spoke to her in a Vulcan dialect he was not familiar with.

"Thank you for visiting with me, Garcia. I would like to do this again someday," T'Pau said. "Now, if you will excuse me."

Simone, about Tam's age, bowed to him as well, and then walked with her grandmother, taking her arm in hers. Tam was thinking how very attractive Simone was when suddenly Simone glanced back with such a sharp look that he nearly lost his composure. He might as well have been caught red handed taking photographs of her coming out of a shower with out her permission. He put his thoughts in check and decided to hurriedly make his exit before he did put his foot in his mouth. As he walked from the palace, he used his neural implant to access the Vulcan Network to check his email. He had an invitation to join Sarek and Perrin for dinner at the Meti Diner Hall, where they were entertaining the Ambassador Shelton of Andoria, and his wife and daughter. Tammias sent an affirmation that he would join them. His new work schedule arrived, compliments of L'Nora, and he was pleasantly surprised. He didn't have to report for another two days, giving him time to rest after the trip, even though he didn't require it. Twelve days in a box had made him rather restless and he looked forward to returning to work. He checked in with the animal clinic, which had run just as smoothly as if he had never been gone, cared for some animals, and decided to call it a day. He had six hours to kill, though, and sent a query to the holosuite. They had a cancellation so he grabbed the slot up.

Tammias checked in at the desk and proceeded to the suite. Melinda was there, waiting.

“Hey,” she said.

“Hey,” Tammas said.

“So, you went out of town,” she said.

“Yeah,” Tammas said.

“You hate the transporter so much you couldn’t transport back, just to keep our date?” she asked.

“Well, in this case, out of town meant six days away at warp eight,” Tammas said.

“Wow,” Melinda said. “They let you do that on probation?”

“My probation officer accompanied me,” Tammas said.

“Where did you go?” Melinda asked.

“Planet El,” Tammas said.

“Never heard of it,” Melinda said. “Did you have fun?”

“Yeah, it was nice,” Tammas said.

“But, seeing how you’re back already, you could have only been there two days at the most,” Melinda said.

“Very good. Your natural STC internal clock is working,” Tammas said, just a little sarcastic. “Did you want to join me in the suite. Usually when I’m here on Tuesdays I DM for a group, but today, you and I can role play.”

“DM?” Melinda asked.

“Dungeon master,” Tammas explained. “It’s an archaic game from Earth.”

Melinda seemed a bit hesitant.

“Is something wrong?” Tammas asked.

“Did you really go to El?” Melinda asked.

“You think I would make that up?” Tammas asked.

“Well, you know, people hear things,” Melinda said.

“People will talk,” Tammas agreed, but she would have never gotten the reference to the classic Earth film starring Jean Crane and Carry Grant.

“Yeah,” Melinda said. “Yeah, they do.”

“And what have you heard about me?” Tammas asked, not really wanting to know.

“That you live in a world of fiction,” Melinda said. “That you don’t socialize much. That you have psychological problems. They say that’s why you live on Vulcan. They have to do mind melds on you to keep you half way sane.”

Tammas nodded. “They’re all true,” he lied. Though one could argue for all those rumors, they were gross exaggerations. And, denying them would only fuel on more.

Melinda sighed. “I must be crazy.”

“What information do you have to support that?” Tammas asked, modeling a form of reasoning he hoped she might employ on the rumors she had heard about him.

“I’m attracted to you, Tammas,” Melinda said. “And I don’t know how, or why, but I always seem to be attracted to men with issues. This is the second time you stood me up without even a call to tell me you’re okay. That’s not a good way to start a friendship.”

“I told you,” Tammas said. “I went to El. I was invited to climb the Sacred Heart to meet the Living Rock, as a personal envoy to T’Pau.” Even Tammas didn’t believe it as he played back what he was saying.

“I just don’t believe you,” Melinda said. “You wouldn’t happen to have proof, would you?”

“Not on me,” Tammas said. “But you know, there’s something else you need to know before we can even think of starting a friendship.”

“And what’s that?” Melinda asked.

“I’m married,” Tammas said.

“If you weren’t interested in me, all you had to do was say so,” Melinda said, and stormed off.

Whew, Tammas thought. A bit of chaos there. He opened the suite and entered. After that encounter, he wasn’t much in a gaming mood. He recreated Betazed and went and sat on a beach. The sand sparkled with stars spread like glitter. The ocean surface was still, but very much alive with the stirrings of luminescent fish. The sky was filled with stars, and a full moon bathed it all in angelic light. Troi came out to meet him.

“So, feeling a bit down, are we?” Troi asked.

“Yeah,” Tammas admitted.

“So, what are you doing to remedy this?” Troi asked.

“Sorry, Counselor, I don’t feel like working,” Tammas said. “Computer, remove Troi. Insert Persis.”

Persis appeared, and knelt down beside him. “They tell me we can’t ever be,” she said. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“I’m sorry, too,” Tammas said, reaching out to touch her. His hand went through her, as he had programmed her to appear as a ghost, not in solid form, to further remind him that it can never be.

“Tammas,” Persis said. “Thank you for the moons. I’ll never forget you.”

She faded away and was replaced with Selar. An altered version of Selar. She was reformed to appear as she might if she were completely Deltan. Her ears and facial features seemed human, but she was bald. “Hello, Tammas. You were right about this place. It’s very romantic.”

“So, this is how you spend your free time?” Melinda asked.

Tammas quickly got up, surprised.

“Who is this bimbo?” the Deltan Selar asked.

“Selar, Melinda, Melinda, my wife... Sort of,” Tammas said, massaging his forehead. “Some liberty and artistic license notwithstanding.”

“She’s for real?” Melinda asked.

“No, this is a holograph,” Tammas said. “What did you want?”

“I just wanted to apologize,” Melinda said. “You’ve always been nice to me, and I was very rude just now.”

“Of course,” Selar said. “He only wants one thing from you. So typically human. I think you engage in this promiscuous behavior as a form of self medicating your depression.”

“Bye, Selar,” Tammas said. “Computer, remove Selar.”

Selar vanished.

“Have you considered therapy?” Melinda asked.

“For what?” Tammas asked.

“I’ve been in some abusive relationships,” Melinda admitted. “And I know how hard it is to get out. So, I can’t believe it is healthy to have a holograph verbally beating you up. Is that really your self-image? Was your last girlfriend really that bad?”

“No,” Tammias said. “She saved my life, actually. It’s why I married her.”

“Okay,” Melinda said. “Well, I just wanted to apologize. See you.”

“See you,” Tammias said.

Melinda departed and Tammias thought about going home. Instead, he used the holosuite to recreate a shower and hot tub. First he cleaned, sat awhile in the tub, and then used the replicator program to create some clothes appropriate to the restaurant where he would later meet Sarek. And he still had time left. He sighed. He needed to cheer up before he went to dinner, and the only thing he could think of that might cheer him up was a song.

“Computer, create a stage setting, position me off stage, stage right,” Tammias instructed, and suddenly he was just off stage. “Now, I want to sing a duet with Rosemary Clooney. The Love and Marriage song, in fact.”

Mrs. Clooney appeared, in black and white. “You ready?” she asked him.

“Why, yes,” Tammias said, and followed her out on stage even as the music started. Nothing like “show tunes” to put a pick a person’s spirits up, Garcia thought.



Tammias was happy to be back at work, up until Melinda came on shift and passed his station without so much as a glance. It had been a year and half since she had learned he was married, and she still hadn’t spoken to him. She did stop to speak with one of the other STC personal and had what appeared to be a pleasant exchange with the human male who she was relieving from duty. Her eyes never met Tam’s eyes. He had to consciously decide not to make anything of it. She would either speak to him again or not. No emotions, right?

Wrong. He turned back to his station and tortured himself by calculating how much time he had left remaining until he finished his probation. Something on his screen got his attention. He pushed his concerns away while trying to identify the radio emission signature. It was something he hadn’t seen before and new was good. It was either a treasure or a computer glitch. It had been a single, solitary energy burst in the gamma frequencies, and he was pretty certain it originated within the Vulcan solar system. He logged it, and waited for more, while simultaneously running a comparative search for anything remotely like it. Since it was only a single pulse, he wouldn’t be able to triangulate and determine its source to any degree of certainty, but he had the area narrowed down to within five million kilometers. Chances were it was probably just space noise, or a spontaneous burst of energy from the vacuum of space that happened from time to time, though usually not in the gamma range.

Tammias glanced over to Melinda. He had wanted to stay on good terms with her, but then, it wasn’t exactly his fault. Maybe he shouldn’t tell anyone he was married, he thought, since Melinda’s reaction was the norm, at least amongst humans. It wasn’t like it was a “real” marriage, he continued to rationalize the situation. Her back was to him, as well as to the Vulcan who occupied the station right behind hers. He liked the way her hair fell. He had to wonder if he was obsessing about her because it was over between them or because he really liked her.

Tammas shifted his focus to the Vulcan behind Melinda. He seemed to be having trouble breathing, as if he were choking. Tammas might have missed it had he not been looking over the Vulcan's head at Melinda. He didn't waste time getting to the Vulcan, either.

Turning the Vulcan to face him, Tammas looked in his eyes. "Are you choking?" Tammas asked. It seemed like a stupid question but it was the first question in a series of questions that had to be asked in order to render medical assistance. The Vulcan's hands were touching his neck in the Universal sign for choking, but he shook his head "no."

"Can you breathe?" Tammas asked.

Again, the Vulcan shook his head no. Melinda turned to see what was going on behind her.

Tammas tried patting him on the back, while looking the Vulcan in the eye hoping that he could communicate visually as to what the problem might be. By the time he touched the Vulcan, he knew it was not simply a case of choking, but instead seemed to be some sort of allergic reaction that had closed down his lungs. The Vulcan collapsed into Tam's arms. Tammas reassigned the channel for his headset to a station frequency using his implant.

"Medical emergency," Tammas announced. "We need a medical team to STC Control."

Tammas laid the Vulcan out on the floor, checking for a pulse before lifting the cushion out of the chair and propping the Vulcan's feet up. Melinda stood, wanting to help, but was reluctant to leave her station. The floor supervisor, T'San, responded, and the first thing he did was to double assign Melinda. She was now covering her section, as well as the station behind her. She arranged her screen to display data from both stations.

T'San touched his earpiece. "Medics are on the way," T'San said.

Of course, Tammas had heard the same reply, even as he was describing the symptoms to the medical dispatch operator. He lowered his head to the Vulcan's mouth to listen for air flow with his left ear and watched for the Vulcan's chest to rise. Nothing. Tammas gave the Vulcan two breaths of air, using CPR techniques, and noticed the lungs did inflate with each breath. T'San cleared the area of chairs so as to give the approaching medical team room to work.

"He's still got a pulse, but he's not breathing," Tammas said.

The medic took over, placing a neural regulator, a small, circular device, on the forehead. He then placed a mask that fit over the mouth and nose, pulling the strap around the Vulcan's face. The second medic took tricorder readings.

"It's not a stroke," the second said.

"T'San," Melinda said, concern obvious in her voice.

Another Vulcan had collapsed. T'San and the medic with the tricorder rushed to his aid. With the new station down, T'San had to make a choice and he hesitated only for a moment. He knew of Garcia's rating, but was reluctant to recognize his achievement by putting him in an STC position. T'San had been one of the committee chairpersons influencing Vulcan's local STC board that had put a stop to Tam's application process, which made his decision now even more difficult for him. Logic eventually won out over his moral conflict.

"Garcia, take over this station," T'San ordered.

Tammas did as he was told. He was now in control of ships arriving and leaving Vulcan prime. He had thirty-five ships in orbit, two preparing to leave, and four entering. He dispatched the two, and assigned an orbit to each of the four approaching ships. It went as smoothly as it did in the simulations that he used to prepare him for this particular job. Just another game, and another rating, only this time, real people were on the other end of the radio.

Another Vulcan STC personal collapsed. T'San moved to attend to her, but then he began to exhibit symptoms of choking as well. Melinda stepped away from her station just in time to catch T'San as he collapsed between the two stations.

"We're going to need more medics," one of the medics called for back up. It was the last thing he said as he, too, staggered to the floor and finally passed out.

"Red alert," Tammas announced, his heart racing. "Seal off STC Control. We have a situation. Possible biological contaminant."

The remaining medic, an Andorian, gave Tammas an angry look because that was his call to make. Since he also knew Tammas was right, he had to let go. "Request all responding medical teams to report in environmental suits. We have an unknown biological vector, which seems to be affecting Vulcan personnel. Please acknowledge request."

The only response was the red alert klaxon. "Damn it, I need help up here," the medic yelled. "Medic Losan to Captain T'Lano? Someone respond!"

"Melinda, back to your station. There's an unauthorized entry into Vulcan space," Tammas announced. "Take the entire upper division."

"Tammas, I can't handle all of this inbound," Melinda said.

"Agreed," Tammas said. "Put all ships within five light years from Vulcan in a holding pattern at the heliosheath. Divert all other inbound traffic to their secondary ports."

"Tammas, I'm in charge here," Melinda said.

"Then do something. Close it all down for all I care," the medic demanded. "I need help here!"

"We can't just close down all traffic," Melinda yelled at the medic.

"Melinda," Tammas said, calmly. "Hold everything at the heliosheath, and divert everything five light years and beyond. I'll take full responsibility."

She hesitated a moment longer, but two more ships dropped out of warp and her sector was getting crowded. Tammas quickly changed the AIDAS information to tell all in bound traffic to hold. He then ordered Melinda to hold all outgoing ships, just in case there were any contaminated ships carrying an unknown virus. Might as well contain this here, even if it did delay and anger the outgoing ships. He told all remaining ships on Vulcan awaiting departure times and vectors to hold. He then turned his attention to the alien vessel.

"Negative," Tammas argued with a passenger ship insisting on leaving the ground. "All planet side ships are grounded until further notice. Melinda, notify Vulcan Prime and Star Fleet we have a situation."

The unauthorized vehicle was now half way to Vulcan. Tammas chose the closest Star Fleet ships and hailed them. "USS Venson and Serenity, please intercept the unauthorized vehicle. It is not responding to STC." Tammas realized he should have

done this immediately after receiving no response from the alien vessel, but didn't have time to berate himself over the mistake.

"Their current orbit will bring the UFO to Vulcan in twelve minutes," Melinda said. "The Vulcan Royal Guard have been notified."

Tammas gave her thumbs up, while simultaneously sending text messages for another ship to hold at the heliosheath and handling a situation in Vulcan orbit. "Klingon Krag," he said, pointing out a traffic related situation to Melinda visible on the over head screen. "Return to your assigned orbit."

Melinda nodded. "On it," she said. "The alien intruder is now on the main screen."

"I'm going to need both of you to help me here," the Andorian medic demanded. "I can't treat all these people by myself."

Tammas wanted to help, but he couldn't. "You're just going to have to make do."

"Some of them are going to die if I don't have help!" the Andorian said.

"Tactical over lay, Melinda. Klingon ship, Krag, please hold your position," Tammas said again. He simply didn't have time to deal with the ranting of the Andorian, no matter how important they were. "I appreciate your willingness to help. Now hold your position."

"Tammas, the alien ship has fired on the Venson and Serenity," Melinda said. The main screen showed the blips of torpedoes moving towards their intended targets, along with vector lines. There must have been twenty or so torpedoes headed for the two Star Fleet ships. "All ships within Vulcan space, go to red alert. Oh, hell."

The Venson didn't just take hits. It blew up, completely disintegrating, and it was more than just a warp core breach. The only good thing was the resulting explosion took out most of the remaining torpedoes. STC didn't see the tremendous explosion directly. All they saw was the transponder info disappear from their tactical display, followed by the torpedoes blips. Only a couple of the remaining torpedoes arched and connected to the Serenity. Its transponder faded, disappeared, but came back to life. A moment later, the space around the identifier tag for the Serenity blossomed with the smaller transponder identification tags. Interpretation: life pods were being launched.

The moment the Vulcan Royal Guard were ready for launch, Tammas gave them clearance and direct intercept vectors. He had already anticipated their flight paths, and cleared all of the traffic and ships in holding patterns that might have presented obstacles. The Royal Guard was comprised of two teams of small, tactical fighter, twelve ships each.

"Shuttle Opolos, return to Vulcan prime, do not make orbit," Tammas said. "Grounded means grounded. Team Alpha, you should have some life pods just appearing on your sensor and heads up for debris from the Venson."

"Who's in control up there?" came a call from ship four in the alpha team.

"Alpha leader to Alpha four," was his response. "Stay focus on your task. Thanks for the heads up, Center. We have the pods in sight. Prepare to switch to Visual Flight Rules, they're jamming our sensors."

"Tammas," Melinda said. "Whatever that ship is putting out is disrupting common sensor used in navigating. Two thirds of my ships are reporting growing difficulties."



“Put as many of them that can on VFR flight, and spread them out so we can have time to give them heads up if need be,” Tammias ordered, wishing he could get back to his station to see what energies and frequencies the alien ship was broadcasting that would disrupt navigational sensors. “Yes, Starship Sutherland, I hear you, please hold... Melinda, direct those life pods in sector one in another direction, or they’ll end up in Beta teams flight path.”

“Got it,” Melinda said.

“Is there any way we can computer coordinate with all satellites and ships for access to real time visual information, just in case we lose our sensors as well?” Tammias asked.

“You know what you’re asking for?” Melinda asked.

“We need a back up!” Tammias snapped. “Klingon ship Krag, hold your position. Shuttle NC208, do not enter orbit. Return planet side. Damn it, Vulcan, hold all traffic. Ground everything!”

“Tammias, I’m sending your request planet side to see what they can come up with,” Melinda said.

“Klingon ship Krag,” Tammias said, anger in his voice this time. “If you do not return to your original orbital position, you will be considered hostile. Now, hold your position. Melinda, have everything within five light years drop out of warp and proceed at impulse. That should clear up the rest of our congestion problems. Also, open a tactical feed to Starship Sutherland. Their ETA is now four minutes.”

“Affirmative,” Melinda said.

The alien ship was fast approaching Vulcan orbit and was launching hundreds of torpedoes. The VRG ships were harassing it, but they were not doing any noticeable damage. Their shields were holding against the phasers, but apparently the torpedoes could penetrate the shields before exploding. They discovered that the hard way, losing two ships in the process. Torpedoes swarmed around the alien, mother ship like angry hornets protecting their nest, going after everything that even looked like a threat. The VRG were now spending most of their time and energy simply avoiding the torpedoes, abandoning their attack runs in order to do so. Their communication frequencies were full of chatter as each was advising each other of threats.

Tammias assisted where he could, but the stray torpedoes were now becoming a danger to the ships in orbit around Vulcan prime. Even the wildest scenarios he had created in the holosuite to prepare himself for any contingency never came anywhere close to this level of activity.

“Melinda, help me get these ships out of orbit,” Tammias said. “RC443, accelerate to 400 KPH, a large fragment headed your way.”

“I’ll take the lower hemisphere,” Melinda said.

On one of Tam’s channels, he heard a call for medical assistance from the Serenity. Apparently not all the personal had managed to escape in the life pods, but fortunately, the warp core was still stable. Tammias looked over the ships in orbit and quickly found one suitable.

“Klingon Ship Krag,” Tammias said, sending them flight info. “Take this vector to the Serenity and assist with first aid. No, you will not attack the alien. Your ship is not equipped to assault this alien, and I don’t have the coping skills to handle any more debris in orbit. You do, however, have a large enough hold for a makeshift triage, and

your personal are adequately equipped for first aid. Now move out. Shuttle Craft Henson, accelerate to two thirds impulse. No, keep your previous heading. Turn around, now!"

The graphic describing the course of the Henson suddenly overlapped the trajectory for one of the torpedoes. Both the icon for the shuttle and the line representing the torpedo faded from the screen. Various sized fragments blossomed from the intersection point.

"Damn it!" Tammas yelled, pounding the instrument panel in front of him.

"Tammas," Melinda said. "Stay focused. We still have work to do."

The alien ship came into orbit and, for the first time, the Vulcan Starbase got into the fight. A volley of photon torpedoes departed the station, accompanied by phasers. The tracers for the torpedoes leaving the station appeared on the tactical map, arching towards the alien ship. Tammas gave the heads up to several VRG ships that were in between the Star Base and the alien. They departed on new vectors, giving thanks for the heads up.

"The Sutherland is requesting to maintain warp until they're inside the system," Melinda announced. "I've designated sector three for them to drop out of warp. They'll be here in two minutes."

The alien ship returned fire, hitting the station hard. The power in the space station dipped and then went completely off. Emergency power came on a lifetime later. Which, in real time, was three seconds. Their eyes hadn't even adjusted to the dark before the lights came back on. There was the sound of straining metal, which wasn't a comforting thing to hear, like a sea vessel being crushed as it sunk. Tammas had flash backs to his Poseidon Adventure. The tactical display came back on, but it no longer displayed identifiers. Ships and missiles alike had been reduced to mere blips and they were all the same color. Tammas watched his internal clock, counting down the two minutes before the Sutherland would arrive. And then he wondered why it was still coming. It would be destroyed just like the other two starships. Still they were coming. And they would come even if he warned them not to. Was it bravery or foolishness? He heard the sounds of life support system coming back on. It hadn't been off long enough to taste a difference in the quality of air, but it was the first time he appreciated hearing the back ground noise.

A spray of sparks from a panel over head caused both Tammas and Melinda to duck, and the medic covered one of his patients. The station in front of Melinda blew, and had she not already had her head covered with her arms, she could have been blinded. As it was, her sleeve was cut and her left arm was now exposed and bleeding. She had a trickle of blood on her forehead. Tammas wanted to go attend to her wounds, but he stayed at his station. Even with all that happened, she didn't skip a beat.

"Ah, negative," Melinda said, moving to the station behind her. "Continue with your last vector and proceed towards the heliosheath. Listen up, everyone. Our guidance computers are down, you will be self navigating."

The alien ship wasn't in orbit one minute before it turned and began its departure on a new vector, ramming an unsuspecting VRG ship that had flown in too close. The alien's exit was even faster than its arrival, and before it was halfway out of the system it went into warp.

“Affirmative, life pod V1, you are cleared to approach Vulcan,” Tammas said. “All life pods are expedited to Vulcan orbit, and may proceed at once towards the surface. Contact ground control on two one four point five.”

A moment later, the Sutherland dropped out of warp. Tammas ignored the voices over his headset, deciding it was now time to help the medic. The first person in his path was T’San. He wasn’t breathing, so he administered two rescue breaths. He checked for a pulse, found none, and began doing chest compression, placing his hands above the Vulcan heart. How long had he been without air? Six minutes? Had T’San used any meditative techniques to slow his metabolism down? Sutherland was hailing him personally, but he didn’t answer as he was back to the breath cycle.

“Affirmative,” Melinda answered their hail. “We read you Sutherland. Understand. I am turning STC control over to you. Yes, thank you, Sutherland. Vulcan Center out.”

Melinda turned towards Tammas. He was too busy to see how exhausted she was, or the admiration for him that radiated from her eyes. The lights flickered.

“We need medical assistance!” the Andorian medic reminded her.

“Vulcan ground control, prepare for emergency traffic,” Melinda said. “The first of the life pods should be entering orbit soon. We need emergency medical teams up here. We’re in severe distress.”

The first medical team from the surface beamed in. They were wearing environmental suits and their helmet lights indicated what they were looking at. Their voices sounded stilted behind the masks, but were intelligible. The sound of tricorders scanning was also a comforting thing to hear, Tammas thought, but he didn’t quit administering CPR until one of the new medics relieved him.

Tammas looked around for someone to help, something to do, and finding nothing, he sat down in one of the STC chairs. His mind was still ringing with all the hails from various ships wanting to help coordinate with rescue. The alarm klaxons in the back ground of each ship was annoying. He took off his headset and threw it.

“It’s about time you guys got here,” the Andorian medic complained. He began to brief them on the conditions of his patients.

Melinda took her earpiece out and laid it down. She walked over to Tammas, who was just staring at the screen. “Are you okay?” she asked

A medic came over and took a scan. “I can see no injuries.”

“I’m alright,” Tammas said, waving him away.

“I’ll be the judge of that,” the suited medic said, while another gave attention to Melinda.

“You don’t seem to be affected by the virus,” the medic said. “Still, you will have to be kept in quarantine till we figure out what’s going on. Sit tight for a little bit.”

“Tammas,” Melinda said, annoyed by the pressure bandage being placed on her arm. “You were excellent.”

“Perhaps if you remain still,” the medic who was trying to treat her said.

Tammas looked at her. He had counted at least ten errors he had made, and though the Venson incident was not technically his fault, he felt guilty. “I made mistakes. I took charge and I should have deferred to you.”

“Tammas,” Melinda corrected, she waved the medic off, and pulled up a chair next to him. She took his hands in hers. “My god, Tammas. For someone without

training, you were astounding. I hesitated. You? You were like... Like a hero in the Escape series I follow.”

Tammas didn't look at her.

“Did you hear me?” Melinda asked.

“The Escape series is pretend,” Tammas said.

“I know its fiction, but I have found meaning in it, and it's been helpful,” Melinda said. “Have you read any of them?”

“I wrote them,” Tammas admitted.

Melinda laughed and touched his head, brushing his hair back. She kissed him lightly. “You have the strangest sense of humor.”

The medic returned. “Okay, we're ready to beam you down. Stand-by for transport.”

“Can't we take a shuttle?” Tammas began to protest... But he and Melinda were quickly swept away by the transporter wave.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Tammas was still in quarantine a full week after “the Crisis at Vulcan,” as the news media was referring to it. They couldn’t come up with any thing better than that? Even he had better writing skills than that, he thought. Lots of people wanted explanations, but fortunately Vulcans were not prone to hysteria. If this had happened on Earth, he wondered if the civilian population would be so quiet. He knew just about as much as any one else did, he supposed, more than the media was releasing, anyway, and yet he was still unable to look away from the news feeds. Every now and then they would release footage of the event that hadn’t been seen previously. It was generally footage of the Venson’s destruction, only from a different angle. The Serenity no doubt had some good recordings, but Star Fleet wasn’t releasing those as of yet. The alien ship hadn’t been identified, but it was now public information what they had done. They beamed in, took hostages, and beamed out. It had been such a precision act that there was suspicion that it had been in the planning for years and that there had to be inside help. Rumors and accusations abounded.

The force field that kept Tammas in quarantine came down, and his Doctor, a Vulcan named Kelars, entered. Since he was not in a suit, Tammas figured he was deemed clean.

“You’re free to go, Dr. Garcia,” Doctor Kelars said.

“Call me Tammas, please,” Tammas insisted. He really hated the title, especially now that all of a sudden every Vulcan that approached him was using it, and in a respectful way. “Can you tell me anything more about the virus, other than I was immune.”

“I’m afraid not,” Doctor Kelars said. “It’s been made classified by Star Fleet.”

“Naturally,” Tammas said.

“There’s a transporter pad on the next floor up,” Doctor Kelars said. “I recommend you use it to go home.”

Tammas laughed. “I’ve had enough of transporters for awhile,” Tammas said. “It’s time to stretch these legs.”

Tammas departed, bidding farewell to the nurses as he passed their station. At the end of the hall, he took a lift down to the main floor, passed through the lobby, noting an increased number of Star Fleet security officers around. He saw a female Vulcan that had taken classes with him at the Academy and for the first time since he had known her, she slowed and recognized him. She actually nodded at him. He didn’t know what to think about this new level of attention. He was polite and nodded to her as well.

Tammas was stopped by a security guard.

“Sorry,” he said. “You have to check out.”

“I’m Tammas Garcia,” he offered, showing his STC badge. The badge basically said communication’s division, but there was also a small label that noted he was Starbase personal with a level twelve clearance, with exceptions. That was usually an instant black flag to the security officer who recognized it for what it was: probation. Tammas waited for the usual follow up questions, such as name of probation officer, where have you been, where are you going...

“Doctor Garcia,” the security officer said, returning the badge. “I believe you would be more comfortable using the transporter. I can arrange a site to site if you like.”

Tammas was again taken off guard. His badge didn't have his title as Doctor on it, because that's the way L'Nora had wanted it. If she had had her way, she would have had the Academy strip him of his credentials. As it was, he didn't mind his credentials being left off. Even back when he first got the titles, people had often felt awkward referring to a teenager as "Doctor," so he had never pressed it and simply got use to hiding the fact that he had titles.

"Um, I would really like to walk," Tammas said. "I've been cooped up too long."

"Very well," the guard said. "Can I at least get you a car?"

"No, that's fine," Tammas assured.

"Have a nice day, Doctor," the guard said, and turned to go about his business.

Tammas shook the strange feeling off and exited the building. Before he made it half way down the marble stair he was assaulted by a number of different reporters from various channels. They had cameramen with them, and blinding lights, which caused him to squint. As if the Vulcan sun didn't offer enough light, Tammas thought. He heard his name from twelve different directions, as well as two questions that blurred together into something unintelligible. By the time he had a second thought about walking, it was too late. He was surrounded.

"How does it feel to be a hero, Doctor Garcia?" the closest reporter asked, putting her microphone up to his face.

Oh, hell no, he thought. Looking back to the hospital. Neither of the guards on the outside seemed to notice he was in over his head. The closest reporter was wearing a short dress, and he was getting a good view of her cleavage as she leaned into him. He quickly looked away as he remembered the cameras were on him, but no doubt, the point of interest where his eyes had lingered was witnessed by potential billions, and any one that wanted to scrutinize the tape further would be making a profile on him. He could hear it now: "Leg man. Cleavage. Red heads. Make sure you get a reporter that fits that description on him, pronto!" This one was all teeth, fluttering her eyes at him, and she knew exactly what she had to do to get that interview. She was wearing an earphone, so it was possible she was also being directed. "Step up with your left foot... Make eye contact. Touch his arm." If it wasn't that, she had done some homework on him.

"I think you have me confused with someone else," Tammas said, deciding to push through them.

That comment only spurred on more questions and speculative comments from some of the reporters who knew they weren't going to get close enough to Tammas to get a story. They followed him down the stairs like bees to a queen.

"Doctor?" The cute one was stuck to him like Velcro. He had seen her before on one of the local networks and had always thought she was cute. Now, he was having second thoughts. "Can I have an interview? Please?" She wet her lips with her tongue.

He stopped to look at her, which was probably a mistake because now the reporters were free to surround him. They would have, too, had a car not pulled up at that moment, horn flaring, the passenger door flying upwards.

"Get in," Melinda yelled.

Tammas jumped into the passenger seat, followed only by lots of question. The last one he heard before the door fully shut was, "Is this your girlfriend. How does your wife feel about this? Have you heard from her?" It was the attractive one, bending over so now her cleavage was right there at eye level.

Tammas forced his eyes to meet her. "Watch your head," he said.  
The door came down, shutting out that world.  
"You okay?" Melinda asked.  
"I'd like to leave," Tammas said.  
She stepped on the accelerator. Fortunately, reporters were wise enough not to step in front of a car. Too many have gotten squashed. Tammas shivered.  
"I'm surprised you aren't more familiar with such scenes," Melinda said.  
"I don't understand," Tammas said.  
"You are really very good at down playing your abilities and success," Melinda said, looking a little angry. "People were asking me all sorts of things about you. I kept thinking they had the wrong Tammas Garcia."  
"I don't know what you're talking about," Tammas said.  
She mimicked him pretty well. "I don't know what you're talking about. Indeed! For starters, you really did write the Escape series. I've read every one of those books! I live for the next edition. And I never knew you wrote them."  
"I don't know what to say," Tammas said. "Thank you for reading?"  
Melinda just shook her head. "You are just over the top. I don't know what to say."  
"Take this street," Tammas said.  
"Why," she asked, turning.  
"You're taking me home, right?" Tammas asked.  
"Is that where you want to go?" Melinda asked.  
"Yes," Tammas said.  
"So, everything I've heard about you lately is true?" Melinda asked.  
"Well, I wouldn't know about everything," Tammas said.  
It didn't take long for Melinda to deliver Tammas to Sarek's home. She pulled up in the drive, but didn't turn the car off.  
"You want to come up?" Tammas asked.  
"Not this time, I think," she said.  
Tammas nodded. "You holding up okay?"  
"Better than some," Melinda said. "There's a lot of people worse off than I am right now. I keep telling myself that, thinking it will help me feel better."  
"We must be pretty selfish, eh?" Tammas asked.  
"You feel it to?" she asked.  
"I'm human," Tammas assured her. "This is normal."  
"It sucks," Melinda said.  
"Yeah," Tammas said. "But what are you going to do?"  
She nodded. The door to Sarek's home opened and Perrin peered out.  
"Better go," she said. "Can I see you tomorrow?"  
"Sure," Tammas said. There was an awkward moment where he wanted to kiss her and he felt certain it was mutual but he didn't give in to the impulse. He knew given the opportunity, he would gladly have melted into her arms just as he had surrendered to Persis. "Tomorrow, then."  
He climbed out and went up the stairs. Perrin immediately fell on him with hugs and kisses. She told him to go sit and she would bring him a drink. He entered to find Admiral McCoy and Sarek in the family room. Sarek was petting Sparky as he chatted

with McCoy. Apparently he had lost all track of time, for even if McCoy pulled strings to come to Vulcan as fast he could, it would have still been about an eight day voyage. Of course, McCoy may not have been on Earth, as much as he still got around.

McCoy and Sarek stood.

“We saw you on the videos,” McCoy said. “Figured you’d be home soon.”

His eyes watered at seeing McCoy. “How do you handle it?” Tammas asked, meaning all of it, the social pressure of being considered a hero, being in a traumatic situation, living on a knife’s edge knowing your next action could cost someone’s life.

“One day at a time, son,” McCoy said.

“There was really no need for you to come down here,” Tammas said. “I’m okay.”

“Well,” McCoy said. “I just wanted to make sure, and, I wanted to ask if you would like to come back with me.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Tammas said, plopping down in his chair, mentally exhausted. Sparky came over to him and pawed at his leg.

“Sarek would like to read something to you,” Perrin said.

Sarek revealed an official document that carried the official seal of T’Pau’s office. “Doctor Tammas Parkin Arblaster-Garcia. In recognition of your outstanding performance during the recent crisis, I hereby declare your debt to Vulcan society paid in full. Live Long and Prosper. T’Pau.”

“You have been fully discharged,” Perrin said. “L’Nora herself sent her compliments.”

“Get out of town,” Tammas said, even with the crisis weighing heavy on him, hearing that was like a weight removed from his shoulders. “I want to see that message.”

“I think you should hear McCoy’s message,” Perrin said.

McCoy pulled out a document just as official as the one from which Sarek had read. “In light of your peer reviews, and outstanding academic career at the Vulcan Academy of Science, your application for entry into Star Fleet Academy has been overwhelmingly approved. Please respond at your earliest convenience. Sincerely, Admiral Brand.”

“What peer reviews?” Tammas asked. “You two didn’t?”

“Neither of us lifted a hand to assist you in this regard, as per your request,” Sarek said.

“You did this all on your own, Tammas,” Perrin said.

“But what peer reviews?” Tammas asked. “Who would have recommended me but you?”

“I suspect the staff at Vulcan STC put in a word or two,” McCoy said. “I can find out if you are that curious,”

Tammas slid from his chair to the floor to be closer to Sparky. “No,” Tammas said. Sparky licked his face. It finally dawned on him. He was leaving. But he couldn’t leave. Could he? Tammas hugged Sparky and began to silently cry. He didn’t care that tears were streaming down his face in front of witnesses. He began to sob. Perrin moved to the chair he had been sitting in and rubbed his back.

“Sparky can stay with us,” Sarek said.

“I know you will take good care of him,” Tammas said.

“You don’t have to leave if you don’t want,” Perrin said. “You can stay.”



Tammas stood. “No, I want to go. I need to go. It’s time I earned my own way.”  
“You’ve always earned your own way,” Sarek said. “And you are always welcome here.”

“When do we leave?” Tammas asked.

“As soon as you’re ready,” McCoy said. “The Hood is waiting to escort me, us, back to Earth.”



Tammas had ferreted out enough information from McCoy to learn that he had not just been at Vulcan to see him, but also to investigate the aftermath first hand. The NCC Hood was now taking McCoy back to Star Fleet for him to make his report in person. The whole point of the alien incursion, apparently, had been to kidnap some people. Only a dozen people were taken, all females, one of which was the grand daughter of T’Pau, who Tammas had met. No reason or ransom was given.

The fact that Tammas got to travel with McCoy should have been extra, but Tammas was wary about being seen with the “good doctor,” less a relationship be assumed, and his entrance to Star Fleet be marred with suspicion from his peers to be. He was ten light years away from Vulcan when he realized he had just stood Melinda up for the last time. He sent her an email, even though he expected not to hear from her again. Ever. Tammas had been given his own guest quarters and he expected it to be the last bit of luxury he would experience for a good while. The room was spacious and he could watch the stars streaming by. He wondered if they were actually stars, or just a visual effect caused by the warping of space time around the ship. Perhaps the warp field was like a bubble magnifying and twisting the star light into their full rainbow spectrum.

Tammas was so concerned about associating with McCoy on the way to Earth that he was reluctant to even have meals with him, fearing that potential reputation. But he was more afraid of not having meals with him. How does one behave around someone who is biologically your father but not responsible for your life? he wondered, and not for the first time in his life. McCoy was still “Pa Pa” Bones, a grandfather type figure, but in public, it was always Admiral McCoy. McCoy knew what was up, and returned the favor, “Doctor Garcia,” but with an obvious edge of humor that might lend a more observant person to imagine a stronger kinship, or friendship. Tammas tried to convince himself his worries were just that, and no one would ever suspect a kinship with McCoy unless he told them. Even a doctor doing a routine genetic scan wouldn’t see the relationship unless they were specifically looking for it and comparing samples and records in an effort to research genealogy. And even if they did, they wouldn’t believe what they found. Another Enterprise Child? He shuddered at the thought.

Tammas was having his last meal aboard the Hood, when Doctor McCoy came and sat down across from him.

“Nice to see you don’t have all your meals in your quarters, Doctor Garcia,” McCoy said. “I’d hate for some of those rumors about you to be proved true.”

“What rumors?” Tammas asked, seriously concerned.

McCoy chuckled.

“Are you playing with me?” Tammas asked.

“You’re going to need to lighten up,” McCoy said. “People are going to think you’re a Vulcan.”

“Well, I am, now, in many respects,” Tammas said.

“More like the laughing Vulcan,” McCoy said.

“Without a dog,” Tammás mused. Sparky was not a dog, but he fit the lyrics well enough to be a ‘dog,’ from a literary stand point. The fact that he missed Sparky was apparent to McCoy, but they both knew the sehlot would not do well coming to Earth, especially at its age. They were creatures of habit, and outside its familiar territory, it would be lost and its health would deteriorate. Tammás changed the subject. “I haven’t seen Commander Riker.”

“Riker?” McCoy asked. “Oh, yeah. I seem to recall that he was transferred to the Enterprise some time back.”

“I thought there was a Picard in charge of the Enterprise,” Tammás said.

“There is. Picard is the Captain, Riker is the First officer,” McCoy confirmed.

Tammás shook his head. “I thought if Riker was transferred, it would be to command his own ship. I guess I still have lots to learn about Fleet.”

“You’ll never completely figure it out. It has a life its own, or so it seems,” McCoy said. “And every now and then, the people that make up Fleet can do the most surprising things, even to the point of renewing your faith in the human spirit, and our purpose in the cosmos.”

“And what is that purpose?” Tammás asked.

“To seek out new life and new civilizations...” McCoy began, and Tammás finished the mission statement with him. “And boldly go where no one has gone before.”

“That is the greatest mission statement ever,” Tammás said.

“No,” McCoy said. “Never forget who you are, and don’t be a stranger while you’re on my planet. That’s a better mission statement for you.”

“I’ll visit you,” Tammás promised.

Admiral McCoy nodded and pushed himself away from the table. For the first time, Tammás noticed that McCoy was not getting around like he remembered. His movements were tired, requiring more effort. It reminded him of Sparky, and he was tempted to reach out and help McCoy. A thing McCoy would not approve of in the slightest. Tammás nearly broke down in tears, thinking, “God, I’ve been wasting so much time he could die any second and then I would never really get to know the real man behind the legends and rumors...” Tammás stood, and was about to rush over and hug him, and announce out loud his love for his father. Instead, McCoy was greeted by the Captain of the Hood.

“Your shuttle is ready, Admiral,” Captain DeSoto said. “It would be a privilege to pilot you down, Sir.”

“Let’s be on our way, then. I got a lot of work to do, and I’m not getting any younger,” McCoy said, he looked over to Tammás and winked at him.

“Legend has it you’ve been old before and got younger,” the Captain said.

“Yes, but I was much younger then,” McCoy laughed.

The door slid shut behind them.



“Welcome to Star Fleet Academy,” Tammás had expected. Something. A sign. A valet. Anything. Someone to meet him as he stepped out of the transporter alcove. At least give him a reward for using the transporter without having his arm twisted. But he got none of it. It took him thirty minutes just to find his way to where he should be to start the check in process.

Tammas pulled up the chair towards the administrator's desk. The administrator's name, according to the plaque, was Fielding, R. S., and he had gone out of his way to personalize his work space. Pictures of his children, one of him and his wife, and combinations there of, were strung out in a row. A small holographic projector cycled through an image of his daughter twirling, falling, laughing, and starting all over again. A grotesquely shaped coffee mug, like a melting lump of clay with an affixed handle sat prominently in reach. When he sat it down, Tam read the words scratched into it; "To Dad, Love, Cynthia." Fielding, R. S., even had an antique pen holder, with actual writing utensils in it, and a booklet of paper he was using for a scratch pad. He turned his oversize PADD slightly crooked, as if it were a piece of paper, and then used a stylus from his pen holder to open various pools of information by touching the screen, as if his fingers were too large for the delicate task. Tammas noted even the graphic display on Fielding's PADD was personalized, so that where new information appeared a faint ripple of light spread out to the corners of the display and bounced back to the origin, until it was all absorbed. It was a distraction that Tammas wouldn't have been able to keep in his work space and remain functioning.

"Tammas Garcia," Fielding R.S. read, not even bothering to take Tam's proffered I.D. It was all connected through wireless technology, but it was customary for an I.D. to be physically examined out of courtesy. (Of course, Tammas reasoned, Earth customs may not be the same as Vulcan customs, or even Betazed customs. Still, out of all the fiction he had read, most humans relied on a certain level of convention, so he was puzzled by Fielding's behavior.) "We're going to have to put you up at the Galaxy Hotel."

"Um, excuse me?" Tammas began to ask.

Fielding, R. S., looked up with a face that said he wasn't accustomed to being interrupted, and yet, at the same time, a face that looked quite bored. He blinked.

"I thought part of the experience of being a cadet was being in the dorm room, and maybe making a friend, and..." Tammas paused. He wasn't about to mention that he feared being put up at the hotel might single him out as being different, his celebrity status making him special.

"The dorms are full," Fielding, R.S. said. "And you're entering into the Academy Mid-term. Hell, I didn't even have a room for that Crusher kid when he arrived, and he has actual rank and experience. I had to accommodate him first. So, relax. I might be able to put you in a dorm with an actual room mate in about six months, if you're willing to broaden the species parameter with whom you can tolerate sharing living space."

"I'm willing to room with anyone, of any species," Tammas said.

"That hasn't been my experience with Vulcans," Fielding, R.S. answered.

"I'm not a Vulcan..." Tammas began, and then felt the need to back pedal when he saw the expression on Fielding's face. "Well, maybe a quarter Vulcan, but I don't subscribe to any special philosophy that would require me to be an isolationist."

Fielding, R.S. filled his cheeks with air and let it out slowly before beginning to speak again. "None the less, we'll be accommodating you at the Galaxy Hotel for the time being, unless you have relatives here in the Bay area you would prefer to stay with?"

Tammas considered. He would of course be welcomed to stay with McCoy, but if he did that, he feared it would definitely get out that he was related to one of the greatest living legends in Star Fleet and be treated differently than the other cadets. That was one

thing he needed to avoid at all cost. Life was tough enough being a genius, but add celebrity status, and then relations with legends on top of that, and life could be down right unbearable. He wanted no rumors or accusations of getting a free ride, his recent feelings of family and closeness to McCoy once again being squashed.

Fielding, R.S. grew tired of waiting for Tammias to respond to his question. “Look, I can get you in the dorm in six months. We have had an exceptional year at recruiting cadets and space is at a premium. We’re still trying to fill all the vacancies from the Borg incident, you know.”

“Yeah, and I suppose that parasite invasion thing didn’t help any,” Tammias mused out loud.

“What parasite invasion thing?” Fielding, R.S. asked.

“You know, the one with the little insect like creature that entered the mouth, and stuck its horn antennae out the back of the neck thing?” Tammias said.

Fielding, R.S. shuddered. “Oh, yeah. Wouldn’t worry about that. We have transporter bio-filters and scanners programmed to detect such things now. That won’t happen again.”

“Please, that can’t be completely true,” Tammias argued.

Fielding, R. S. leaned forward, putting his weight on his arms on his desk, pushing his coffee mug about two centimeters. “What do you mean by that?”

“Well, the bio-filters and scanners we use are only as perfect as the people using the equipment,” Tammias said. “Take the Trills for example. They’ve been in the Federation for nearly as long as the Vulcans have been around, and yet, it wasn’t until that incident with an Ambassador Odan, if I remember correctly, that the whole symbiotic relationship was revealed. It happened on the Enterprise, what a couple months ago? It still amazes me that it was so well played down and that there wasn’t instant hysteria in the streets. At the least, one would imagine a few darker conspiracy theories would have evolved out of that one, especially in light of that parasite that nearly took over the Federation. It certainly made for a great story. Fourth biggest download out of all my books, which suggest that I’m not the only one that saw a conspiracy, and yet our society just rolls right on as if nothing significant has happened.”

Fielding, R.S. blinked. “What are you talking about?”

“Never mind. Just attribute this to my over active imagination,” Tammias said.

“Right. Says here you’re a writer, among other things,” Fielding, R.S. said, rubbing the back of his neck.

Tammias wasn’t sure if the disgust on his face was due to him being a writer “among other things” or because the man’s neck itched. “Yeah. Mostly science fiction,” Tammias agreed.

Fielding R.S. smirked. “More like fantasy and magic crap. I took a look see before you came in, try and get a feel for you... Couldn’t abide it myself.”

“Today’s magic is tomorrow’s science fact. Imagine what our ancestors would think about transporter technology, even as little as three hundred years ago...” Tammias said.

“I try not to think of these things. It complicates life,” Fielding, R.S. said, scratching the back of his neck even harder. He rolled out a drawer to his desk, pulled out a worry stone, and began massaging it. “I transmitted your info to the hotel. You can check in at your convenience. And though I’ve e-mailed your schedule to you, none the

less, I am obligated to remind you not to miss orientation today at nine thirty, our time. Orientation is compulsory for all students entering the academy and visiting the campus. Please make sure you adjust your chronometer, or by whatever means you keep track of time, so that you're in step. I don't want to hear you started out on a bad foot, because I always get questioned as to whether or not I gave you all the information."

Tammias stood, as he could see Fielding, R.S. was obviously finished with him. As he turned to walk away, he called out to him.

"Oh. Just occurred to me," Fielding, R.S. said, putting some ointment on his fingers and massaging it into the back of his neck. "There's an alternative to the hotel if you're interested."

Tammias expressed interest nonverbally, raising an eyebrow.

Fielding, R.S. wiped his hands in a towel, tore off a sheet of paper and scribbled down an address that was just barely legible. "A group of students got together and purchased a home about ten years ago. It's got six private rooms, connected to a shared living area and kitchen. It's been passed down to other students as people have graduated and taken assignments. One of the occupants just got orders and is shipping out. The remaining five cadets are interviewing people. It might be worth a look see, given how opposed you are to the hotel. I personally would jump at the hotel, but then, there is no pleasing everyone."

♪♪▶

Orientation was awe inspiring, and as he listened to the speaker, and glanced around the room at his potential friends and fellow students, for just a moment he felt safe and warm. These were all beings with the same spirit of cooperation, to be a part of a team that was greater than the sum of its parts. His delusions were quickly dispelled when he realized that, once again, people are people, and no matter what part of the galaxy they came from there were always social games to be played. Rivals were being made and clicks were being formed even as they sat there sizing each other up, all born in a spirit of competition. It was like being on the play ground and the would-be captains were picking their team players while isolating those they imagined had weaknesses that would hold them back.

Tammias frowned. Even here, at Starfleet, he thought. Perhaps even more so, for this was competition at its best, Olympian style. People weren't just being evaluated for their potential weaknesses. That would have made the game too easy. Because everything was literally a game to be won, anyone that seemed to have an advantage was viewed as a threat. And Tammias generally fell into this latter category. If he went the way he had at the Vulcan Academy of Science, Tammias would adopt an aura of meekness, and avoid discussing any of his achievements, tending to underscore his own ability. If he did this here, especially with his emotions in check, he would be labeled a pure Vulcan by the end of the day, and no doubt treated like a pompous ass. There were some humans that would feel obligated to take him down a peg, and, casually looking around, he felt confident he already knew which ones he should avoid. He shook his head in dismay, mostly at himself for being so paranoid. He hadn't even got out of orientation and he believed people were preparing to kill him.

Tammias found his way to his next class, which was a temporal ethics course. The professor started class with a nice little story. He called it the greatest love story ever. It was about Edith Keeler and James T Kirk. When McCoy unwittingly disrupted the time

line, Kirk was forced to sacrifice the love of his life in order to put things right. Edith Keeler had to die in order for the Federation to come into existence. The professor embellished a great deal, but served it up well. Tammias wondered if the professor had been an actor in a previous career. The professor then asked the students to consider what they would have done if they were in Kirk's place.

And Tammias yawned. It was not a good thing to do, especially when one has the habit of sitting up front.

"So, what do you think?" the professor turned to him.

Tammias hesitated.

"Oh, come on, be honest," the professor said, rather encouraging.

"I think it was better the first time I read it," Tammias said.

"I don't understand," the professor said.

"The story you just told is called the Aeneid, written by Virgil on Earth between 70 and 19 BC," Tammias said. "In which, Queen Dido, way ahead of her time, must die in order for Rome to come into existence."

A hush fell across the room and the students to either side of Tammias became very uncomfortable.

"Are you saying I made this story up?" the professor said more than asked.

"I believe you exaggerated somewhat," Tammias said. "As most people do when telling the adventures of Kirk. The way some of the stories go, you might think he was a god."

A few murmurs became audible, but the professor raised his hands for quiet. "Now, folks, your peer is welcomed to his opinion," the professor said, a nice little country draw thing going on. "I did ask for honesty. And, it also shows how well read he is, because he isn't the first one to suggest this idea. But, please, go on, um," he looked at his PADD, and then said, "Doctor Garcia?"

"You suggest that Kirk had no options," Tammias said. "But I whole heartedly disagree. I think this is just another example of why people should not fly by the seat of their pants hoping for a bit of luck to change their circumstances, which, seems to be the one thing Kirk relied on more than anything else. Pure chance. You rarely hear anything about his most capable crew who were no doubt often having to save him and his career after putting all their lives in peril."

"And so, pray tell, what do you believe Kirk should have done in this particular instance?" the professor asked, again raising his hands for silence.

"Hell, he could have pulled Edith aside and explained the truth to her," Tammias said.

"And violate the prime directive?!" a classmate yelled.

"Technically, the prime directive doesn't apply to this," Tammias pointed out. "And it certainly wouldn't have applied in the 1930's on Earth, but assuming it did, the prime directive had already been violated when Edith Keeler's original fate had unwittingly changed. It wasn't necessary for Edith Keeler to die to correct that error. She was a reasonable human being, and 'well ahead of her time'" Tammias said with the teacher's Texas accent, "by all accounts. She might have been willing to sit back and watch her history unfold in full knowledge that a better time was coming. Of course, we will never know because she wasn't given that chance. Still, another option would have been to simply bring Edith Keeler back with Kirk, to her future, Kirk's present. This

way, as far as the 1930's are concerned, Edith Keeler is affectively dead, and poor James T Kirk, with his inability to find any ONE girlfriend, could have spent the rest of his days with the one he loved."

A bell rang dismissing class, but no one moved. The professor took a step back, applauding. "And there you have it. See you Wednesday." The professor packed his stuff up and departed quickly, obviously out of sorts. The professor's quick departure put Tammias in some peril. Several students took the opportunity to approach Tammias and in no uncertain words told him to keep his opinions to himself. As Tammias made an ungainly exit, he felt a hand touch his shoulder and he turned defensively. The guy that had been sitting next to him in ethics smiled.

"My name is Joshua Albert," he said, offering his hand.

"Garcia, Tammias," he said.

"I won't be sitting next to you in that class again," Joshua said. "But I did want to ask if we can be friends."

"Why?" Tammias asked.

"Why am I not sitting by you, or why do I want to be friends?" Joshua asked.

"Yes, to both," Tammias said, approving Joshua's humor.

"You dissed Kirk on the first day of class, which means you're really brave, or really foolish," Joshua said. "Either way, I admire that sort of courage."

"So, why don't you want to sit by me?" Tammias asked.

"I don't want to be anywhere near you when they start throwing stuff," Joshua said. "See you."

♪♪▶

To make it to the interview on time, Tammias had to use the transporter. (He was keeping count and he was now at eleven transports total for his life.) He arrived near the front porch of a relatively nice home, just as a person was exiting the door. The person looked familiar, but Tammias ignored him as he went quickly up the three front steps. Tammias knocked on the door, look around, and noticed that the kid he had just passed was staring back at him. Before either could say anything or exchange acknowledgements, the door opened, and Tammias refocused his energies. Whoever it was would just have to believe him to be rude, he thought. The person who answered the door was an Indian. An Indian of east India descent, Indian.

"Yes?" the girl at the door said. Her accent sounded more Caribbean than Indian from India, but he didn't follow the matter with a question. Her history would no doubt be revealed as they got to know each other.

"Hello. My name is Tammias Garcia and I was hoping I could be interviewed as a potential candidate for the spare room," Tammias said.

"Just in time," she said, opening the door wider. It was a real wooden door, with a door knob and a dead bolt lock. It even squeaked as she swung the door open to allow his entrance. "Come in."

The living area was spacious and offered comfortable seating arrangements for viewing media or simply having long conversations. The books on the coffee table suggested that the group here probably studied together. There was an exercise mat behind the couch where they probably practiced some of their martial arts, or perhaps one of the flat-mates practiced yoga. Beyond that, there was a sliding glass door that opened up to an airy patio, offering a great view of the San Francisco Bridge. A ship was passing

under the bridge as he took in the view, framed by the garden plants arranged about the patio.

The girl that had answered the door introduced herself. “My name is Indira Sookanan, but you can call me Trini. I’m in my second year, and I’m from Trinidad, Earth. This is Lenar, from Trill.”

Lenar stood and offered his hand. Tammas didn’t hesitate to shake hands with him, but he raised his personal shields to prevent any accidental meeting of the minds. He nearly blushed as he remembered his talk with Fielding, and the thoughts of conspiracy reemerged. Tammas expected the Trill’s hands to be cold, but he was almost caught off guard by just how cold. He imagined his warmth being drained from him and resisted the urge to pull his hand back in panic. It was just a shade warmer than dead.

“Just in case you’re wondering, I’m a First,” Lenar said, suggesting that this was the first taking of a host by this particular Trill symbiotic life form. Lenar was no doubt the new name for both of them together, for there was such a meshing of identities when a host and Trill came together that it was practically impossible to separate the two. Tammas had lots of questions for Lenar, but two people entered from the kitchen, one carrying a tray with beverages.

“Would you like some garlic tea?” asked the girl carrying the tray. She appeared to be human.

“Yes, please,” Tammas said.

“I’m Tatiana Kletsova, from Russia. And this is Afuhaamango Cotai, from Tonga. We just call him Afu, though,” she said, allowing him to take one of the coffee mugs.

Tatiana set the tray on the table, where Lenar and Trini helped themselves, while Afu shook his hand, before sitting on the couch. Tatiana also shook Tam’s hand before sitting. Tammas sat in the chair facing them, trying to appear relaxed. It wasn’t lost on them, though, that he seemed a bit uncomfortable. He sat at the edge of the chair, with a kind of perfect Vulcan posture that gave anyone with empathy back pains just to view it.

“So, are you part Vulcan?” Trini asked.

“Does it show?” Tammas asked.

Trini laughed. “A little. You said your name was Tammas Garcia, which suggest an Earth lineage, not Vulcan.”

“Can we access your profile?” Lenar asked.

“Sure,” Tammas said, holding up his I.D.

The four of them picked up their PADDs and started browsing over his files. “So, how did you find out about us?” Tatiana asked.

“A Mr. Fielding suggested I drop by,” Tammas said, feeling compelled to rub the back of his own neck. Damn empathy, he cursed. He sipped from his tea.

“Really,” Tatiana asked. “I’m surprised. He disapproved of the off campus living arrangements, even though the founding member’s charter and agreement with the Academy went over well.”

“You have to understand, our charter was only recently renewed, and only because all the cadets who have lived here graduated with honors,” Lenar said. “It’s our willingness to work together as a team that has set us apart, and so, we have high expectations of anyone who signs on board. That’s why the interview process is necessary.”



“You have three doctorates?” Trini asked, amazed. “Did you not have a childhood?”

“My doctorate in music really shouldn’t count, as music comes really easy to me. In fact, I would call it more of an OCD issue than even a hobby,” Tammias said. “The doctorate in sociology was also rather easy. It started out as an interest in pursuing a career in psychology, but after my first sociology course, I couldn’t get enough of it. The doctorate in alien veterinary science, well, that was just pure work. There were several times I nearly gave up pursuing that, but I wanted very much to become a Vet. I love animals.”

“But your application says you applied to Star Fleet to be a communications officer,” Tatiana said. “You’re over qualified to be a doctor slash psychiatrist. Isn’t this a waste of your talents?”

“I like communications,” Garcia said. “That is my passion. I like listening, and searching space/time for signals, and relaying information. I don’t want you to think that I don’t love helping people and animals as a Doctor. I do. It’s just that my capacity for empathy is so high that I’m a borderline telepath. Consequently, I can only tolerate working around patients short term before the stress starts taking a toll.”

The four of them nodded understanding as they continued to browse. “Anything you want to share with us?”

“Well,” Tammias started, but thought about it and then reconsidered. “I’m well traveled...” he faltered a little.

“Hold up,” Afu said. “It says here you were doing community service on Vulcan. It doesn’t say volunteer work. Don’t the Vulcans make a distinction between the two?”

“I was doing time,” Tammias said, straight up about that issue. “I was young, and in love, and, I... Well, it’s complicated. I sort of let a virus go in the Vulcan central net and...”

“Oh my god! You’re the moon virus guy. I remember reading about that on the IS-Net news. That was an incredible story,” Trini said. “I was still in high school when that happened.”

Tammias sighed. “It was a while ago. I did my time...”

“It says here fifteen years, but the moon virus thing happened...” Trini began, doing the math.

“I was released early for good behavior,” Garcia said.

“Fifteen years seems a bit harsh but for one virus,” Afu said.

“Well, it’s more complicated than that, but if you consider that Vulcans live longer, then the punishment seems to fit the crime,” Garcia went on.

“Says here you also launched yourself into space when you were seven years old,” Lenar said. “Could you explain that one?”

“That’s in my profile?” Tammias asked.

Lenar turned his PADD to show Tammias what was on his screen.

“I didn’t know that was in there,” Tammias said.

“Didn’t read your own profile?” Afu asked.

“I find reading about myself rather boring,” Tammias admitted, scrutinizing it. “Who put that in there?”

“You’re anything but boring,” Tatiana said.

“So, can you explain that one?” Lenar said.

Tammas slumped. "Finding myself boring, or how a seven year old child launches himself into low orbit?"

"Both. You're supposed to be good at story telling, according to this," Afu said. "Both your fiction and music have very high download counts over the IS-Net. In fact, your celebrity status could have some negative impacts on your progress here at the Academy."

"I like him," Tatiana said, matter of factly.

"It's not the point. We just turned down Wesley Crusher because of his celebrity status," Afu said.

"Wesley Crusher?" Tammas asked.

"Yeah. Why, you know him?" Lenar asked.

"Not really," Tammas said.

"You sound like you don't like him," Tatiana said.

"I haven't met him," Tammas admitted.

"You just passed him on the porch," Trini said.

"That was Wesley Crusher?" Tammas asked, amazed. "Um. I expected him to be much taller."

"Well, anyone who doesn't like Wesley Crusher is okay in my book," Lenar said.

"Now, I didn't say that I didn't like him," Tammas said.

"I agree," Afu said. "He's got my vote."

"Yeah, a little Wesley rivalry could give us just the edge we need in the war against Nova Squadron," Trini said. "He's got my vote."

"The war?" Tammas asked. "Now, wait just a minute. There's been a little misunderstanding here."

"You want to join us, or not?" Tatiana asked.

"Yes," Tammas said.

"Welcome aboard," they said in unison, and stood to shake his hand again.

"Come, we'll show you your room and the rest of the place."

Trini hugged his arm as she pulled him in the direction of the kitchen. "You're going to love it here. I'm just sure of it."

"Don't let her scare you," Afu said. "She's extremely affectionate with everyone. We even got her a cat thinking it would give her an object to lavish her attention on so we would be less bothered."

"Yeah," Lenar said. "Come to think of it, I haven't seen that cat in forever."

"It's still hiding," Afu said. "You'll meet our other room mate next week. He's out on a training cruise. We're sure he'll like you. He's got this practical joke thing going on, and he got Wesley Crusher good."

"Jell-O in the shower," Tatiana said. "Classic."

"I didn't say I hate Wesley Crusher," Tammas said.

"You didn't say you liked him, either," Lenar pointed out.

"I don't know him!" Tammas protested.

"It's really not Wesley you have to watch out for," Lenar said. "The ring leader is Cadet First Class, Nicholas Locarno. He's got it out for us."

"I'd be more than happy to talk to him, ask him to stop the practical jokes," Tammas offered.

His new roommates looked at him as if he were joking, and then started laughing. They noted the look of confusion on his face, and Afu explained: "Asking someone to stop making practical jokes is a sure fire way to escalate the attacks."

"But retaliating also only guarantees another round of attacks," Tammias said.

"You're more than welcome to give it a shot," Afu said, opening the patio door so they could go outside after inspecting the kitchen. Everything was pretty self explanatory. Replicator, sink, a small fridge, cabinets and drawers with an assortment of typical kitchen ware. "But don't be surprised if you become the next target."

Tatiana patted him on the back. "As you can see, this is the kitchen. This is my cup, my favorite cup, please don't use it..."

A cat entered the room and ran right up to Tammias, its tail in the air, brushing up against his legs. "And that's Ambassador Clemens," Afu said.

"I'm jealous," Trini said. "Clemmons never shows me that kind of affection. And I feed him!"



After a whirlwind of a day, Tammias Garcia fell exhausted to his bed. As a celebrated author and musician, the volume of emails he received was beyond ridiculously impossible for any one person to handle. So, 99 percent of it was answered by a computer program that he had created. There were common questions, the FAQs, that he had pre-arranged responses to, that the computer replied accordingly, and as he updated his daily journal, some of it was designated private, some family, some friends, and some public, and the computer dispensed the information accordingly. It was better than an auto-statement because it was in his writing style and in his voice, and very few would ever know the difference. The computer would identify letters that it thought he should review and answer personally, based on the parameters Tam had established in the protocols. Kids with issues, like children with illnesses, or any kid that mentioned suicide, went to the front of the list. The latter was rare, but occasionally someone reached out for help. Of some of the letters that made it past the filters, pen pal friendship were often established, but many of them, again due to his own limitations, would go on a list and everyone got the same letter, personalized to every individual. Everyone would hear about his first day at the academy, or hear the same funny story about how he was affectionately greeted by Ambassador Samuel Clemmons, a cat, but each thought it was to them. And out of those, there were a select few that got personal letters at least once a month.

As Garcia lay in bed, reviewing the inbound mail, he noticed a single letter made it through the filters, and only because of its brevity. It was addressed to the author of the "escape" series, and it was from Melinda. All it said was "Good Luck." He inwardly smiled, but didn't respond to the letter.

Still, that letter was enough to remind him that he felt terribly lonely and sad. He wondered how it was possible that a person with as many friends and family members, many of which were permanently attached to him via telepathic bonds, could feel so alone. Just up and leaving everything behind was not as easy as he had imagined. True, he didn't miss the material goods. Most of his possessions he had given to people, so he could "know" where they were. As for the rest of his possessions, they were all virtual and could be recreated at any holosuite. His biggest loss seemed to be Sparky, and he wondered if Sarek would be letting him sleep in his room beside his bed.

A letter arrived in his personal electronic cue, and he closed his eyes to see who it was from. His heart fluttered. It was from Persis. “Dear, Tammas. I hear that one of your dreams has come true. You made it to Star Fleet Academy. I wish you great success. I miss you and still remember the moon and stars. The stars are on my desk, even as I write.”

Tears began to flow and a lump filled his throat, but Tammas refused to give into a crying spell, thinking he was way too old to be giving into such emotions. A cat jumped up on the bed and came over to him. It was Ambassador Clemmons. It purred and pushed his face at Tam’s hand as if to entice him into petting him. Tammas petted the cat, noticed fur sticking to his hands from having wiped his tears. He left his room and went over to get a brush from the replicator so as to better collect the fur the cat was determined to shed on him and the bed. He passed Trini who was putting a jug of milk back into the replicator. Trini gave him a quick hug and said good night, as she headed to back to her room. Afu and Lenar were reading their PADDs in the living room, didn’t even look up. Garcia returned to his room and began grooming the cat. The cat flexed its front claws into his leg. Tammas brushed the cat until it got up and went to the end of the bed. As it cleaned itself, Tammas wrote a letter to Persis that he chose not to send. Ambassador Clemmons had curled up by his feet. Using his implant, he turned off the lights in his room and went to sleep.

♪♪▶

It wasn’t serendipity that Garcia found Locarno in the Recreation Hall. It was by design. He went directly up to the senior Cadet and asked him for a moment of his time.

“Sure,” Locarno said, introducing himself. “You’re Tammas Garcia, aren’t you. I saw a posting that you were just accepted into Sierra Squadron. They were short a team member.”

Garcia nodded, but it wasn’t what he wanted to discuss. He got right to the point. “I would like to negotiate a truce from the practical jokes.”

Locarno laughed. “Hey,” he said, waving his hands innocently. “We didn’t start the war. Lenar did. If you’re around him when the hit comes, well...”

“Can we negotiate?” Garcia asked.

“No,” Locarno said. He looked up to see his team pulling in around him. Joshua Albert to his right and Jean Hajar on his left, with Crusher and Jaxa Sito behind them. “It’s all in good fun. Oh, yeah, you’re from Vulcan. You don’t believe in fun.”

“If you are unwilling to negotiate, would you be willing to play for it?” Garcia asked, ignoring the jibe.

“Play for it?” Locarno asked, glancing back at Crusher. Crusher shook his head, ‘no.’ Hajar shrugged. “What are you getting at?”

“Right here, and right now, I will go head to head with you at any three games of your choosing,” Garcia said. “If I win all three games, no more practical jokes.”

“And if you loose?” Locarno asked.

“I am a licensed massage therapist,” Garcia said. “In addition to not protesting future practical jokes, I will consent to giving your team massages, once a week for a month, or at your convenience.”

“Deal,” Hajar said.

“Now, wait just a moment,” Locarno told her, and then leaned into the table. “I can choose the games?”

Garcia nodded affirmatively. Locarno read the faces of his team, and all but Crusher seemed willing to take the bet. Locarno stood, excused himself, and called his team into a huddle. “All right, Wes, what’s wrong?”

“He’s a prodigy,” Crusher said.

“So are you,” Locarno pointed out.

“When it comes to games, he never loses,” Crusher said.

“Neither do I,” Locarno boasted. “And I get to choose the games. And besides, what do we have to lose?”

“Better, what do we have to gain?!” Hajar said. “We have a lot of test this month, and quite frankly, the massages would help me relax.”

“Alright,” Crusher said. “I just thought you should know you’re walking into a set up.”

Locarno looked to each of his team, nodded, and returned to the bargaining table. “You’re on,” Locarno said, offering his hand shake. “Let’s start with a chess game.”

“Two dimensional or three dimensional?” Garcia asked.

“Regular old, boring, two dimensional chess,” Locarno said.

Garcia frowned. “Well,” he began.

“What?” Locarno laughed, looking to his people for support. “Backing out already? I want my chess game.”

“Oh, I agree to the chess game,” Garcia said. “I just wanted it to be a fair competition, so I was hoping you might allow me to change the odds a little bit.”

“What do you mean?” Locarno asked.

“In addition to you, I play nine other people. Simultaneously,” Garcia offered. “Tournament rules.”

Locarno’s laugh was a bit forced. “You’re joking, right?”

“Shall we begin?” Garcia asked. There were ten game stations in a row along the north wall that weren’t being used. Garcia accessed their gaming computers and called up the chess format and the boards and pieces materialized. “Pick your ten players, and you can all make the first move.”

Locarno made an announcement, asking for chess players. All of Nova squadron sat down to play, so he only needed five more players. There wasn’t a shortage of volunteers, either. Locarno’s announcement, however, stirred up a small audience that began to grow as the games commenced. Garcia didn’t sit down, but went from table to table, making moves. The fastest game was over in eight moves. Locarno was the third player eliminated from the line up. Jaxa would have been next but he coached her, and gave her a move back. Hajar wiped her brow, hopeful, but when Garcia returned and saw that she had moved, he moved one piece to finish her game.

“I was really looking forward to that massage,” Hajar wined.

“I still have two more rounds,” Locarno said, tapping the back of her head.

Crusher was the last one to lose, and the audience applauded and cheered. He discovered his roommate Tatiana suddenly behind him to congratulate him. Locarno sulked. “Alright, so you’re a good chess player. But how are you at stratagema?”

“I never lose,” Garcia said. “And I’m willing to take on another handicap.”

“Ten players?” Locarno asked, amazed.

“No, just you and me,” Garcia said. “But I’ll play with my eyes closed, relying only on the normal audio sounds that accompany the game.”

“I choose the blindfold?” Locarno asked.

“Sure, if you don’t trust me not to peek,” Garcia said.

“Jaxa?” Locarno said, as he sat back down at one of the game stations and called up the stratagema game.

“On it,” Jaxa said, going to retrieve an appropriate blind fold from the replicator. She returned to find Garcia sitting, and Tatiana helping him into the control glove and finger tips. Hajar was assisting Locarno with the same activity. “May I?” Jaxa asked, indicating the blind fold.

“I hardly know you,” Garcia jested, drawing a few laughs from the audience, and a playful slap from Tatiana.

Jaxa blushed, but took it in good humor. Garcia allowed her to blindfold him, and then told Locarno to start the game when he was ready. The game was over in thirty six seconds. Jaxa took the blind fold off, while Tatiana Kletsova assisted in removing the controls. Locarno was not pleased, but he was a good sport.

“I am impressed,” Locarno said.

“I never lose,” Garcia said. “Negotiate a truce, and I’ll throw the massages in for free.”

“No,” Locarno said. “I have a game you can’t win. It’s even called a no win scenario.”

“I’m listening,” Garcia said.

“Well, I’d hate to take advantage of you, you being new and all to the Academy,” Locarno said.

“Name the game,” Garcia said.

“It’s actually a simulation, and you’ll get class credit for it,” Locarno said.

“I’m still listening,” Garcia said.

“It’s called the Kobayashi Maru challenge,” Locarno said.

“No, Nick,” Kletsova said.

“It’s completely voluntary,” Locarno said quickly, raising his hands in innocence. “And if you sign up for Captain, you can even pick your own crew. Galaxy class ship.”

“Tam, don’t,” Kletsova tried to warn him.

“Why?” Garcia asked. “How can I fail if I can pick my own crew based on their talents, and study and prepare for the test in advance?”

“Tam, it’s a no win scenario. By definition, you can’t win,” Tam said.

“There’s no such thing as a no win scenario,” Garcia argued. “There’s always a solution to every problem.”

“So, Kobayashi Maru. Final round?” Locarno said.

“I’ll agree, if you’ll agree to a truce until then?” Garcia said.

“Agreed,” Locarno said, immediately putting his hand out. They shook on it.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

The temporal ethics professor, which Tammias had met on his first day, also taught a general ethics course, and his name was, Thalymum. And as usual, he always started his class off by using a specific example to illustrate his point. “In the last class we left off with an example of cultural contamination. Today we’re going to be examining just why it is so important to be careful. Take the Iotian culture. According to Spock, the Iotians adopted the gangster mentality because of their strong need to emulate what they perceive to be a superior race...”

“Actually, Spock was wrong...” Tammias said, compulsively.

Other than a few gasps, there was a stunned silence which grew into some rather rude comments from some of the more vocal students. By now, Tammias had a strong reputation for speaking his mind. “Would you keep quiet for once,” the cadet directly behind him said, kicking the back of his chair. That cadet was none other than Adam Martoni. He was known as a great computer hack, but he was not a social genius. Apparently he had recently reprogrammed Crusher’s sonic shower to spray mud. Because of that, Crusher had retaliated with chili sauce in lab class. Only, it wasn’t just Martoni that got sprayed. There were innocent victims, including Afu and Lenar, and they were plotting their retaliation, even though the truce was officially on.

“Oh, like it’s irreverent to suggest one of our most esteem patriots might be wrong?” Tammias asked.

“I didn’t come to hear you lecture, and you’re not going to come here with your holier than thou attitude and knock one of the greatest legends of all time,” Adam argued.

“Perhaps you shouldn’t put people on such a high pedestals that you can’t examine their work in a more scientific fashion...” Tammias argued.

“Gentlemen,” Thalymum interrupted. “The last time I checked, this was still my class. Cadet Garcia, if you have a point to make, make it quick.”

“With all due respect to Ambassador Spock, his forte was not Sociology. It clearly states in his report that he relied heavily on the sociological programs of the Enterprise’s computers. The computer programs to this day are still inferior at predicting to any degree of certainty how a specific cultural contaminant might manifest itself. It’s the proverbial butterfly theorem for weather prediction. A butterfly in South America can alter the weather in Japan by flapping or not flapping its wings.”

“Yeah, and if I ever find that butterfly, I’m going to kill it,” Thalymum said, getting a roar of laughter.

“None the less, the ramifications of this analogy leave you with a computer model programmed with all the variables of atmospheric motion that will crash when you introduce this one butterfly,” Tammias continued.

Thalymum interrupted. “Our computers are capable of doing this today.”

“Perhaps, but this is a much more complex problem than weather. We’re dealing with bio-psycho-social-cultural equation, so it’s not a question of the computers ability to run a model through to its natural conclusions,” Tammias returned. “It’s a matter of verifying you have all the variables. And in this case, we don’t have all the variables factored in.”

“You’re saying Spock failed to account for all the variables?” Thalymum asked.

“That’s what I am saying,” Tammias agreed. “The sociological computers could only operate with the information Spock programmed into it. The emulation of gangster

society was not a direct result of the book that was left behind, but rather it was a symptom of a larger problem that neither Spock nor Kirk addressed. Because they failed to address the main issue, they left the Iotians in an even more precarious situation than when the Enterprise found them.”

“Are you telling me that Kirk should have left them in their warring state?”  
Thalymum asked.

“No, but that would have been consistent with the prime directive’s intent,”  
Tammias said. “What I am saying is that the warring state that the Iotians created, modeled on the gangsters of old Earth, was their solution to a greater problem that the Hood created. This problem was not addressed, and, in fact, the solution that Kirk gave them should only exasperate their problem, which has several potential outcomes that I can see. The most serious and likely outcome will be a complete societal breakdown, total chaos to the point of a planet wide extinction level event for the Iotians.”

“Professor, Thalymum,” a student interrupted. “May we please get back to your lecture.”

“Just a moment,” Thalymum snapped. “What is it that you propose that Kirk and Spock missed on their visit?”

“Neither Spock nor Kirk ever answered the question as to why the Iotians, a peaceful, loving society, well documented by the Hood, adopted the murderous, greedy mentality of the gangster life so readily,” Tammias said.

“They did so,” Adam said. “Because they found a book on Gangsters!”

“Put yourself in their place. If you found a book on the Klingon Warrior code, are you simply going to adopt a warrior attitude and challenge every person that you want to subdue, even your friends and family, to a fight to the death?” Tammias asked.

“If I thought the Klingons were gods or a superior race I might,” he answered.

“Look, we all agree that the Iotians are brilliant people. They can emulate pretty much anything they examine,” Tammias said. “The gangster book was not the only book or technology the Hood left behind. We know the Hood left books on basic radio technology, and steam engine technology, even automotive technology. In addition, they left behind books on agricultural technology and basic medical technology. In effect, what the Hood did was increase the Iotians ability to produce food and prolong the lives of all the citizens on their planet. When people are fed and healthy, they live longer. This leads to a population explosion, an event that the Iotians had never faced before. The population grew faster than their ability to cope and manage resources and so they turned to the only source they had to find a solution. The Hood’s gangster book. That is when territorial wars became the way of life for the Iotians. Not because of the book, but because as a peaceful people, they had no clue how to deal with their sudden population explosion that led to a greater lack of resources than they had had before the Hood arrived. It’s all there in my thesis I submitted to Star Fleet with my application, recommending a return trip to verify their conditions and correct the solution that Kirk came up with, which basically supported the continued existence of a Gangster state, only now Star Fleet is the lead gangster.”

Thalymum sat back on the desk and put his hands on the table, as if bracing himself up. “I should have seen that,” he mumbled. “So, you believe Kirk’s solution gave them a more efficient system for managing their resources, but now that there are no wars or routine hits, the population will eventually begin to grow until they have, once



again, outstripped their resources, consequently returning them to the crisis that required them to adopt the gangster mentality in the first place?”

“That’s the only conclusion I can come up with,” Tammias said. “The simple fact is, the Iotians have a problem, and there is no telling what solution they will ultimately come up with. Their original state was a peaceful, loving society with a naturalistic philosophy that explained the biological pressures of nature and balance. The Hood showed them there was an alternative to a peaceful society. This worked so well for them, and for so long, that going back may be impossible. We’ve seen many examples of what societies will do when their population gets out of hand. And most of those choices were not people friendly. For example, the people of Gideon kidnapped Kirk to spread Vegan choriomenegitis, a disease the Gideon’s hope would kill enough people that there might be standing room.”

“Leave Kirk out of this,” Adam said, kicking Garcia’s chair.

“Please,” Tammias said. “It wasn’t like Kirk is completely innocent in that. The most common way for humans to contract Vegan choriomenegitis is through sexual relations with promiscuous Vegans. But I digress. Another race created a moral compulsion to commit suicide on reaching a socially designated age. And another had people stepping into disintegration chambers because a war simulation said their time was up. This is all about population control and resource management, not political and philosophical agendas adopted by societies gone bad.”

“Class dismissed,” Thalymum said. “Doctor Garcia, I want to see you in my office in twenty minutes.”



Tammias entered Thalymum’s office to find the Professor with company. Admiral McCoy was there, and he was having a heated argument with a Vulcan on a monitor. Tammias recognized the Vulcan right away as the Chief Vulcan of Star Fleet Recruiting, at the Star Fleet headquarters on Vulcan.

“That’s not the point,” McCoy said. “I can count a number of arguments Spock lost to me and no one suppressed my reports.”

“There was no suppression. Your tendency towards exaggeration is obviously getting the better of you,” the Vulcan observed.

“Why you green blooded, son of a…” McCoy started.

“Bones?” Tammias interrupted.

“You and I will be talking some more, later,” McCoy said. “Star Fleet out.”

“It is always an honor,” the Vulcan said, disengaging his screen.

“Oh, Tammias,” McCoy said. “This is Admiral Ventox and Captain Heller.”

“Admiral, Captain,” Tammias acknowledged.

Thalymum mumbled, “Absolutely brilliant!” He paid no mind to the two Admirals and the Captain.

“Am I in trouble?” Tammias asked.

“On, the contrary, Cadet,” Admiral Ventox said. “Apparently there has been some sort of misunderstanding. When you originally applied to Starfleet, you presented a mission query along with your sociological paper on the Iotians.”

“Yes,” Tammias said. “I was interested in returning to Iotia to observe how the culture has changed since Kirk’s visit. I am surprised to hear that you hadn’t read it, Professor Thalymum.”

“I never received it,” Thalymum said, putting the PADD down.

“Starfleet never received it,” Ventox added.

“I don’t understand,” Tammias said.

“One of several possibilities has played out. Either someone didn’t like your thesis, someone didn’t like you, maybe because of that stunt with the moons, or someone was trying to prevent Spock’s reputation from being tarnished by the publication of this paper,” McCoy said. “And so, your papers were conveniently misplaced and misdirected.”

“So, what you’re telling me is, had any of you read this, I would have been accepted into the academy the first time I applied?” Tammias asked.

“Maybe, maybe not. But someone would have taken this thesis and turned it into a Star Fleet research mission,” Professor Thalymum said.

“I don’t understand. Even if you didn’t get this, it’s not like it’s been a big secret. All my academic writings are available on the IS-Net, and even discussed within the circle of academia,” Tammias said.

“You have a reputation for many things, Doctor Garcia, but your academic standing, though impressive and diversified, isn’t high on everyone’s reading list,” Ventox said. “You do have a tendency to fly off on tangents and your narrative style reads a lot like fiction most of the time.”

“Well, maybe it should be more carefully scrutinized,” McCoy said.

“I’m sure if this paper were released right now, Garcia’s sudden notoriety will bring a wider scrutiny to all of the sociological work done over the last hundred years,” Ventox said. “This particular paper brings with it quite a bit of controversy. Starfleet will take a lot of heat if it goes out.”

“Perhaps that is the real reason it was suppressed?” Tammias asked.

“Of course not,” Ventox snapped, angered by even the suggestion.

“Rad Ventox,” McCoy said, a harsh quality rising in his country accent. “Though there is a precedent for Vulcans withholding information, I find it hard to believe Starfleet didn’t have an influence on this paper being over looked.”

“I refuse to believe there was a conspiracy here,” Ventox said. “None the less, as soon as you have mission objectives fully out lined, I’ll be ready to send Captain Heller and a sociological team in to investigate.”

“I’m going on an away mission?” Tammias asked.

“No,” Thalymum said. “You’re staying right here to finish your training. However, I expect you to serve on the committee overseeing the development of this mission. I expect to take about a week to get everything in, Captain Heller. Your ship should be finished with its scheduled maintenance by then, yes?”

“Absolutely,” Captain Heller said.

“Great, then I guess that’s all for now,” Thalymum said.

Ventox and Heller departed, and McCoy and Thalymum turned to Tammias. “Now, Doctor Garcia, we want to talk to you about your classroom behavior. It isn’t necessary or even appropriate for you to come on so strong in class,” Thalymum said.

“So I am in trouble?” Tammias asked.

“No. We just want to help you get through the Academy with the least amount of pain and frustration,” Doctor McCoy said. “And one way to do that is not to step on people’s toes when it comes to hero worship. Let sleeping legends lie, so to speak.”

“Pa Pa, even you don’t allow people to treat you in a legendary capacity,” Tammas complained. “You go out of your way to discourage that line of thinking.”

Thalymum eyes went up at Tam’s use of “Pa Pa,” but he didn’t comment on it. Perhaps because of the look McCoy gave the man.

“True enough,” McCoy said. “But I am older than you are and consequently permitted a little hypocrisy from time to time. When you get to my age, you’ll understand.”

Tammas sighed. “I hate it when people say, when you’re older you’ll understand. I think that’s just a lame excuse for adults who have an inability to bring clarity to a situation.”

McCoy gave Tammas a look that cowed him back into line.

Tammas sighed. “I’ll endeavor to be a little less adversarial in class. Still, I thought that the purpose of class was to engage in thought evoking conversations, not merely regurgitate lectures. You know, the Socratic method.”

“If you remember your history correctly, Socrates was killed for his beliefs,” Thalymum pointed out.

“Point well taken,” Tammas said.

“Dismissed, Cadet,” Thalymum said. “We’ll email you the committee start time and location. Oh, and Garcia?”

Tammas turned around.

“I teach Tai Chi on Tuesday evenings. I want you to take over for me while you’re at the academy. Starting tonight,” Thalymum said.

“Uh?” Tammas asked, but he could see there wasn’t going to be any negotiations about this one, and pretending he hadn’t heard correctly was a ploy that wasn’t going to work for him.

♪♪▶

Tammas arrived to the gym prior to class time and began going through his personalized Tai Chi routine, focusing on calming his nerves. Why Thalymum had chosen him to do this was beyond him. Perhaps single him out? No, he had already done a good job of alienating himself in his classes, he thought. Why couldn’t he just learn to be silent? He asked himself. As he practiced his exercise, he flashed back to his first Tai Chi lesson. He remembered it as if it were yesterday:

Deanna Troi was crossing things off a list. “Oh, tonight’s my Tai Chi class. Would you like to go?”

Tammas shrugged.

“I can’t hear a shrug,” Deanna said.

He frowned and said, “I don’t know.”

“Well, today’s class starts with a lecture question portion, so it would be a good first class for you,” Deanna said. “Come on. I’ll let Xerx know we’ll be late getting you home. We’ll even go get ice cream afterwards.”

“Chocolate?” Tammas asked, his enthusiasm level going up at the thought of ice cream.

“Absolutely,” Deanna agreed. She parked the hovercraft, deposited her gum into the tin-foil wrapper it had come out of, and placed it in the cup holder. She didn’t notice Tammas pocketing the gum as she got out of the vehicle.

The class was as informal a class structure as informal can get and still be called a class. A group of people were sitting Indian style on an ultra-soft floor, generally reserved for practicing gymnasts. Tammas liked the way the floor gave under his feet, and imagined how much more fun it might be to do cartwheels and do back flips here as opposed to on a hard ground. Perhaps the cushioning effect actually added to ones height as they jumped, he imagined. Instead of experimenting, however, he dutifully followed Deanna to the front of the class where she sat. This was when Tammas noticed that there was more structure than he had imagined at first. Deanna was a relatively new student herself, and so she sat in the front, as opposed to those with colored belts who sat to either side of the instructor. The instructor was having a quiet little chat with an advanced student.

Tammas sat down next to Deanna, imitating her style of sitting. He asked Deanna a question, but when she didn't respond, he realized once again he had slipped into a telepathic mode. He leaned over and whispered his question to her. Unfortunately, he had not quite mastered whispering, and Deanna suppressed a wince when he asked her: "Is that guy blind. How can he teach a martial arts class if he's blind?"

"I may be blind, but I'm not deaf," the man answered.

"I'm sorry, Sensei," Deanna began.

"A Betazoid sorry?" he asked, as if shocked. "Don't worry, Ms. Troi. The only people brave enough to call attention to an individual's personal traits are children and Betazoids, and I'm not ashamed of who I am."

"Can't they fix that?" Tammas asked.

A few of the humans in the class seemed a bit uncomfortable with Tam's directness and they shifted about in place. The Betazoids simply looked to Sensei and waited for his answer.

"And loose my special insight?" The instructor asked. "I've been blind since birth, and I've become attached to the way I see the world. What would be my incentive to change now?"

"Because you're missing a huge portion of information to process," Tammas pointed out.

"Am I?" he asked. "Can you smell the difference between a Betazoid and a human? Can you smell the difference between specific individuals of humans within a human population? Can you tell me what each person here has eaten for lunch today just by their smell alone?"

"I've never thought about it," Tammas said. "I can smell the difference between a Vulcan and a Human. I can identify a Klingon from twenty meters away with or without air circulation. And Catians have a particular odor. Have you ever smelled a Catian?"

"Yes," the instructor said, smiling. "What is your name?"

"Tammas."

"Tammas. Welcome to my class. I am Depak," he said. "From Vulcan."

"I thought you were Sensei," Tammas said. "And you're not a Vulcan."

"Sensei is my title, which you will use while attending my class. And no, I am not a Vulcan, biologically speaking, but I was born there," Sensei said. "I think we'll skip my usual lecture today and instead have an open discussion. Are there any specific questions someone would like answered?"

"Why do people learn this?" Tammas spoke right up.

“For different reasons. Some learn it for defense. Mostly, the students who learn from me come to learn a new sense of peace and well being. They do it for health, and for the health of those around them.”

“Health of those around them? I don’t understand,” Tammias said.

Sensei Depak nodded. “Who you are affects everyone you encounter in life. If you are a chaotic person, then chaos will follow you. Like a magnet, you will attract people who are chaotic. If you are peaceful, then the people around you will be at peace. Why do you suppose when you encounter a wild animal, or an unfamiliar dog, and you are fearful, the animal will attack you?”

“Perhaps the animal sees your fear as a sign of weakness which it can take advantage of,” Tammias offered.

Sensei nodded. “That is certainly one view. My view, though, is that the animal is afraid because you are afraid, and it is merely lashing out because it can’t reason through the fear. If you were not afraid, but at peace, the animal would remain peaceful, for there is no available threat.”

“So, I just have to look calm? Pretend? This is what you teach?” Tammias said.

“No, I teach you must be calm. Calm to the core. Not pretend,” the Sensei said. “We are not separate entities, individuals making up a society. We are one, society itself is the individual. And we are not static, but we are fluid. We are continuously evolving, both mentally and physically. Static is death. Fluidity is life. Just as you can not step into the same river twice, neither can you be in the same body twice, for it is constantly renewing itself, replacing old atoms with new atoms, old molecules with new molecules, though, in reality, there are no old, or new atoms, for they all come from the same source from the same time from the same energy.”

Depak paused a moment for that to sink in and then continued. “We see examples of this in our lives. If you are female and live in a dorm with other females, all will cycle at the same time. Even at home, the females will tend to have their monthly cycles at the same time. One female tends to be the dominate one, who sets the biological clock of the others,” the Sensei said. “This being true, it follows then that if we are peaceful, others will become peaceful around us. For when we are peaceful, our bodies are peaceful, and the hormones and chemical messengers flowing through our bodies reinforce that peace, and then, as we breathe it out, releasing it into the air, it literally fills the air with peaceful molecules. Those around us breathe in peace, and their bodies respond to that biochemical message, as well as the psychic message of peace. If we are dominate, not easily moved by the emotions of others, then that peace resides. This is why if you visit a temple where people have meditated you will feel an over-powering sense of peace. Acceptance and belief is irrelevant. We, the peaceful, will have a calming affect on all people who share our airspace, if only we are truly calm.”

“Is this a religion?” Tammias asked.

“What do you think?” Sensei asked.

“I think it’s a load of crap,” Tammias said.

Deanna rolled her eyes.

“It is a philosophy,” Sensei said, trying not to laugh. “A belief system based on empirical evidence.”

“But you could be wrong?” Tammias asked.

“Of course,” Sensei said. “I base my philosophy on my experience and how I perceive the world. The empirical evidence I have gathered is first hand experience. Though I am quite capable of fighting, I have never had to defend myself because no one person can remain fearful in my presence. No one can remain hateful in my presence. I am superior to my environment in that I can reason and remain calm with presence of mind, and that mindfulness is shared with anyone who chooses it. Those that can not abide peace will leave my presence, because that is their only way to escape. They are compelled to return to the only thing they understand.”

“But once they have a taste of peace, will they come back?” Deanna asked.

“It is my belief, once you have experienced goodness, you will seek out goodness. That does not mean it will be easy. If it takes more than two years to replace every atom in your body, then you must realize it takes time to break old habits, to build healthy relationships. But know this, as you evolve, so will those around you. They will either change, or they will flee, because chaos can not abide peace.”

Tammas was so absorbed in the Sensei’s discussion that he hadn’t noticed his eyes were shedding tears. Still, part of him wanted to resist this theory. “You say that we are fluid. That we are always changing and static means death,” Tammas said.

“Yes,” the Sensei said. He could smell the extra moisture in the air, taste the saltiness of it, but deeper, he could taste the longing, the hope, and the sincere need for peace coming from Tam’s direction.

“Then, if you were to teach me peace now, would I later return to chaos because things must change?” Tammas asked.

The Sensei laughed. “Very good question. Even the best of us are subject to the cycles of life, and there will be times when there is chaos in our lives, times when we feel strong feelings, when we feel vulnerable and out of control. That is why peace must be practiced daily, so in the times when feelings are strong, and life seems unbearable, we will have habits and routine that can give us clarity. This gives us the ability to weather a storm. Yes, there are cycles in life, but I will teach you how to come home to a more healthy way of being. Peace is not easy. It requires dedication, discipline, resolve, perseverance, and constant practice. I can not teach you who you are, but I can show you who you can be, give you the steps, and then show you the way. The journey is your choice. Taking the steps, walking the path, that is your job. The Way is a choice.”

Tammas had completed three stages of his routine, “walking the path,” before becoming aware that he had gathered an audience. Leaving the past, and his days spent with Deanna behind, he returned from his slow, methodic dance, bowed to the Sensai in his memory, and then turned to the class.

“I’m filling in for Thalymum today,” Tammas said. “And probably, for the rest of my stay at the Academy. According to the class roster, many of you are new comers to Tai Chi, so I figured I would begin with questions and answers.”

“Yeah, why do we have to learn this crap?” one of the cadets said.

Tammas blinked. Was he generating chaos or peace? Remain calm. “I believe you have other choices available, Denton, isn’t it? Second period Warp Core technology?”

“Yes,” Denton said. “And yes, I have options, but this fits my schedule, and if what you were doing just now is an acceptable form of martial arts, then I’m a monkey’s uncle.”

A couple of his friends snickered and Tammas observed an obvious rift in class beginning. A colored belt was about to respond to Denton and his friends, but Tammas motioned him to silence. Tammas knew it was his job to unite them and he had to get this under control fast.

“You know other forms of martial arts, I take it,” Tammas said.

“Yes. This Tai Chi is for geriatrics,” Denton said.

“I propose to you, that if you can master Tai Chi, you’ll never have to rely on any other techniques again, because you won’t have to fight,” Tammas said. “I believe Thalymum recommends this not only for self defense, but also because it can offer you a sense of peace as well as physical fitness. It also travels well, for it can be done in confined spaces, such as on a starship.”

“You’re a master at this?” Denton asked.

Tammas shrugged.

“Tell you what,” Denton said. “If I take you, you pass me without me having to show up to this class.”

“And if you fail?” Tammas asked. “What will you give me?”

He laughed. “I won’t fail.”

Tammas motioned the colored belts to stand back, noticing one happened to be Wesley Crusher. He wondered if Deanna had taught him any technique.

Crusher shook his head and whispered to Joshua: “There’s one in every new class.”

Denton motioned for Tammas to bring it on. Tammas smiled. “If you wait for me to attack you, you’ve already lost, and I will state my terms...”

Denton charged and ended up flat on his back, leaving Tammas seemingly untouched or unfazed. Tammas quoted out loud, in Mandarin, something to the effect of, “A tree breaks in the strong wind, where as the grass bends with it and stands again.” He offered Denton a hand to help him up. As Denton stood, he jerked on Tam’s arm trying to pull Tammas off his feet. Tammas went with it, falling, rolling, and coming back up. Since Tammas hadn’t let go of Denton’s hand, Denton fell with him, only to be thrown a little further away. Tammas didn’t offer to help him up a second time.

“Are you satisfied?” Tammas asked.

Denton got up, not dazed, but a little weary. He attacked, but he took his time planning, circling, and looking for a weakness. Not finding an obvious Achilles’ heel, he lunged to make an opening and then swung a left hook. Tammas defended it easily, trapping Denton’s arms while leaving his fist just a centimeter away from Denton’s face. Tammas smiled at him, extended a finger, and touched Denton’s nose.

“That’s not Tai Chi,” Denton said.

“It’s all one,” Tammas said. “Like playing the piano, you have a practice speed, and a performance speed. What you saw as you entered class was practice speed.”

Tammas disengaged and Denton came at him. Again and again the attack ended up with Denton in a joint lock, completely at Tam’s mercy. It was obvious to everyone, even Denton; Tammas was just playing with him, mocking him in front of the class. Denton’s face turned red, with anger as well as exertion, and his breath became more exaggerated as he gave it his all.

“As you can see,” Tammas said, not even winded, but continuing to block, and roll. “Because all of my moves are passive deflections, the opponent will eventually tire

himself out. I do not have to exert any force to hurt the opponent. I can, however, use his own energy and momentum to cause him injuries. The greater the force he uses, the greater his potential damage.” With this last bit, Tammas actually deflected a punch, and demonstrated how the opponent’s own energy could be used against him. Tam’s counter punch to the face was sprung off Denton’s own punch, a perfect “pak sau” move which trapped Denton’s hands in two moves, because he didn’t know the defense. Denton sat down hard on the floor, quite stunned by the force of the “tap” on his head.

“I believe this demonstrates the effectiveness of Tai Chi, if appropriately applied,” Tammas said.

Denton motioned to his friends and two of them came to his rescue. After all, there were no teachers here, right? Just fellow students. Tammas hadn’t been looking at the attacking students, but he deflected them as if the attack had been rehearsed. They weren’t quite sure how he got away, comparing it later to trying to catch a greased pig, but as they reoriented on Tammas, Denton decided to join in again. Two other students decided to participate, adding to the circle surrounding Tammas.

“This isn’t fair, Denton,” Crusher said.

“Denton, if you and your posse concede now, no one gets hurt,” Tammas said.

“You’re about to get hurt,” Denton smiled. “I don’t know who made you our teacher, but you’ve spoken out of turn one too many times in class, and now it’s your turn to be schooled.”

“Denton!” Crusher said.

“You stay out of this, Crusher, or I’ll be teaching you next,” Denton said.

“I’m letting you know now, based on your performance so far, I will not be injured, and one of you will be seriously hurt,” Tammas said. “This is your last opportunity to stand down.”

Crusher took a defensive pose and Joshua followed suit. The rest of the colored belts also showed their readiness to get involved. Tammas again motioned them to stand down.

“Colored belts, at ease. No one helps me,” Tammas said. “Is there anyone else who wants to join Denton’s posse? This will be your only chance to take a swing at me.”

At that challenge, four more stepped in, including Adam Martoni, and one of the color belts. The colored belt was Mathew Steward.

“Mat!” Crusher called Mat.

“I’m just curious,” Mat said. “No hard feeling, Garcia?”

“I’ll endeavor not to hurt you,” Tammas answered.

The circle of students, eleven in all, closed in on Tammas, suddenly, and viciously. When it was all over, Tammas was standing and the rest were on the floor. Two were out cold, thanks to the Vulcan nerve pinch. Denton was in tears, due to a compound fracture to his leg. Another had a dislocated shoulder. Another had a broken arm. Adam was lying on his side, thanks to a groin kick, and was beginning to vomit. Mat was sitting on the floor holding one arm, unable to move it, unsure if it was broken or not. Tammas walked over to his back pack and retrieved his communicator.

“Medical emergency, gymnastic building, room 22-A,” Tammas said.

Tammas then walked back to Mat, touched a pressure point, and Mat could then move his arm. He shook his hand out, a little inspired and a little scared.

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Thalymum bailed Tammias out of the detention center. As they were taking the lift down to the lobby, Thalymum shook his head. "I said teach them, not beat them."

"I believed I taught them a very valuable lesson," Tammias said. "And I did present them an out."

"I heard," Thalymum said, pushing a button to hold the lift. "Damn it, you're too smart for this. Being a Starfleet Officer isn't about being right all the time. And beating the crap out of everyone who opposes you is unacceptable behavior. You had a learning opportunity here and you blew it."

"You would have preferred I took a beating?" Tammias asked.

"Garcia, you're not listening to me," Thalymum said, using exaggerated hand gestures. "There shouldn't have been a fight at all. You were put in a leadership position to practice being a leader. You realize the only reason you aren't being booted out right now is because everyone involved in this incident is sticking to the story that it was just a sparring match gone bad? This reflects poorly on your record, and I don't want to see you wash out because you can't play nice with others."

"They started it," Tammias insisted.

"Did you like miss this entire phase of your childhood?" Thalymum asked, pushing the button to resume the lift. "This is not the time and place for these sorts of Shenanigans. Grow up, act your age, because one day your luck is going to run out, and you're not going to have someone to pick up the pieces for you."

"What do you mean by that?" Tammias said.

"It means exactly what it sounds like it means," Thalymum said, stepping out of the lift as the doors opened. "Good night, Garcia. You're free to go."

Tammias caught the tram to Bay Station and walked home from there. He pondered over what it means to "act one's age." What is age? There was always a disparity between physical age and mental age, even emotional age could be different, and he felt as if he were older, more mature, than any of his peers. His new clan was waiting up to hear all the details, first hand, since rumor had already given them second and third hand perspectives on the matter. The only exception to the rule that there was nothing faster than light was rumors on a starship, with rumors at the Academy falling just behind that. Tammias obliged them all with his rendition, and they discussed what they would have done, and what they thought a "Star Fleet Officer" would have done.

"I think you handled it the Klingon way," Tatiana said.

"You know, when I went through the Academy before," Lenar began, pausing with his own musings.

"You've gone through this before?" Tammias asked, interrupting.

"Yes and no," Lenar said. "I haven't, but this host body has."

"I thought you said you were a first," Tammias said.

"I am a first, from the perspective of the symbiont," Lenar said. "Sorry, I see the confusion. The host body survived a shuttle accident, but the symbiont died. This is my first host body. They count First from the Trill's perspective, not the hosts."

"I wish I could start over so easy," Tammias said.

Lenar nodded, as if he understood. "It's not all it's cracked up to be. Because the symbiont and I share memories, much of my original memories and experiences were lost when my previous symbiont died. What's left are fragmented and disjointed. That's why it was compulsory for me to go through the Academy training program again. If it

weren't for my symbiont, I probably would have died of loneliness. A host that loses the symbiont is rarely chosen to be a host a second time. I was lucky."

"It sounds complicated," Tammias said. Just following which perspective Lenar was just now using was hard to track. It seemed obvious that there was the host perspective and the Trill's perspective mixed in Lenar's explanation.

"It can be," Lenar said. "Speaking for the host, I am grateful to be useful, to be called again. Anyway, there was this cadet who liked to fight. I think his last name was, Crowe. Yes, that's it. R. Crowe. Heavy Australian accent..."

"I remember him," Afu said, rubbing his jaw.

"Anyway, he'd fight at the drop of a hat," Lenar said.

"I don't see the connection with Tam's situation," Trini said. "These guys had it coming."

"There are better ways for getting respect than fighting," Tatiana said.

"What was your point, Lenar?" Afu asked.

"I don't know. I just remembered this Russ guy fighting all the time," Lenar said.

"Well, never mind. Just try not to beat up anyone else for awhile. It'll blow over."

"You're very helpful," Tatiana said.

Lenar smiled. "Thank you."

"Tam," Afu said, drinking his garlic tea. "Do you think you can teach me that pressure point move you used on Mat?"

"Sure," Tammias said.

"But then he'll have to kill you," Tatiana said.

Trini laughed, spitting tea out her nose. She reached for a napkin. Everyone else laughed at the tea through the nose thing. Ambassador Clemmons jumped up in the chair with Tammias and sat next to him, resting his front paws on Tam's thigh. Trini shook her head in mock disgust, jealous for the cat's loyalty. "Turn coat," she called him.

"What is it with you and animals?" Tatiana asked. She frowned at Tam's shrug.

"I wish I had that power with animals," Trini said.

"I wish I had that power with women," Afu said.

"Me, too," Tammias said.

Trini laughed. Tatiana shook her head, sighing. "You men are all alike. It doesn't matter what species."

"That's not true," Lenar argued. He and Tatiana went at it again.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Tammas picked up his tray of food and wandered into the cafeteria, looking for someone to sit with. He spotted her almost immediately, which wasn't hard since she had the table all to herself. She was in his warp physics class and she was by far the smartest person he had seen when it came to warp physics. That wasn't including Wesley Crusher, of course, but since Crusher's grade was so far above everyone else's that the cadets tended not to mention Crusher's ranking when they discussed scores. Yes, she was clearly the top in warp physics. Of course, he was biased. He easily identified with her because she was of mixed species, and she seemed to have equal trouble relating to others. He imagined that she felt lonely, sitting by herself, very much the way he had felt at the Vulcan Academy of Science. So he decided to change that.

Cadet Torres was eating and reading over a PADD, when Tammas made his camp site across from her. He sat down directly in front of her as if there were no other seats available in the cafeteria. He pretended not to have noticed her and started on his lunch rituals. He opened an alcohol wipe and cleaned his hands.

"I thought you were supposed to be this social genius?" Torres asked.

"I'm a sociologist, not a genius," Tammas offered.

Torres leaned a little closer. "Then let me spell it out for you. I don't want you sitting by me. I don't want you talking to me, looking at me, or in any other manner interacting with me or even appearing to be interacting with me. Got it?" Torres asked, her voice loud enough to be heard by half the cafeteria. "If you continue in this fashion, I will lodge an official harassment complaint against you."

Tammas could see that she was very serious and began to believe this went beyond what he imagined to be her normal reclusive tendencies. Her reaction to his simply sitting across from her seemed over the top, at least to him, but then, perhaps he was just being obtuse. Or, perhaps she was just being Klingon. If the latter were the case, he would know for sure she liked him the moment she started throwing things at him. At any rate, he understood her not wanting to be social in class, but here, in the cafeteria? He decided to risk further insult by pressing for details.

"Before I depart, never to bother you again," Tammas hedged, "Is there something specific I did to offend you that I can correct?"

"Other than merely being?" Torres asked.

Ouch, Tammas thought. He would rather she had simply dropped kicked him into the next room. He felt a bit warm and imagined there were a few smirks on the faces he knew must be observing him. Shields up, he thought. Red alert. Perhaps she just couldn't afford being friends with him. After all, they were both social outcasts, so to speak, and being in league with him might be too much for her to handle. "I see. Well, I guess there are some things beyond our control," he said, pivoting on the bench to make a hasty retreat.

"Like writing 'The Other Klingons,' was out of your control," Torres mumbled.

"Oh," Tammas said, his intrigue rising to a new level. He had been all set to go, but now, he turned back. "You read that?"

"My mother, full Klingon, made me read that," Torres said.

"Good for her," Tammas said. "Reading is fundamental."

Torres glowered at him.

"It was fiction," Tammas said.

“My understanding is, the only reason you published it as historical fiction was because the academic world wouldn’t touch your research with a three meter pole, with rubber gloves on,” Torres said.

“The research material was considered too controversial to be published by academia, yes,” Tammias agreed. “But just because I avoided being politically correct doesn’t mean that the facts in the book were wrong.”

“Besides nearly toppling the existing Klingon government, you nearly started another Earth Klingon conflict, and you still believe it was all about not being politically correct?” Torres demanded.

“There are still a few Klingons that have knives with my name on it,” Tammias agreed, musing aloud. “Are you one?”

“If I practiced that line of honor, you would be dead,” Torres said.

Tammias nodded, distancing himself further from his emotions. “If the Klingon Empire, or what’s left of it, is so volatile and fragile that examining its own history brings about its own demise, then maybe its time to bury it. I will not bury truths because they are too difficult for people to examine in full light.”

“Truths? How about opinions?” Torres said.

The premise of “The Other Klingons,” dealt with the disparity between the two types of Klingons. There were the biological Klingons, who were easily recognized by any who encountered them, whether it was by smell, or their large size, or their unmistakable ridges that lined their foreheads, framed often in braided hair. They wore armor, and brandished weapons, spoke loud, and carried on in what might appeared to be uncivilized behavior by any who were not apt at seeing through the illusion to the harsh social structure which governed every aspect of their lives. They were no less civilized than the Norsicans, a race that went out of its way to adopt everything the Klingon culture had to offer. The Norsicans had been sucking up to the Klingons ever since the Klingon Empire established a colony on the Norsican world. Of course, the Norsicans would have had no chance assimilating into the human culture as easy as it did with the Klingons, simply because their appearance didn’t garner any human sympathy. It’s easy to adore and want to protect and adopt a cute little furry critter, but not so easy when that cute furry critter has breath that could skin a cat, and fangs reminiscent of the monster that every human child carried in nightmares.

The Others were a humanoid race, almost indistinguishable from Humans, appearance wise. Some suspected that they were humans, perhaps brought to the planet that the Klingons discovered and conquered, by a race called the Preservers. At any rate, when they were confronted by the Klingon and the Norsican race, they had a choice, they could perish, or they could mirror the ruthlessness they saw in their conquerors. With these two, fierce looking races hovering over them it was no wonder that the Others went out of their way to be cruel. The Others wore the black and gray uniforms of those that were impressed into duty by their Klingon conquerors, which meant they were little more than slaves. They were a people who wanted only to please their masters and find a way to prove that they deserved some autonomy and equality within the Klingon government. To make up for being seen as “weak humans” by the Klingons, the Others had to be twice as fierce, twice as strong, and totally unreasonable and irrational, from a human standpoint. And there were a number of times where they might have tilted the balance in the Klingon’s favor had the Enterprise and her crew not been there to stop them.

“The Other Klingons was not based solely on opinions. They were a race of humanoids driven to ruthless behavior simply to impress their Klingon captors. They tried proving that they were worthy of joining the Empire, and being called Klingon, through terrorist acts,” Tammias said.

“They were Klingons, just genetically altered,” Torres said.

“Where did you get that information?” Tammias asked. Not that it changed his hypothesis any, since the regular looking Klingons didn’t accept the Other Klingons based on their human appearance. The Others still would have needed to overcompensate for their minority perspective. “What are your sources?”

“Please, everyone knows it,” Torres said.

“So, you’re telling me that the Klingons never conquered any humanoid races that looked like humans?” Tammias asked.

“The Klingons conquered everyone in their path,” Torres said.

“So whether these Others are genetically altered bio-Klingons or conquered humanoids is irrelevant. And whether they were officially sanctioned or not by the Klingon government is also a mute point. The facts are that the biological Klingons chose not to acknowledge the Other’s unscrupulous behavior because at the time it was working in their favor. The fact that these Others’ were ‘allowed,’ to behave in this way, without official sanctions from their Klingon rulers, was because the bio-Klingons were loosing the territorial and technological war with the Federation. Because the Empire needed every advantage it could get, it chose to look the other way. There were whole generations of Earthers who had never even met a biological Klingon, and when they did, they found it very hard to trust them, first because of their appearance, and second, because of the behavior of the people they had so poorly governed. Honor and respect took a back seat, and by looking the other way, by ignoring everything the Klingon culture valued about integrity and strength, the Empire ended up seeding its own demise. Every race that encountered these Other Klingons was practically driven into the Federations fold out of fear of loosing every ounce of self respect and freedom they had known previous to Klingon contact. That was a hundred years ago, and the Klingons are still doing damage control. And until they own up to this policy of supporting and encouraging criminal behavior, and start cleaning house, you will continue to witness a sect of the Klingon people trying to attain power through nefarious and cowardly means,” Tammias said.

“Again, this is your opinion,” Torres said.

“No, it’s my prediction, based on social evidence and knowledge of history,” Tammias said.

Torres sat there a long moment, quiet, staring hard at Tammias, but revealing no emotions. Tammias returned the stare, unwilling to back down. “You know,” Torres said, finally. “Your book did actually help me with something.”

Tammias blinked. “It did?”

“It helped me understand why Earthers hate us so much,” Torres said.

“I think you need to read the book again,” Tammias said.

“What?” Torres said.

“You got it all wrong. I don’t hate Klingons. I love Klingons!” Tammias said.

“And that’s why I should reread it?” Torres said.

“No. You should reread it because you obviously missed something. I wrote it out of esteem for all the good that the Klingon culture has to offer,” Tammias said. “Earthers don’t hate Klingons. Well, there has been some hate, but a lot more love than hate. We both have quite a lot in common, and the greatest thing that we share is this idea that our enemies can teach us more about ourselves than any friend ever could. I wouldn’t be sitting here with you now if I didn’t love Klingon, honor, integrity, the direct way your culture handles conflict resolution. I am actually interested in getting to know you. Who knows, maybe I did have some misunderstandings when I wrote that book. I was only fifteen. If I am that far off the mark, this could be your chance to show me where I was wrong. That is, if you’re willing to tolerate being around someone as insufferably opinionated as I am.”

“It’s not my job to go around saving everyone from their own ignorance,” Torres said.

“Oh, but it’s your job to walk around with a chip on your shoulder because you’re fed up with how ignorant everyone else is, but unwilling to even educate, much less speak to, someone who’s expressing interest in you?” Tammias asked.

“I didn’t come in here for this,” Torres said.

“You’re right. You could have eaten in the privacy of your room,” Tammias said. “By eating in the cafeteria, it’s kind of an unwritten rule that you might like company. And I was hoping to have a nice lunch with you.”

“You’re not just trying to make up for all those Klingons who want to kill you by befriending a Klingon?” Torres asked.

“The ones that want to kill me have either not read the book, or are one of those Klingons who would forsake his culture of honor simply to stab me in the back,” Tammias said. “Any Klingon with honor who would choose to challenge me in a proper duel will walk away after I announce ‘I am not Klingon,’ for not only is it a dishonor to kill a weaker opponent, it’s a crime to kill someone who won’t fight. And I’m a strict pacifist by nature.”

“Yeah, I heard what your idea of pacifism did to Denton’s leg,” Torres said.

“I said I was a pacifist by nature, not a martyr,” Tammias said.

“I would have classified you as a passive aggressive,” Torres said.

“I’m a lot of things,” Tammias agreed, standing and gathering his tray. “Some would even say I’m a hypocrite, but I prefer the simple term, human. Enjoy the rest of your lunch.”

Tammias gave Torres a slight bow, as if he were bidding farewell, Asian style, and walked away. Torres frowned, stirred her food, and then tossed the fork down. She actually liked Tammias a lot more now that she had vented and opened up to him. Damn him, she thought. She put her tray up and returned to her room to study.

Tammias put his tray and uneaten food back into the recycler and stormed out. Tatiana, who was just coming out of the food line, saw him and followed, ditching her food into the same recycler. She caught up to him just as he exited the building.

“Hey, Garcia,” Tatiana called after him. “Wait up.”

He turned, recognized her, and then paused to allow her to catch up. He then walked slowly, aiming for the shade offered by the trees even though it really wasn’t hot enough to avoid the sun. Earth was nothing like Vulcan. It was actually pleasurable to be in the sun, in San Francisco, at noon.

“What’s wrong?” Tatiana asked.

“Oh, nothing, other than I am a slow learner,” Tammias said. He began to talk with his hands, but the gestures were saying he didn’t know what to say, then he just sort of gave up, threw his hands in the air, and sighed. “I just don’t seem to be attracted to the right females.”

“I don’t guess I could help you with that one?” Tatiana said more than asked.

“Probably not. I keep falling for the non-human types,” Tammias said. “And stupid me, I keep being surprised that we’re not compatible.”

Tatiana sighed, her tone changing slightly to change the emphasis. “Like I said, I don’t guess I could help you with that one.”

“Uh? Oh. I’m sorry,” Tammias stuttered. “I’m just rambling about me. Did you want something?”

“I guess not. I just can’t compete with aliens, computer games and holodeck programs,” Tatiana said, casting a quick glance down at her breasts. “You know, if technology gets any better, there won’t be a human race.”

“Uh?” Tammias asked, wondering where all her sarcasm was coming from.

Tatiana turned to storm away, got a few steps, stopped, walked back, kissed Tammias hard on the lips, and then stormed away. Tammias stood there beside himself, wondering what had just happened. Did he just kiss his room mate or had she kissed him? He wasn’t sure of anything until Lenar pulled up along side him and waved his hand in front of Tam’s eyes.

“You okay there?” Lenar asked.

“I don’t know,” Tammias said.

“Well, if you have time to go over a few things, we have that big test tomorrow, and with you being the game master, I was hoping we could go over a few scenarios,” Lenar said.

“You’re still fretting over this Kobayashi test?” Tammias asked.

“No one has passed it in over a hundred years, if rumors are accurate,” Lenar said. “That means it is reasonable for me to fret a little. You’re being much too cavalier about this. This affects your grade point average, you know? Especially since you’re the Captain.”

“No one else wanted the job,” Tammias said.

“That’s because no one wins,” Lenar said. “Come on.”



The Kobayashi Maru scenario had changed very little over the years. The only significant change was that the Klingons were no longer the enemy, as they had protested against the vilification of their species. Wasn’t it obvious, they argued, we would never attack a wounded prey? Where would the sport be in that? Where’s the honor? So, naturally, the Klingons were taken out and the Romulans were inserted in. The Kobayashi Maru was still a freighter, only, instead of eighty crew members and three hundred passengers in need of rescue after their ship serendipitously discovered a mine, it was now two hundred crew members, and six hundred passengers. The change reflected the improvements in technology, keeping the appearances that it was just barely possible to accomplish the goals. Students on the command track would volunteer to take the test and were allowed no more than three chances to beat the simulator. Would be captains were permitted to pick their crews, drawing from anyone that was currently enrolled at

the Academy, from the pool of those who had not been in the test more than three times. Drawings were treated as a summons by most cadets, because anyone who was “requested” had to comply as if they had been drafted. If the would be captain was nice, he or she could excuse you from participating, but most of the time if you were chosen you were chosen because you were believed to hold a skill necessary for the successful completion of a mission. And since, win or loose, your performance was evaluated, the “draftees” would never maliciously sabotage the mission out of petty retaliation.

Or so it was believed.

The simulator itself was a full scale star ship, which was named after the Enterprise, out of respect to Captain Kirk, the first only one to boast beating the test. Though all the professors referred to the “test” as a “no win” scenario, everyone went into the test believing it was possible to win if only they performed the correct number of tasks, in the correct order, and in a timely fashion. Everyone wanted to beat Kirk’s record. Especially Garcia, who was quite annoyed at how his first test had just played out.

Professor Thalymum patted him on the shoulder. “Relax, Garcia. It builds character.”

“Umphf,” Tammias said. It was obvious to everyone on the “Enterprise” bridge still smoldering from the fake fires that he was unusually angry. It was rare to see any outward display of emotions on him and even his room mates were taken by surprise at his sudden animation. “Character is over rated.”

“Well,” Professor Chapman smiled. “You still have two more tries.”

“This wasn’t a fair test,” Garcia protested.

“It’s a no win scenario, Cadet,” Thalymum said. “You’re not graded on successfully completing the campaign. You’re graded on your performance and on your decision capabilities. If it’s any consolation, you prolonged the inevitable longer than any cadet previously since the establishment of this scenario. That’s something you can be proud of.”

Tammias stormed off the bridge. He had played games before. True, he had written most of his scenarios for his holosuite experiences and so he had never made anything he couldn’t eventually win, with a little effort and practice. But the more he thought about the Kobayashi test, the more he was convinced there wasn’t a winning option available to him. He was certain he did everything right and was confident that everyone else performed their duties to the best of their abilities. His classmates were bemused by the way he was “sulking” through the rest of the day’s classes. Jean Hajar stopped him to schedule an appointment for a massage, which he agreed to gracefully. “Tell the others to email me,” he told her, and then continued on, “sulking.” He didn’t think of it as sulking, but rather as brain storming. Trini called it an obsession, even going as far as referring him to Captain Ahab. Even Joshua, while in Thalymum’s class, leaned over to him and said, “You need to let it go.”

He cleared the emails in his account as he rode the tram home, declining an invitation to have dinner with Admiral McCoy, who had no doubt heard of his performance in the test. He went right to his room and began scrutinizing over all the details of his Kobayashi Maru test. Everyone who participated had filed a report and using all the information available to him, he made a list of everything that had gone wrong. It was amazing how much paper work was generated by a crew that was



supposedly killed to the last man, but it gave future file clerks papers to file, future battle and crash analysts something to study, and future commanders a real time look at how fast things can go bad. And that was one of Tam's first clues that the scales were weighted against him. There were mechanical failures that had crept up that even in the most horrific battle would not have happened. Or, at least, so unlikely that it would be statistically impossible. It wasn't like starships were constructed with Tombstone Technology, technology already developed but not put into use until the cost benefit analysis demanded it. Star Fleet took safety very serious.

Tammas became so convinced that there was a conspiracy involved, some sort of personal vendetta against him winning, as opposed to just everyone in general, that he spent two hour searching for a way to download a copy of the Kobayashi Maru's program via the Earth Net. The security involved was tough, but it was no Kobayashi Maru test, and he managed to complete a download without tripping any alarms. It was too big a program for his neural implant, so he had to use his PADD. He was so studious that when his neural implant's alarm clock went off, he realized he risked being late for class and shut down his home computer system. He had spent the whole night on his pet project, and had been so focused, that he hadn't even bothered with sleep. He washed up, grabbed some fresh clothes from the replicator, dressed, and hurried out the door.

"Breakfast?" Tatiana called after him.

"Not today. See you later," he answered.

"It's just a game!" Tatiana reminded him, calling to him from the threshold of the kitchen.

Before Tammas closed the door, his eyes met Tatiana's eyes, he saluted with his PADD, and smiled a mischievous smile. "Of course, it is. One I am going to win." He hurried down the side walk and caught the tram to the Academy.

As he read over the program, he began to silently fume. He had been right. The program actually was written to prevent anyone from winning, and so, for the first time in his life, he could truly say, there was indeed a devil maliciously pushing buttons to make his life miserable. And he was staring at the devil, a series of default lines that would ultimately begin a series of cascade failures that would guarantee to end the mission swiftly. "Who the devil would have written a program with no possible way to win?" he wondered.

An urgent email rang an alarm in his implant. It was from Lenar, so he opened it. "I got a cryptic message from Crusher. It read, 'Got you!' So, heads up, everyone. Incoming practical joke. Lenar."

"Damn it," Tammas thought. So much for his negotiated truce, and per his agreement with Locarno, he would not be able to complain if he were hit as an innocent bystander, or even a direct target. And chances were, he would be a direct target. "I don't have time for this crap, Crusher."

None the less, he left the tram wary of a possible attack. He had played assassins enough in the holosuite to know how the game was played. Some innocuous person, perhaps reading a paper or drinking a cup of coffee would easily slip up next to you unawares, spill something on you, and poof, you went around with orange skin the rest of the day. "Well, not today, Crusher," Tammas said. He was halfway across the courtyard when he felt something irritating his arm. He looked down half expecting to see a bug trying to bite through his uniform, though he knew it unlikely. Uniforms were designed

to naturally repel insects, as well as resist the growth of bacteria. The bacteria elimination cut down on body odor by nearly ninety eight percent. What he saw was puzzling. His clothes were beginning to fizz at an ever increasing rate of speed, as if he was wearing a tonic water so shaken up that the carbonation was spewing away the entire drink. In the middle of the courtyard, between the biology and physics building, right in front of his very eyes, and the eyes of many peers and a chance of faculty, every last stitch of his clothing disappeared into a light cloud of smoke which drifted away on the morning breeze. There was just a hint of an ozone smell, the kind that followed a summer morning rain.

All the injustice of the Kobayashi Maru test faded, gone, just like his clothes. Tammias became aware of Crusher and Albert, walking swiftly away from him, but evidently laughing hysterically. There was also another message from Lenar.

“Hey, everyone. If you used the replicator to produce clothes this morning, find shelter immediately. The replicator has been reprogrammed to produce clothes that will disintegrate after approximately thirty minutes exposure to ultraviolet light...”

Tammias opened a live chat window with Lenar via his implant. (Confirmed. The Emperor has no clothes.)

Lenar. (LOL. Do you want me or Tatiana to bring you clothes?)

Tammias. (No.)

Lenar. (What are you going to do?)

Tammias. (What do you think? I'm going to class.)

Tammias stopped and ordered an iced raktajino. Not that he needed the extra kick. Thanks to Crusher, he was very much awake, and acutely aware of himself and his surroundings, even though he had pulled an all-nighter. The Klingon coffee was simply to add to the illusion that nothing was out of the ordinary. And the caffeine wouldn't hurt. Sure, people were taking second glances, and even the Andorian at the coffee shop was over heard asking her fellow employee, “I thought humans were uncomfortable with public nudity.” The employee's response was simply to shrug.

Tammias took his usual place in Chapman's class, front row, and for all his “being late” he still arrived early enough that most of his class mates were still in the process of arriving. Conversations would stop and eyes would divert as people entered, and someone in the back yelled, “Hey, this is Earth, not Betazed!” There was laughter at that, but Tammias just pretended everything was the same as it always was.

One thing that was different, beyond his lack of clothing, was that the seats to either side of him remained vacant, and the last one in the room, Torres, was forced to sit next to him. She was about to tell the person to move from her usual seat, when she noticed Tammias in his birthday suit, sitting comfortably, A PADD in front of him on the desk. He seemed to be enjoying a raktajino. She could smell the coffee, and knew it wasn't watered down, which was almost enough to distract her from the other facts about Tammias. About the same time, Professor Chapman entered, and told Torres to find a seat. She shot an evil look to the guy occupying her usual spot, and then sat next to Tammias.

Professor Chapman set his briefcase down, and began retrieving his materials, while simultaneously addressing the class. “We have a lot to cover in class today,” he said, turning around to face the class. His lips quivered for a moment. No one else laughed, either. He turned to face the electronic chalk board, sighed, scratched his nose,

shaking his head sadly, said one word, then paused as he tried very hard to keep in control, and called up the first bit of info he was going to cover. "As you know, you have an exam next week, and I want to go over some examples."

He had full composure as he turned back to face the class, though there was moisture in his eyes from his effort to maintain himself, and a bemused smirk kept trying to appear. "If you'll download the first example," Chapman said.

Everyone in class retrieved their PADDs and downloaded the first problem in the queue. No one waited for permission to start trying to solve the equations.

"You may be wondering why I'm starting with what should be the easiest test question ever," Chapman continued. "I'll tell you. It never fails that someone inevitably forgets the basic laws of physics. If you don't know the law that an object at rest tends to stay at rest, and an object in motion tends to stay in motion, unless acted upon by a force, then you need to pack up and go home now. Whatever your attributes are before entering warp will be your exact same attributes when you exit warp. So, even though you may have just come out of warp in the gravity well of a new star or planet, before firing up your thrusters, you must orientate yourself to your new environment. If you don't, and you fire up the thrusters, you may be quite surprised where your ship ends up. Besides that, you will flunk this test."

Chapman tended to wander as he lectured. There was laughter coming from outside the classroom and he wandered over and shut the door. Tammias knew what the laughter was about and he recognized a couple of the voices. It had been Jaxa and Hajar, and Garcia glanced up to see Locarno pointing at him as if his fingers were a gun, indicating, "got you," as the door was pulled to.

"Also, outside of warp, the speed of light is still nature's speed limit," Chapman said. "You can run your impulse engines from now until eternity and you will never push your ship past the speed of light."

It was always a race to see which one of the students finished the problem first. Normally, Torres was first. But today, Tammias was, and she came in third. Chapman nodded as he looked over the responses arriving on his PADD. "Very good, Garcia. At least you haven't forgotten everything."

Tammias couldn't help but feel a little bit proud at beating Torres and he wanted a little boasting, mostly to distract himself from his anger and discomfort of being naked. He leaned a little towards her and whispered, "If I had known you were so easily distracted, I would have started coming naked to class much sooner."

"Let's continue with number two," Chapman pressed on.

The next problem wasn't much harder, but it was more tedious. Torres leaned over, "I was just surprised they're not as big as all the rumors have them to be."

Tammias laughed out loud.

"Something funny, Garcia?" Chapman asked.

"No, Sir," Tammias said, recovering. He came in third. Torres looked even more pleased than the cat that ate the mouse. And so class went, with everyone but Tammias filing out as quickly as possible. Torres was the first one out the door. As students were leaving, Lenar and Tatiana pushed their way in, bringing clothes to the impoverished.

His dignity already gone, Tammias simply dressed right in front of them. "Thank you."

"You could have beamed home," Tatiana said.

“I believe that would be considered frivolous use of a transporter,” Tammas said.

“I think people would have understood,” Lenar said.

“In the old days, people had to wear badges when working around x-ray equipment. They ought to follow people who transport with similar concerns,” Tammas griped. “None the less, do either of you know where Crusher is at this moment?”

“He’s in the library,” Lenar said. “Do you have a plan?”

“Yes, actually. But no one acts until I say, alright? Will you pass that on?”

Tammas asked.

“Done,” Lenar said, using his PADD to put out the word. “What’s the plan?”

“First, I’m going to go make nice with Crusher,” Tammas said. “You two, hang back.”

♪♪▶

Crusher and Albert didn’t see Tammas until he sat down at their table. Nova team leader, Cadet First Class, Nicholas Locarno, did, however. He ceased browsing for books and motioned the remaining Nova Team members to rally around Crusher. Tammas was aware of them, but paid them no mind as he focused his remaining attention on Crusher.

“Relax, Crusher,” Tammas said. “It’s not like I’m going to hit you.”

“What do you want?” Locarno demanded.

Never breaking eye contact with Crusher. “Will you go flying with me, Crusher?”

“What?” Crusher asked.

“Go flying with me,” Tammas.

“No way,” Locarno said.

“I’ll rent the ship, you can pilot,” Tammas said. “And if you’re afraid, you can bring Albert. I trust him. I don’t trust Locarno.”

“Why?” Crusher asked.

“Why don’t I trust Locarno or why do I want you to go flying with me?” Tammas asked. Crusher indicated the second. “It’s purely out of selfish motivation. I would like to discuss the terms of my surrender and I would like it to be in private, as well as in an atmosphere you and I are both comfortable in.”

“You mean a truce? You said you weren’t going to complain,” Locarno said. “Besides, you’ve had it coming. You’ve been out for us ever since you arrived at the academy and joined the Sierra Squadron. Sierra was supposed to be all Vulcans, and you’d like me to believe you’ve not been gunning for us?”

“If my joining the Sierra squadron forces you to work harder to win the Rigel Cup, you should be thanking me for the extra edge I’m giving you,” Tammas said.

“Why can’t we discuss this over lunch?” Crusher asked.

“We can, if you want to bring lunch on the shuttle,” Tammas said, and then, to express his sincerity, he added. “Please.”

“When?” Crusher asked.

“How about now?” Tammas asked.

“No, I have anthropology with Novakovich in twenty minutes,” Crusher said. “How about 18:30?”

“Fine. SFO spaceport, hangar three,” Tammas said. “I promise no retaliations until the conclusion of our meeting.”

“Agreed,” Crusher said, and he offered his hand, even though he had heard rumor that Garcia was uncomfortable shaking hands. Then again, it was hard to say what was fact or fiction about Garcia. Some say he never forgets a person’s name. Once he met you, he knew you for life. Then other rumors suggested his incredible memory was due to neural implants and other fanciful technological assists so that he might as well be a Borg in sheep’s clothing. The only thing he had not succeeded at since arriving was the Kobayashi Maru test, and even that performance was well above the performance of any other cadet. Still, his reaction was so human that Crusher felt a bit of empathy for him, so much so he was beginning to consider that perhaps the nude joke was a bit ill timed.

Tammas took Crusher’s hand. When he got up to leave, Locarno got in his face. “Anything happens to Wes or Josh, you’ll have to answer to me.”

“You almost have me convinced that you’re more concerned about them than you are your own welfare,” Tammas said.

“What is that suppose to mean?” Locarno asked.

“What do you think it means?” Garcia asked, cryptically.

“How about you and I settle this in the boxing ring?” Locarno pressed.

“I don’t think it would be a fair competition,” Tammas said, and simply walked away.

Albert and Crusher persuaded Locarno not to pursue the matter. “I’m going to kick that arrogant, hypocritical, punk’s ass...” Locarno began.

“Let it go,” Albert said. “He did come to ask for a truce. And by himself. You have to admit that took some courage.”

“It’s not his courage that I have an issue with,” Locarno said.

♪♪▶

Though Crusher was given the opportunity to fly the shuttle, he declined in favor of allowing Tammas to pilot them away from SFO International Space Port. Tammas took them straight up into a geosynchronous orbit, directly above the academy. His next action was to call Space Traffic Control, where he got permission to shut all systems down to simulate a catastrophic power failure. They were given a window of an hour and thirty minutes before they had to reinitialize systems and make contact with STC. Tammas then powered down all the systems, including artificial gravity. With a nose down attitude, the only light came through the cockpit window, and it was light reflecting off the Earth. They could see the terminator line, with nearly three quarters of the North American continent experiencing night. The continents were so well defined by the presence of civilization that it was like looking down on a constellation.

“If you’re thinking you’re going to make us space sick, you’ve forgotten Wes and I are use to this,” Albert said.

“I know, Joshua,” Tammas said. “And believe it or not, I’m not here to retaliate.”

“Well, if you want to negotiate a truce, you’re going to have to convince your peoples to stop the practical jokes. As far as I’m concerned, as of right now, we’re even,” Crusher said.

“I agree,” Tammas said. “And, to be honest, I don’t think we can top your last action without getting really ugly. Fortunately, I have a great sense of humor. That was a nice trick getting past the firewall, but an even nicer trick altering the template for producing clothing without the replicator diagnostics catching the alteration. How did you do that?”

“Trade secret,” Crusher said.

“You won’t share that with me, or you can’t share that with me?” Tammias asked.

“I would be afraid of some sort of retribution,” Crusher said.

“Alright,” Tammias said. “I guess I have no choice but to reveal to you what I have discovered. I’m doing this because I need your help. Help me, and I’ll share the benefits with you. But if you decide not to, I’m going to need to ask you and Joshua to remain silent, at least until after I’ve accomplished my task.”

“You’re being too cryptic,” Crusher said. “I can’t promise to be silent about something I don’t have clue about. If you’re doing something illegal, I’ll go public.”

“Fair enough,” Tammias said. He took a calculated risk and handed Crusher his PADD.

Crusher took it and only casually glanced over the program at first. Then his mouth fell agape, his eyes went wide, and he scrolled back to the top of the program. “How did you get this?” Crusher demanded, both hands suddenly gripping the PADD as if he held the long, lost, clay tablet that held five of the Ten Commandments. The bluish, pale light of the PADD gave Crusher’s face an unearthly glow, with lines of light reflecting off his face mirroring the lines of text, only out of focus.

“What is it?” Albert said, pulling himself closer to Crusher’s chair, and staring over his shoulder. “Oh, wow! How did you get this?”

“Trade secret,” Tammias said.

“We shouldn’t be looking at this,” Crusher said, unable to take his eyes from it.

“Give it to me, then,” Albert said.

Crusher didn’t let go.

“Wait,” Albert said. “Scroll back. What’s that line do?”

“It’s just an algorithm of some sort, probably generating random numbers for various activities through out the program,” Crusher said, wanting to push on.

Tammias knew exactly which line Albert was referring to. “Take a closer look at that algorithm. It belongs to a set of equations that have serious repercussions on how the game evolves.”

Crusher did so. He scanned down, scanned back up, and then scanned to another section. “This can’t be,” Crusher said.

“I don’t understand?” Albert said. “What’s it doing?”

Crusher just kept shaking his head. “This can’t be right, Garcia. If this is right, then there is absolutely no way to accomplish the mission.”

Tammias only stared at Crusher. Crusher looked up. “Really, where did you get this?”

“It’s the real thing,” Tammias assured him.

“No, it’s not. People have won,” Crusher said.

“People, referring to Kirk, have cheated,” Tammias argued.

“Kirk never cheated,” Crusher said, adamantly.

“Then show me how he did it? Show me how anyone can do it, for that matter?” Tammias said. “Point out any flaw in that program that can be manipulated in such a way that it is possible to accomplish the mission objectives.”

Crusher continued to push through the program, ever more intent on finding a solution. Albert just shook his head in amazement. The sun dipped behind the horizon, and the sliver of remaining Earth light began pooling at the edges of the Earth, sucked

into a point, ejecting one solar ray that shrank and disappeared with the sun. This was sunset as seen from their shuttle's perspective. It was like a very expensive clock.

"If word got out that the only way to win was to cheat, think of all the fall out there might be with people who worship Kirk," Albert said.

"He didn't cheat," Crusher insisted.

"Are you certain?" Tammias asked. "And in this instance, would it be a bad thing if someone did? Think about it. If it's really a test of character, maybe the test is really to measure determination, to see how far a cadet will go to accomplish the goals. Now, I can change the program so that it's possible to win. It's putting the altered program back into the system without anyone or anything recognizing that it's been altered before I have my chance to win where I start to have trouble. You're my key to doing that. Do this for me, and I'll make sure you and Albert are participating in the test when I win."

"And just how much are you going to change it? Will you change it so much that you just waltz in there and rescue the people?" Crusher asked. "What kind of test is that?"

"I've already taken my licks," Tammias said. "But alright. I concede your point. Would you be more willing to help me if I were to write the alterations in such a way that it's possible to win, but not easy? Hell, that might even help us out, if they don't see that we're winning until it's too late to prevent it. That way the test evaluators can't start altering events and sequences that would work against me while in play. Us. All I'm asking for is a fair test. A test where all the people involved are rewarded for doing those things that they do best. Naturally, if they're going to evaluate us, I want to give them a good showing of our talents."

"That sounds fair to me," Albert said. "Worst case scenario is we get a reprimand for altering the program. It's not like anyone's life is in danger by this stunt. It's just a simulator."

"I'll take full credit for altering the program. No one gets in trouble but me, but everyone gets to walk away with a badge," Tammias said.

"What makes you think they'll give you a badge if they know you cheated?" Crusher argued.

"Because to not do so means that they have to spill the beans about there not being a way to win," Tammias said. "They'll have to admit that there is no possible way to accomplish this mission."

"They tell everyone it's a no-win scenario," Albert corrected.

"True, but they don't correct the illusion that people have that it is possible to win," Tammias said. "Otherwise they would explain that Kirk's win was a fluke or a myth. If this is the same program, Kirk either didn't win, or he cheated, but either way there's a lie being perpetuated. All I want to do is win."

"It's unethical," Crusher said.

"As unethical as giving us a task that we can't win?" Tammias asked. "As unethical as not discouraging you from believing you can win?"

"That's because they want you to give it your best," Crusher argued.

"If no one ever wins, people get discouraged and stop trying," Tammias said. "We'll just be raising morale. What do you say, Crusher? Will you help me?"

"Alright," Crusher said. "But only if we really have to work to accomplish the goal. I don't want a free ride, and I certainly don't want it coming back to me that I've

been pampered so long that I found it necessary to cheat. I expect you to leave some variables in there.”

“Fine with me,” Tammias said.

“Yeah, but Wes,” Albert said. “The program allows for potentially twelve Romulan war birds to attack the Enterprise. No one could win against those odds. Besides, what is the likelihood of that happening in real life?”

“A lot if you allow for the contingency that the Kobayashi Maru’s accident wasn’t an accident,” Crusher said.

“Alright,” Tammias agreed. “How about you give me a fighter squadron on one of the hangar decks of the Enterprise?”

“Better,” Albert said. “What if Nova Squadron was available to off set the odds?”

“There you go,” Tammias said. “How about that?”

“How would we explain attack fighters on the hangar deck?” Crusher asked.

“Sierra and Nova Squadrons are being escorted to the Rigel finals,” Tammias offered.

“Even with the squadrons, we’ll have trouble communicating,” Crusher pointed out. “Once the Romulans attack, this whole area will have a communication black out due to all the jamming.”

Tammias nodded. “I will solve that issue.”

“How?” Crusher asked. “Our team needs to be able to communicate effectively between each other and with the Enterprise to coordinate attacks. Hell, even our TCAS computers will be pretty much ineffective with all that jamming.”

“Trust me on this one. I have a solution,” Tammias said. “As for improving the TCAS computers and possibly improving our own computer navigation in this area, even with the jamming, well, we can use class one probes. We’ll just launch a number of them to help boost telemetry communications via probes and ships, by shortening the transmission range. Hell, worse case scenario, we communicate directly with line of sight laser communication systems, bouncing lasers off the class one probes. The more probes the better, because it’ll cut down on the distance a signal has to travel before it gets picked up and retransmitted.”

“That’ll only add to all the chaos,” Albert said. “Think about it. We’ll just be pumping more noise into that effected area of space and have more objects to collide with.”

“Yeah, but that could also work for us,” Crusher said, musing. “All of that noise, if you will, will also have an adverse affect on the Romulan’s communication systems. It will force them to rely more on visual information to navigate. It might also make it more difficult to get target acquisitions with their computers. It might just level the playing field.”

“That’s what I’m talking about,” Tammias said. “Leveling the playing field!”

“But there’s more to worry about than Romulans,” Crusher said. “The Kobayashi Maru’s warp core will breach in the event these criteria have been met. So, even if you hold your own against the Romulans, you still have this to consider.”

“I’ll take care of that,” Tammias said.

“How?” Crusher asked.

“I’ll just eliminate the problem before it becomes a factor,” Tammias said.

“You’re going to send in an away team to eject the core?!” Albert asked.



“Why not?” Tammias asked.

“Better, why would you?” Crusher asked.

“Because,” Tammias began, thinking for a moment. “Because the Kobayashi has no weapons. Ejecting the core might eliminate a Romulan, or better yet, prevent the Romulans from targeting the Kobayashi’s Engine room hoping to prevent our rescue operation, or an attempt to further cripple the Enterprise by such a catastrophic explosion due to our rescue proximity.”

“You have an answer for everything, don’t you?” Crusher said more than asked.

“Not yet,” Tammias said. “That’s why I wanted to join Star Fleet, so I could look for those answers.”

“Have you ever considered that perhaps your answers aren’t out there, but are in here?” Crusher asked, pointing to Tam’s head and then to his heart.

“Very philosophical of you, Crusher,” Tammias said.

“A Traveler suggested it to me,” Crusher said.

“Perhaps we can discuss this sometime, while we’re polishing our Kobayashi Maru badges,” Tammias said, making a mental note to research Traveler because of Crusher’s obvious reverent attitude towards the name.

“Alright,” Crusher said. “Let’s do this. I’ll inform Nova Squadron.”

“No,” Tammias said. “This stays between the three of us. The fewer that know, the less likelihood of a leak that might prevent us from achieving our goals.”

“I’ve got to tell Locarno at least,” Crusher said.

“No,” Tammias said. “I’ll just draft him.”

“He won’t like that,” Albert said, agreeing with Crusher. “He wants another shot to try and pass that test as Captain and he only has one more chance.”

“He’ll pass the test, just not as Captain of the Enterprise. He’ll be Captain of his Squadron,” Tammias said.

“Yeah, but if we don’t tell him then he’ll just think you’re out for revenge for the nudity thing,” Crusher said.

“Great,” Tammias said. “So it will look like everything is normal at the Academy. You don’t believe for a second that Star Fleet is ignorant of our practical jokes war, do you? I believe they’re watching to make sure nothing gets out of hand, but also evaluating our characters in how we respond to such matters. When we conclude this meeting, tell him we were unable to reach an agreement, and that the war is still on. I’ll handle the fall out from there. Trust me, once we’re in the test and I notify him that his tactical squadron is available, he’ll be ecstatic at the chance to win.”

“Yeah, I guess” Albert said. “Wait a minute. That will add to our evaluation points. It might give us the edge we need to win bragging rights and get to perform at our graduation ceremony. That will put you at odds with your Sierra squadron. How can we trust you?”

“Look, Crusher is helping me with the program, so he’ll know almost everything I do,” Tammias said. “As for the bragging rights, you’re forgetting that Sierra Squadron is comprised of Vulcan pilots, who don’t have an ego. They will be satisfied with the Kobayashi badge.”

Crusher looked over the program again, and then looked to Albert. Albert looked just as eager to play this new game. “Alright, let’s do this,” Crusher agreed, for the third time.

All three of them touched hands simultaneously, like the three Musketeers. Tammias powered up the shuttle and contacted STC for clearance down to SFO International Space Port, and handed the controls over to Crusher. “If you don’t mind, I need a power nap,” Tammias said, and reclined his seat and went instantly to sleep.



The next day, Tammias filed a petition to take the Kobayashi Maru test a second time as Captain. His schedule and crew selection was approved and posted two days later, with the event scheduled to take place a week after the posting. Ten minutes after it was posted, word got around. Eleven minutes after the posting, Locarno went ballistic. It took an additional ten minutes for Locarno to establish the whereabouts of Tammias Garcia, and another seven minutes to catch up to him. Tammias was proceeding towards a table to have lunch. Crusher and Albert tried to intercept Locarno, but simply weren’t fast enough. Locarno got there first and the cafeteria became suddenly library quiet.

“How dare you?!” Locarno said.

“Could you be more specific?” Tammias asked.

“With my fists?” Locarno asked.

Tammias sat his tray down on the nearest table without turning his back on Locarno. The cadet sitting there moved his stuff to accommodate the tray, and prepared to flee in the event of a fight. Garcia was aware of Afu and Lenar taking up position beside him, and Trini getting up from the table to join them. Sierra Squadron also rallied around Tammias, arriving before Trini.

“You know I wanted another shot at this test as Captain,” Locarno said.

“I need you,” Tammias said. “In order to win, I need you.”

“You don’t need me to man the tactical station!” Locarno snapped. “The only reason you’re doing this is to get even for the naked thing and because I found a game you can’t win. Every one here knows it.”

Trying to stay calm, Tammias simply repeated his statement. “I need you.”

“You need your ass kicked!” Locarno said, shoving Tammias.

“Hey,” Crusher said, getting in between Locarno and Tammias. “He’s not worth this.”

“Get out of my way, Crusher,” Locarno said. “I’ll take them all on if I have to.”

“As a strict rule, I tend to prefer the way of the pacifist,” Tammias said. “So, if you’re willing to kick my ass in front of all these people, even knowing I won’t strike back, then go ahead and get it over with. Just know, when you’re finished, and I get up and brush myself off, you’re going to still have the same problem. Now, can we find another way to resolve this issue?”

“Yeah, you can let me out of the test,” Locarno said.

“That’s not going to happen,” Tammias said. “I expect you to be there, in good spirits or not, prepared to help me win this test.”

Professor Chapman approached the small circle that had formed. Cadets siding with Locarno had joined his side, trying to balance the fight, should it come to a fight, and many of them were hoping for a fight. Quite a few people still wanted to take Tammias down a notch. “Is there a problem here, gentleman?”

Tammias and Locarno didn’t budge from their posturing, nor did they answer.

“Gentlemen?!” Professor Chapman said again.

“No, Sir,” Tammias said. “Locarno here was just complementing me on my crew selection.”

Professor Chapman looked to Locarno. “Cadet?”

“There’s no problem here, Sir,” Locarno said, shrugging free of Crusher and Alberts’ hold. He turned and walked away.

Crusher’s eyes met Tam’s eyes for only the briefest moment before he and Albert turned to follow Locarno, hoping to console him. Tammias retrieved his tray and followed his flat-mates back to the table. Sierra disbanded and returned to their dinner, only acknowledging Tammias with a quick nod and a meeting of the eyes. Conversations slowly returned the cafeteria to a normal level of volume.

“You know,” Trini said, when they finally settled in at their table. “That really was bad form, Tammias. It wasn’t a secret that he wanted to try one more time to beat the test.”

“I know,” Tammias said.

“So, why did you do it?” Afu asked. “It would have been sufficient to turn his skin orange or purple.”

“I need him,” Tammias said.

“Well, I hope it was worth it,” Trini said. “Because not only did you make him a real enemy, but you made enemies out of most of his allies. People will more likely sympathize with him being cheated than they will with you having to go around naked for a portion of the day.”

“He’ll get over it after we win,” Tammias said, spooning diced broccoli into his mouth.

Trini just shook her head.

“Speaking of the test, Afu. I got something I need you to do for me,” Tammias said.

## CHAPTER TWENTYONE

Tammas tossed another rock into the ocean. It skipped no less than six times. He seemed unaware that Trini had come up behind him, watching him. She knew where to find him because he often came to the beach to wind down and process life and information. She kicked the sand around and found a suitable shell for skipping, timing it to coincide with Tam's next throw. Two sets of impact points spread ripples before gentle waves washed them away. Tammas didn't turn to her.

"Okay, Tam," Trini said. "You've been sulking since Galactic Archaeology."

"I'm not sulking," Tam said. He started walking slowly down the beach

"That frown looks like sulking to me," Trini said, following.

"Well, I'm not. I'm processing information," Tam said. "It just doesn't make sense. How can the Tkon Empire, with a population pushing a trillion people, just disappear with barely any trace? The Tkon home's world's star going supernova is just inadequate to explain how the entire population just vanished. They surely colonized other star systems."

"Do you have to explain everything?" Trini asked.

"It doesn't bother you that the supernova explanation is inadequate?" Tam said.

"Did you ever think that perhaps we humans are the remnants of that civilization?"

"Oh, please," Trini said, shaking her head sadly. "You're not going to try and put this into another theory of everything, are you? No, don't answer. I don't want to know, and I don't want to think about it. It gives me a headache, just like philosophy. Is this a chair? Why is it a chair? What makes it chair. Can rock be chair? A chairs a chair, Tam."

Tam didn't respond. Instead, he quietly observed a woman sitting on a bench, apparently crying. He would have kept on walking, except when Trini saw her, she motioned for Tam to change course.

"I think she wants to be left alone," Tam said, resisting the urge to go and rescue someone.

"She's crying? Are you completely heartless?" Trini asked.

"If she wanted help, she would send out a distress signal," Tam argued.

"She's a woman, not a starship," Trini said, crossly. "But even so, assume tears to be a distress signal, and it's your Starfleet duty to investigate."

"It's also my Starfleet duty to observe the Prime Directive, and in this case, the non interference policy seems the best recourse," Tam said.

"I'm assuming command," Trini said. "Just stop thinking and follow me, cadet."

Trini lead the way over to the young woman. Her dress was simple, what little clothing there was, exposing much of her skin to the afternoon sun. The outfit, and to some degree, the girl herself, reminded Tam of a character from "the Time Machine" by H.G. Wells. Though it was one of his favorite holographic stories, he had to concentrate for a moment to discover what it was about her that reminded him of the Eloi. It had to be more than the simplistic nature of her clothing. In his mind he saw a woman that had been suddenly ejected from paradise and the closer they got to her the stronger that image became. He had to force himself not to start constructing a fantasy around the woman and focus on the facts. Her posture and tears confirmed the sadness that registered with his empathy. She was gripping the bench with both hands, to either side of her thighs, so tightly that her knuckles were white. She had naturally curly blond hair, fair skin, and

excellent muscle tone. She was obviously very athletic, and Tam imagined a scent of great sensuality about her.

Tam suppressed a sudden compulsion to go find an apple.

“Hello,” Trini said. “Are you okay?”

“I’m very sad,” the girl said.

“Are you suicidal?” Tam asked.

“No!” She said, looking at him as if he were an alien.

“Tam!” Trini snapped, slapping his arm.

“It’s a legit question,” Tam said. “I can tell that she’s almost overwhelmed by her emotions. She’s afraid, out of her element, and... Are you hungry?”

“Yes,” she said.

“May we sit with you a moment?” Trini asked.

“Please,” she said, scooting to the middle of the bench so that they could sit on either side of her. “You’re the first people to truly talk to me since I’ve arrived. I just don’t understand how there can be so many people in one place and yet everyone is so cold and distant. So very little interaction. It’s so sad.”

Tam and Trini looked to each other and then each studied their world for a moment. There were indeed lots of people around, many of them walking alone and purposefully towards some destination, most likely to work or a class or a lab, or maybe off to get something to eat. There was a girl walking on the beach listening to music, her ear pieces a barrier to discourage people from approaching her to start a conversation. There were people in groups, too, but Tam was aware of the personal space between them. Personal space was a social rule, which varied from culture to culture. Tam had become accustomed to the personal boundaries of Vulcan which left space for two or three people to fit. Betazed had a similar personal space boundary, with the exception of family. Betazed family could stand so close to you that you might think you were the same person. So, Tam understood what the girl was observing, where Trini no doubt saw something very different. The typical personal space boundary of the average human was about an arm’s length away, which for him was often too personal, just right for Trini, but obviously for this stranger, it was seen as “cold and distant.”

“My name is Indira Sookanan,” Trini said, offering her hand. “But my friends call me Trini.”

The girl skipped the handshake and went right into a hug. “My name is Rivan,” she said, turning to Tam. She hugged him with even more intensity, kissing his cheek. She was instantly aware of how tense he became. “I’m sorry? Is this an unacceptable greeting?”

“Oh, don’t mind him,” Trini said. “He’s very shy when it comes to public displays of affection. He spent too much time growing up on Vulcan where public affection is avoided at all cost.”

Rivan’s eyes seemed wide with wonder. “Really?” she asked, holding his hand. “I’m sorry if I embarrassed you.”

“It’s okay,” Tam said, shrugging it off. “It’s good for me to practice lightening up, and adapting to alternative cultural behaviors.”

Rivan nodded enthusiastically and then hugged him again, as if to give him immediate forms of practice. “Thank you for greeting me so warmly, even though it is

uncomfortable for you,” Rivan said. She pulled back and wiped her eyes. “You have both brought me joy. What is your name?”

“Call me Ishmael,” Tam said.

“Ishmael?” Rivan said, testing the pronunciation.

“Tam!” Trini warned, her eyes stern with displeasure.

“Is Tam your title? Like Captain?” Rivan asked.

“No,” Trini said. “His name is Tam. The Ishmael name is just Tam trying to be funny, but he’s not funny.”

“Oh?” Rivan asked, concentrating on Tam’s eyes. “Will you teach me this game? Funny is good. You keep looking at my necklace? Would you like it?”

“I was just admiring it,” Tam said, noting its prominent circle. “I’ve never seen that symbol before. But somehow, it seems familiar. Sorry, nothing more to add on that.”

“Thank you, Tam. Would you like to have dinner with us?” Trini asked.

Rivan grabbed up Trini’s hand in hers. “Oh, yes, please. I would gladly exchange services for food. Perhaps you have garden work I could do for you. Or cleaning? Or Tam, I could teach you my people’s way of sharing love.”

“You can eat with us for free, Rivan,” Trini said, chuckling because Tam was blushing.

Rivan touched Tam’s face. “You’re blushing? Would here be an inappropriate setting for love making?”

Trini couldn’t help but laugh. “You obviously haven’t been on Earth very long, have you?”

“I haven’t figured out how to keep time here,” Rivan said. “Your daylight period seems shorter than mine.”

“Come with us,” Trini said, standing.

“Thank you!” Rivan said. “Shall we run? Or is that also against the law here? I’ve seen no one running.”

“We’re going to take a tram,” Tam said.

“A tram?” Rivan asked, her grip on Tam’s hand tightening. “Is it scary?”

Trini and Tam exchanged concerned looks, but patiently explained that trams were not scary. Their new friend was very talkative, as if she had been held in isolation for months and these were the first faces she’d had seen. In many ways Rivan was like a child, amazed by any piece of technology. The approach of the tram caused her to reflect whether or not she wanted to ride in the tram at all, but she steeled herself and stepped on, holding Tam’s hand for that extra bit strength and comfort. When the tram started to move, Rivan hugged Tam, hiding her face in his chest.

“It’s okay,” Tam said, gently pulling her face up. “Breathe. That’s a girl.”

“You’ve never been on a tram before?” Trini asked.

Rivan shook her head no.

“This is very strange,” Trini said.

“I would be so lost if it weren’t for you two. Are you mediators?” Rivan asked.

“Mediators?” Trini asked.

“Mediators assist those in need and dispense out justice,” Rivan said.

“We’re just everyday people,” Tam said.

“Then what is it about me, or you, that caused you to stop and inquire into my well being?” Rivan asked.

“Well, there’s a sociological answer to that,” Trini said.

“Really?” Tam asked, shocked by her sudden use of a sociological explanation.

“Yes,” Trini said. “I can’t site it as well as Tam, here, but there’s a sociological phenomenon where in high traffic areas, where we found you, most people assume that someone else will stop and help and so they feel less compelled to stop. Had you been in distress in an area where people pass less frequently, the compulsion to stop and render aid increases. Did I say that right?”

“Adequate,” Tam said.

“Tam, here, wouldn’t have helped you at all had it not been for me,” Trini said.

“Why?” Rivan asked. “And why are you blushing again?”

“I’m blushing because of the level of intensity that you’re giving me, as well as your proximity,” Tam said.

Trini laughed. “He blushing because he likes you and he’s uncomfortable.”

“Really? Would you like me to ease your tension, or is a tram also too public for affection?” Rivan asked.

Trini laughed. “I don’t know if you’re serious, or just having fun at Tam’s expense, but I like you.”

“Thank you,” Rivan said, taking Trini’s hand. “I like you, too. But why wouldn’t you help me, Tam?”

“It’s not that I wouldn’t help you,” Tam said. “It’s just that I didn’t see your tears as a cry for help. It’s usually best not to help people until they actually ask for it.”

“Well, I can’t tell you how glad I am that you both stopped to talk to me, because I do need your help,” Rivan said.

“This is our stop,” Trini said. “We’ll talk about how to best help you over dinner.”

“It seems my thanking you is too little,” Rivan said. “Are you sure there is nothing I can do for you? I want to repay your kindness and bring balance to this love and joy you are sharing with me.”

“Allowing us to do this kindness is what brings us joy and love,” Tam said.

Rivan hugged Tam around the neck. “You speak like my people. God knows best.”

Trini pursed her lips, giving Tam a look he couldn’t translate. She then linked arms with Rivan and led her home with Tam walking beside them. If he had had pockets, he would have hidden his hands in them. It took effort to listen to the conversation that Rivan and Trini were sharing, as he kept getting caught up in imagery of strange foods. He was aware that Rivan’s hunger was affecting him vicariously and he was surprised by the intensity that she was broadcasting her feelings. As they entered the house they found Tatiana and Afu practicing Karate on the mat. Tatiana was trying to apply a joint lock to Afu, but was failing miserably. Rivan smiled at the sight of game playing.

“I’m glad you’re here,” Afu said. “I am having difficulty teaching her this technique.”

“Later,” Tam said. “Right now we need to have a family dinner. Why don’t you tell Lenar that we have a guest and Tatiana and I can start preparing a meal.”

Afu departed to make that call, and Rivan interpreted it to mean Garcia was the head of the household.

“Would you like to clean up first?” Trini asked.

“Please,” Rivan said.

“Come with me. You can use my bathroom and I’ll rep you some fresh clothes,” Trini said.

“Rep?” Rivan asked.

“Replicate,” Trini explained. “You are familiar with a replicator, right?”

“Will it hurt?” Rivan asked.

“No,” Trini chuckled, leading Rivan by the hand to her room, passing Afu as he returned.

“Okay, who’s the tramp?” Tatiana asked.

“Don’t say that again, especially in front of her,” Tam instructed.

“Why?” Tatiana asked, following Tam to the kitchen. “Because she’s a mental case?”

“Probably because she looks fit enough that she could kick your butt,” Afu said, gathering some plates for the table.

“Bring it on,” Tatiana said. She pulled hot rolls from the food replicator and started buttering them, one at a time, cutting them straight down the middle.

“Look, I know she sounds simple, but there’s something very strange going on,” Tam said. “She’s very intense, and very nice, so don’t interpret her odd behaviors as being anything other than what they are. She may be lost from a tour group. What goes good with rolls?”

“Mashed potatoes,” Afu said. “And cranberry sauce.”

“Very American,” Tatiana complained. “Anything but peanut butter, Tam. If we’re going to entertain, we’re going to have a real meal.”

Tam agreed and ordered up a large bowl of mashed potatoes, with a hint of garlic and onion. The bowl was so hot from the potatoes that he rushed it to the table and blew on his fingers as he returned and received the cranberry sauce. “Chicken or turkey?”

“Chicken, garlic roasted, or rotisserie,” Tatiana said.

Trini returned, shaking her head. “You’d almost think she’d never seen or used a computer before. She didn’t even know how to operate the faucet in the shower!”

“Do you think she’s acting?” Afu asked.

“No,” Trini and Tam said simultaneously. Trini continued. “And she doesn’t seem to be lacking in intelligence. She’s just a bit naïve. Innocent.”

“Innocent is not the word I would have chosen,” Tatiana said.

“You’re being very ethnocentric,” Tam said.

“How dare you?!” Tatiana snapped, pointing the butter knife at him while addressing him. “If it dresses like a slut, and quacks like a slut...”

“If you say anything like that again...” Tam began.

Tatiana laughed. “You’ll what? You’re being awfully protective of her. Who made you her champion?”

“Why are you being so hostile?” Tam asked.

Tatiana threw the butter knife into the sink and started walk away.



Trini reached out and touched her arm. “Wait, Tatiana. I’m feeling equally protective of her. There’s something strange going on, and it was my idea to bring her here. Please, just be civil.”

“I will be,” Tatiana said, giving Tam a dirty look as she left the room.

Lenar appeared outside, via transporter, and entered through the back sliding glass door. “Hey! I got the message. What’s the occasion?”

“Company,” Tam said.

“Do you think this could be one of those unscheduled tests the Academy throws at students?” Afu asked, filling five glasses with ice.

Trini shook her head. “I don’t think so. It’s too random. How would you grade it? Everyone that passed her up flunks?”

“And now that we’ve brought her in, is there a time limit to solve the mystery?” Tam asked.

Tatiana entered carrying her favorite cup, which she rinsed out before making it available to Afu. “Beer, room temperature, no ice,” she requested, which was standard fair for her. Ice was just too American.

“Afu, if it turns out that she’s acting, I’ll go naked to classes,” Tam said.

Lenar laughed. “You’ve already done that.”

“Tam, rep up some of my spinach roti,” Trini said. She noticed the expressions on Tatiana and Lenar’s faces. “What? Rivan might like it.”

Tam pushed the preset button and instantly a plate of spinach roti appeared. Roti was a peta-bread like food and with the spinach already sandwiched in the roti, it came out like mini sandwiches. Cut in quarters, it made nice finger food. But, it also made him hungry for the other Trinidadian foods Trini had introduced him to, so he made a second plate with samples of saheena, made from dasheen bush with a mango chutney sauce, bigany, which was fried eggplant, and doubles, which was vegetarian sandwich of chick peas nestled between two rounds of fried dough, all of which had an assortment of Indian spices, including tumeric, saffron, cumin, masala, and madras. Only Tam and Afu liked Trini’s Indian dishes. Tatiana and Lenar found it too spicy. The table became full with various samples of delicacies, even vareniky, a Russian Ravioli filled with meat or sweet cheese, to be dipped in butter or sour cream.

Rivan entered the kitchen hesitantly, seeking out Tam. She smiled when he turned to her. “How do I look?” she asked, spinning to show off her new outfit, comprised of a pink blouse and skirt. She had chosen not to wear the house slippers and remained bare feet.

“Like someone out of Logan’s Run,” Tam said, taking the plate of rolls that Tatiana had just finished buttering to the table.

“I don’t understand. Is that good?” Rivan asked.

“You look great,” Lenar said.

“You’ll just have to ignore Tam,” Trini said. “He’s shy on the compliments, and he’s over loaded on old movie references. Logan’s Run was a sci.fi. movie. Right?”

“A movie?” Rivan asked. She reached out for a roll as it went by and then restrained herself, bringing her hand back and taking on an apologetic look.

“Take one,” Tam insisted, pausing to hold the plate in front of her.

Rivan looked around to make sure everyone was okay with what to her would normally be a breach in protocol and then she eagerly took one, pulling it in two and devouring half. Her eyes closed as she savored it.

“This is so good,” she said, downing the second half without even bothering to chew. “May I?” she asked, reaching for another.

“Come, sit down here,” Tam said. “Help yourself to the food.”

“Would you like tea or juice?” Afu asked her.

“Water?” Rivan asked.

Afu brought her a glass of ice water, while everyone else took their places. Tatiana sat across the table from Rivan, while Tam and Trini sat at either side of her. Trini put a spinach roti on her plate and after that decided to serve her a portion of everything on the table. Rivan concentrated on the rolls, scooping up mashed potatoes and sighing with delight.

“Gravy?” Trini asked.

Rivan nodded, her mouth too full to speak.

“You act as if you haven’t eaten in a while,” Lenar observed.

She nodded vigorously. “At least two cycles of sun,” she said, poking at the ice in her water. “Floating rocks? How interesting. And the water’s cold. Is there a spring near by? The rain in the shower was hot.”

No one had a response to that, but only because they didn’t want to embarrass the guest. Trini changed the subject. “I wish you had been in Galactic history today, Lenar. Tam’s has a new obsession called the Tkon Empire.”

“Really?” Lenar asked. “I love the Tkon Empire. There’s a legend on my home world that the Tkon once visited my people.”

“That would be contradictory to the history lesson we discussed in class today,” Tam argued. “If they were wiped out six hundred thousand years ago, to the man, then it’s unreasonable to believe that your race had a close encounter with them, since that would have been before your species invented writing.”

“Well, you know how legends are,” Lenar said. “One of their spaceships supposedly crashed landed on my planet.”

“Is there any hard evidence? Maybe an artifact?” Afu asked.

“No, the only thing left at the crash site were the pilots,” Lenar said. “The legend has it that the ship simply dissolved into thin air, like smoke from a fire that gets blown away.”

“How trite,” Tam said. “Plot contrivance if I ever heard one.”

“A ship that blows away like smoke does suggest mythological overtones,” Afu offered.

“Yeah,” Tam agreed. “It just doesn’t make any sense that an entire Empire, consisting of trillions, with intergalactic traveling capabilities was completely wiped out by one, solitary supernova.”

“Maybe all the Tkon return to the home world every year for mating,” Trini offered. “Like the salmon. And it was just coincidence.”

“I don’t like coincidences,” Tam grumbled. “There would still be a foot print. An artifact. More abandoned colonies and out posts like the one the Enterprise chanced upon. Records indicate they occupied nearly the entire Milky Way galaxy.”

“An artifact? You mean like that Slaver Weapon found by Spock?” Afu asked.

“Please, don’t even get me started on that,” Tam said.

Rivan had slowed her pace in her eating and was now emulating Tatiana’s table etiquette. She was manipulating the fork with her right hand, while her left hand rested in her lap. Tam ate his chicken like a French man, knife in his right hand, and fork in his left. She followed the conversation, watching the faces of her new friends as she ate.

“I don’t see why it’s surprising that cultures rise and fall,” Tatiana said. “It’s just part of life. There’s lots of archaeological ruins to investigate of cultures that were around longer than even the Tkon Empire. Who ever built the Guardian of Time must have been a pretty spectacular species and they vanished without a trace. Even on Earth, whole cultures disappeared. The Mayans. And there was that Native American group that disappeared but was rediscovered on another planet.”

“You mean the ones relocated by the race called the Preservers,” Lenar said. “Kirk found them and a Preserver Artifact.”

Tam shook his head. “It’s been determined that that wasn’t a Preserver Artifact. And we still don’t know much else about the Preservers,” Tam said. “It just doesn’t make sense. Unless the Preservers and the Tkon are actually one and the same...”

“Do you have to have an answer for everything?” Tatiana asked.

“Thank you!” Trini agreed, glad she wasn’t the only that made that observation.

“Yes,” Tam said. “That’s why we’re here.”

“I thought we’re here because we were hungry,” Afu said, attempting humor.

“So, is this a typical custom?” Rivan asked, pausing in her taking in of subsidence. She had been following everyone who spoke with her eyes and ears, but quietly eating food while the others talked, occasionally watching how they ate so as to mimic them, and constantly looking to Tammias for reassurance, but trying not to stare. “To eat and discuss your daily lessons?”

“As opposed to?” Tatiana prompted.

“Love?” Rivan answered without delay. “Doesn’t anyone here speak of love and feelings and fun things?”

“I need some more water,” Tam said, pushing away from the table. “Can I get anyone anything while I’m up?”

“Coward,” Tatiana called after him.

“It is curious that whenever discussions of this nature arise, Tam often finds a way to extricate himself from the conversation,” Lenar agreed.

“I just wanted some water,” Tam said, raising his voice to project back to the table, partly to communicate that he could still hear them even though he was away, unable to see the conspiratory glances they gave each other.

“Yeah, right,” Tatiana mumbled.

“Are you uncomfortable speaking of love?” Rivan asked Tam as he rejoined them at the table.

“He’s Vulcan,” Afu explained. “And Vulcans are amorous only once every seven years.”

“How dreadful!” Rivan said, touching Tam’s arm in sympathy. “By law?”

Tam sighed. “I’m only a quarter Vulcan.”

“So, how does that translate exactly,” Tatiana asked, stirring her fork in the air as she mused and chewed her food. “You’re amorous every one point seven five years?”

Trini snorted chocolate milk through her nose for laughing while drinking, which got everyone at the table laughing, except Tam, who was giving Tatiana his best impression of being cross. Trini tried apologizing, but couldn't stop laughing long enough to do so. She excused herself to the kitchen to clean up.

"Not that it's anyone's business," Tam argued. "But if we're discussing love as a euphemism for sex, then one could say that I engage in this ritual frequently enough to be considered promiscuous, even by Betazoid standards."

"Betazoid? I met a person from Betazoid!" Rivan clapped. "Deanna Troi. Do you know a Deanna Troi?"

"Who doesn't know Deanna Troi?" Tatiana asked, rolling her eyes heaven wards.

"Besides, Tam, I don't think holodeck women count," Lenar said.

Again Trini burst out laughing, turned and went back into the kitchen to contain herself. Tatiana held back her laughter, but was obviously amused by Tam's growing discomfort. Afu and Lenar did a "high five" counting coup points. Tam fumed silently, blushing.

"I don't understand," Rivan said. "Holodeck women?"

"You don't know what a holodeck is?" Lenar asked.

Rivan simply shook her head, eating one of the cherry tomatoes from her salad. Her eyes widened with joy at the taste exploding in her mouth. She wiped her chin with a napkin.

"It's technology," Tatiana said. "A technology that will ultimately lead to the extinction of the human race."

"I think you're over reacting a little bit," Afu said.

"Really? Maybe you should ask the people of Talos Four how they feel about technology that creates illusions. Oh, wait a minute, I forgot. You can't do that because they're extinct." Tatiana said. "You'll just have to read about it."

"I still don't understand," Rivan said.

"A holodeck is a room that employs technology that can create artificial environments and even artificial people, or characters if you prefer," Lenar explained. "It gives you an illusion that is so authentic that it is impossible to distinguish between it and reality."

This seemed to sadden Rivan, where Tatiana seemed only more disgusted by even the discussion of it. Rivan turned in her chair to face Tam and again touched his arm. "You would choose an artificial partner to a real partner?" Rivan asked.

Everyone leaned in closer to the table as if they were to learn a great secret from their room mate. He wasn't about to satisfy them.

"So, the weather sure was nice today," Tam offered.

"It's rude not to answer a guest's question," Tatiana pointed out.

"We're not discussing my love life at the dinner table, or anywhere else, for that matter," Tam said, point of fact.

"Or lack there of?" Afu said, getting recognition from Lenar as they counted coup again.

"By love life, do you mean sex?" Tatiana asked, taking a bite of salad and flashing an innocent smile as she chewed.

"Or lack there of," Lenar added.

Tam shot them both a look that threatened immediate retaliation if they didn't stop.

"Tam," Rivan said, her voice very serious and compassionate. "If finding a willing partner is an issue, I would be more than happy to make love to you."

Tatiana choked on her salad and Trini nearly fell to the floor laughing. Afu's jaw dropped. Lenar was amused by everyone's reaction. There was no secret that he thought humans to be a bit prudish when it came to sex talk. Trini pushed herself away from the table to go get more milk. Tam was still riding a blush that wasn't given a chance to fade.

"He doesn't lack willing participants," Tatiana spoke for Tam. "He just doesn't pick up on subtle hints."

"Maybe people on Earth need to learn to be more direct in expressing their wants and feelings," Rivan suggested.

Tatiana took that as a personal jibe. "Tam prefers aliens," Tatiana said, her voice going up in volume.

"Really?" Rivan asked. She looked to Tam with eager sincerity. "I'm an alien."

"You appear human," Tatiana argued.

"True," Rivan said. "And according to the one known as Riker, we are so close that it's possible that we are somehow related."

"Riker?" Lenar asked. "William T Riker? First Officer of the Enterprise William Riker?"

"Yes," Rivan said. "Do you know him?"

"Why am I not surprised?" Tatiana said more than asked, shaking her head.

"Between him, Tam, and Kirk, I don't know which of them is worse."

"Worse?" Rivan asked. "I don't understand."

"It's bad enough a girl has to compete with the inflated breast, hour glass figure, artificial heroines created by computer game engineers and geeks," Tatiana said. "But to have alien females stealing every eligible bachelor away, it is no wonder that traditional forms of marriage and family, with the expressed intent and goal of raising children and a commitment to grow old together, are practically non-existent. It just adds insult to injury."

"Tatiana," Trini said. "That's a bit harsh. Marriage as an institution has been in a decline since the twentieth century, isn't that right Tam?"

"I'm not here to steal men," Rivan protested.

"She's just kidding," Trini said.

"No, I'm not," Tatiana said. "This is very serious. With every new semi-compatible species, or improvements in entertainment technology, family values get further and further left behind. Hell, at this rate, the Romulans won't have to worry that we'll take over the galaxy, because we'll just stop breeding. So next time you're wondering what happened to the Tkon Empire, Tam, or all those other species that just mysteriously disappeared, just factor in some good old entertainment and alien women. Mystery solved."

"I'm saddened by your expression of pain," Rivan said. "Has someone stolen your joy?"

"Rivan," Tam interceded before Tatiana could explode. "Tell us something. Why are you here?"

"You promise not to laugh?" Rivan asked.

“Of course,” Trini said.

“Why would we laugh?” Lenar asked.

“Because I attempted to speak to someone when I first arrived and he laughed and walked away,” Rivan said.

Trini reached out and touched Rivan’s arm. “We’re you’re friends. We won’t laugh at you as a form of ridicule, but you must know, sometimes humans laugh because they are uncomfortable discussing subjects, so if we do laugh, or chuckle, just know that you are safe with us.”

Rivan wiped a tear from her face and leaned over to hug Trini. “Thank you,” Rivan said. “I feel very safe here in your commune.”

“So, why are you here?” Tatiana asked.

“God sent me,” Rivan said, a no-nonsense, matter of fact tone.

No one laughed, but they each, in their own way, began to suppress their concerns that she might require the aid of a mental health care provider. They looked to Tam, for they knew he had experience in this field and waited for him to respond. Rivan, very aware of how uncomfortable they were, continued on. “Please, I know that you don’t believe in God, and maybe the entity that I know as god isn’t a god capital G, in the traditional sense of the word, but that is really the only way I know how to communicate with you. The one known as Picard met God. He can confirm what I tell you as truth.”

“Troi, Riker, Picard. Maybe you should start at the beginning,” Trini said.

Rivan nodded. “My name is Rivan and I am from the planet Rubicun Three. My understanding is that the Enterprise left a colony in the Strnad system, which is the most prominent star in the sky above my world. Afterwards, the Enterprise came to us, and there was an incident in which Wes inadvertently broke a law and it was necessary for us to put him to death.”

“Wes?” Tam asked. “Wesley Crusher?”

“Yes, you know him?” Rivan asked, grabbing Tam’s arm above the table.

“You were going to execute Crusher?” Lenar asked. His smiled broadened. “I like your species.”

“Lenar!” Tam snapped. “Continue on, Rivan.”

“To save Wesley, the one known as Picard broke one of his laws called a Prime Directive, as well as breaking our laws. It left our people in a quandary and it was decided that someone was needed to go and learn the ways of other cultures in order to better understand and resolve our own conflicts. I was chosen by my people to go and observe as many cultures as I could, learn, and come back and offer them the wisdom of my experience to ameliorate the effects of the State Versus Crusher dilemma.”

“So, God brought you here in a spaceship?” Afu asked.

“God has a spaceship?” Trini asked.

“No,” Rivan said. “God sent me here very much the same way that the one known as Picard took me up to his star city. A trans-porter?”

“You were transported all the way from Rubicun Three to Earth by means of a transporter?” Tatiana asked, incredulously.

“That’s the only way I can tell you. God sent me here to learn,” Rivan insisted.

“Go back to the part where you wanted to kill Crusher,” Lenar said. “What law did he break exactly?”

“Don’t answer that, Rivan,” Tam said. “It’s none of our business.”

“It might be useful in our little war,” Lenar said.

“You’re at war with Wesley?” Rivan asked.

“No,” Tam said. “It’s not a real war. It’s more a little friendly competition rivalry thing going on. It’s like a game.”

“I love games,” Rivan said. “Can I play?”

“Just how long have you been on Earth?” Afu asked.

Rivan shrugged, and turned to glance outside. “The sun has set three times, now, but two full cycles.”

“And does anyone know you’re here?” Trini asked.

“God,” Rivan said, nodding her head.

“Does anyone from Earth or the Federation, someone official, know you’re here?” Afu asked, clarifying his question.

“Does the Tam Commune count as official?” Rivan asked.

“The Tam Commune?” Tatiana mouthed the words looking to Tam for an explanation.

Tam ignored her. “No one else?”

“There was the guy on the beach that laughed at me when I said God sent me here to learn,” Rivan said.

Trini patted her on the knee. “Yeah, um, you might want to avoid sharing that bit of information with people.”

“Why?” Rivan asked. “Is it against the law to speak of God?”

“Trust her,” Lenar said. “It will make your stay on Earth a little bit easier.”

“I don’t understand,” Rivan said.

“Earth of the past had a great deal of conflict concerning religion, politics, and even racial issues, to the point of having wars,” Tam explained. “Consequently, there was a time when it became politically correct to avoid the subject altogether, and to some extent, it’s still somewhat of a social taboo, but certainly not criminal. Humans of today’s age are very partial to a scientific paradigm, believing that all things that can be known have reasonable, logical explanations that do not include supernatural explanations, but they are still open to supernatural beliefs.”

“Is that the explanation for why there is so much moral flexibility when it comes to following your own rules and regulations?” Rivan asked.

“Maybe we should talk about this later,” Afu said. “Right now the pertinent subject of choice is what do we do about her?”

“I don’t understand?” Rivan said.

“You’re an illegal alien,” Tatiana said. “That’s a violation of Federation law, Earth’s Customs and Immigration laws, and probably even Agricultural laws. Who knows what natural flora or biological contaminants you may have brought with you.”

Rivan’s eyes went wide and with one hand she grabbed Tam’s hand and with the other she grabbed Trini’s hand. “But Picard said you no longer execute criminals!”

“No ones going to hurt you,” Trini promised her. “We’ll see to that.”

“Really?” Tatiana said more than asked. “And who’s going to protect us? The longer we delay in reporting this, the greater the risk of ensuing penalties, including, and not limited to, expulsion from the Academy. This is very serious.”

“And what would you propose us do?” Trini asked. “Just turn her over to the authorities?”

“We must follow the rules set forward by your people!” Rivan said. “I did not come here to cause a problem.”

“No one’s going to believe her story,” Afu said. “Hell, they may think we concocted this whole scenario as a joke.”

“I don’t believe God would send me into a dangerous situation,” Rivan said. “Unless, in doing so I can better understand the Crusher dilemma.”

“Which raises the other issue,” Tatiana said. “Assuming she’s not lying due to a mental illness, then we’re liable for not reporting her to a mental health facility.”

“I’m telling you the truth,” Rivan said. “You do believe me, don’t you? Tam?”

“I believe you,” Tam assured her, squeezing her hand. “And we’ll start with that. Let’s collect evidence to verify her story.”

“Yeah,” Afu agreed, and then, with no little hint of sarcasm: “Let’s just call the Enterprise back to Earth and ask Picard to identify her in a line up. I’m sure they’re not doing anything important at the moment.”

“Or, we could ask God,” Tatiana said.

Tam smiled at that. “Or, why don’t we just invite Wesley over?”

“Wesley is here?” Rivan asked, excited by the possibility of meeting someone familiar.

Tam looked to Lenar. He understood the look and nodded. “I’m on it. I’ll get him here, even if I have to do an illegal transport. I can’t wait to see his face when he sees the girl that tried to execute him.”

“And then what?” Tatiana asked.

“Just relax, Tatiana. One step at a time,” Tam said. “Rivan, breathe. Everything’s going to work out. Can we get you anything else to eat?”

“I am so full,” Rivan said. “I couldn’t eat another bite, but, I so hate to see all this food go to waste.”

“It won’t go to waste,” Trini assured her. “Come, I’ll show you the modern way of cleaning up after dinner.”

♪♪▶

The “Tam Commune” retired to the living room where they waited for Crusher. They talked while drinking fresh, hot cocoa that Trini had acquired from Trinidad. Though they believed this situation warranted an emergency transport, Wesley did not. He arrived via tram and was accompanied by Joshua. Lenar led them in.

“What’s this about?” Crusher asked. “This better not be part of a joke.”

“Joke? Why would we joke?” Lenar asked. “I take it you didn’t like your pet vulture?”

“Oh, god, that was nasty,” Joshua complained. “Who would have thought a bird like that could hurl projectile vomit at such a range! I’ve shot phasers with less accuracy.”

“And we still haven’t gotten the smell out of the room,” Wesley complained.

Rivan entered, returning from the restroom, heard Crusher’s voice, and ran right to him. He was completely unprepared for the greeting. She even kissed him.

“You’ve grown so much since we’ve last met,” Rivan observed.

“Rivan?” Crusher stuttered. “Um, what are you doing here?”

“She’s here to exact justice,” Lenar said.



Crusher actually took a step back, giving Lenar great satisfaction. Afu and Lenar counted coup points. “That’s enough, you two,” Tam said. “Crusher, she’s not here to kill you.”

“Oh, no, Wes,” Rivan said. “God sent me. I need to observe law and justice as applied by other cultures. I’m particularly interested in learning whether or not there are indeed universal laws, or is everything relative. Is there consistency in the Universe? I am willing to trade in exchange for the learning opportunities you can provide me. I could work on one of your star city’s perhaps?”

“Starships,” Tatiana corrected.

“Sorry,” Rivan said.

“Okay, Tam,” Tatiana said. “I’m convinced her story is accurate. Now what?”

“We go see Admiral McCoy,” Tam said.

“Excuse me?” Tatiana asked. “We can’t just barge in on an Admiral. *The Admiral!* There’s protocols and this little thing called a chain of command.”

“I’ve already contacted McCoy via email and he’s responded with an invitation,” Tam said.

“All of us?” Trini asked. “I’ve never met him. I have to change. We all have to change.”

“No, you don’t have to change. We’re leaving right now. All of us. Crusher, I need you to attend in order to confirm her story,” Tam said. “Please.”

“Of course,” Crusher agreed.



The city of San Francisco at night was a brilliant thing to observe, even from the window of a moving tram, but as fascinating as it was for someone like Rivan it was insufficient stimulus to prevent her from succumbing to sleep. The lack of sleep over two days, the gentle motion of the tram, the comfort of Garcia next to her, and a full stomach facilitated her quick departure. She had only intended to lean against Tam and rest her head on his shoulder, but was soon out like a light. Tatiana sat across from Tam, not even bother to hide the fact that she was sulking.

“Absolutely sickening,” Tatiana mumbled, crossing her arms.

“I think you’re jealous,” Lenar said.

“How dare you,” Tatiana snapped at him.

“I do have another shoulder, if you want it,” Tam offered. Rivan repositioned herself, cuddling closer and hugging him like a toy bear.

“She’s almost as bad as Ambassador Clemmons,” Trini observed. “Animals and children just take right to you, don’t they?”

“She’s not a child,” Tatiana pointed out.

“Well, you know what I mean,” Trini said.

“No, what do you mean?” Tatiana asked.

“How is it you know the Admiral?” Afu asked. He was tiring of Tatiana’s moodiness.

“Yes, tell us,” Trini said. “Is there an adventure in it? Or is he just another fan of your music that you serendipitously met?”

“Um, we’re just good friends,” Tam lied.

“I met him once when I was younger,” Crusher said. “My mother and I had just boarded the Enterprise, and he was doing the inspection. He was really funny.”

Everyone looked at Crusher as if he were an alien, or a stranger that had inappropriately joined a conversation that he wasn't supposed to be privy to. Tam immediately agreed with Crusher, trying to diffuse some of the tension. "He does have a sharp wit, and though some people can find him a bit taxing, he is really kind, and generous to a fault. And he aged well. If I can function half as well as he does now when I reach his age, I will be very pleased."

"How old is he, exactly?" Lenar asked.

"One forty something?" Joshua guessed.

"Well, he was a hundred and thirty seven years old when I met him," Crusher said. "And that was around star-date 41154."

"Do you remember everything in terms of star dates?" Tatiana asked.

"No," Crusher said. "But I do tend to remember numbers well."

"OCD perhaps?" Tam asked.

"No," Crusher said, not even considering the statement. "People often think that mathematics is a gift, but I think ninety percent of it is just having memorized numbers. The better one memorizes simple addition, and all the multiplication tables, the better structure you have to build higher mathematics upon. Star-dates is just a mathematical game, but one that I am so use to playing with that it's memorized, and the frame work allows me a way of categorizing memories and events systematically. The consequence is that I have good recall of events, both spatial and temporal in nature."

"Fascinating," Tam said, truly interested in learning more. "I can see a similar thing with me and music. I have so many patterns committed to memory, that I never think of the best way to resolve harmonic tension, it's just there. But math isn't so quick, and I admit, I don't have enough of the multiplication tables memorized. I always relied on tricks. Like, you know how to do the nines time table on your hand? Why memorize when you can use your hand, kind of thing."

"Why memorize it if you can use a calculator," Trini said.

"It's best to just memorize it," Crusher agreed with Tam. "But you with your music, you went beyond just memorizing it. It's actually committed to your kinesthetic memory, so you can actually play without thinking about it, right? That's how it is with me and quantum physics. Sometimes I find my hands typing out resolutions to equations before I even know I know the answer. Kind of scary, actually."

"This conversation is actually scary," Tatiana said.

"Perhaps you would rather talk about love and fun stuff?" Lenar said, mimicking Rivan.

"Let's not go there again," Trini said, giggling. "It's not nice to make fun of her."

"Especially when she's asleep and can't defend herself," Afu said.

"I almost hate to wake her up," Tam said, regretfully as the tram pulled into the station.

"I just bet," Tatiana said.

♪♪▶

Rivan woke without much prodding and followed the group up to Admiral McCoy's apartment. They rang, the door opened, and Tam led the way inside. McCoy was sitting at the table, drinking a cup of hot tea. He was reading a report by Picard on the Rubicon system on a PADD set before him. McCoy saw Tam and waved him over.

“Come in,” McCoy said. “Never seen a more shy group of cadets. Make yourselves comfortable. Tam, come over here and sit by me. And bring your young lady friend. Is this the one you emailed me about?”

Rivan went right to McCoy and got on her knees, bowing, her arms crossed in front of her. “You are the oldest person I have ever met.”

McCoy chuckled, but Rivan was more attuned to Tatiana’s and Trini’s gasp, and started apologizing profusely for any insult she might have done.

“It’s okay,” McCoy assured her. “Up girl, up. Get up and sit here.”

“I meant no disrespect,” Rivan said, moving to the chair McCoy had indicated. “I don’t know how to show you the respect due you because of your age. You must be the most wisest and important person in the whole Universe.”

“I’m not that old, child,” McCoy said, trying not to sound testy. “And I’m afraid the aged are not as well treated on this planet as they seem to be on yours. Too many of our people worship youth.”

“I am saddened to hear this,” Rivan said. “On my planet, the older you are the more respected you are. Also, the older you are, the stronger you are. This is just the natural way of things.”

McCoy nodded as he poured himself some more tea. He poured some for Rivan, and then instructed Tam to pour tea for everyone else. “Now, Rivan, I would like to hear more of how you came to be here.”

“God told me to give you this,” Rivan said, pulling off her ring.

McCoy took the ring and examined it. It was a solid gold band, with no markings that might give a hint to what the Edo written language looked like. McCoy looked to Tam for an explanation, for there was no mention of a gift from god.

“And one ring to bind them all,” Tam said, seriously. “Frodo, you must take this ring and... Ouch!”

“Be serious,” Trini said, having just pinched his arm.

McCoy looked over to Crusher. “You, son, what’s your name?”

“Wesley, Sir. Wesley Crusher?” Crusher asked, hopeful that McCoy might have remembered him. “We met once, back when you were doing an inspection of the Enterprise D’s medical section.”

“Ah, yes,” McCoy said. “How’s that android fellow. Data?”

“Yes, Sir. Data. I’m sure he would tell you that he’s operating within normal parameters,” Crusher said.

“Yes,” McCoy chuckled. “That would sound like him. Reach behind you there and grab my tricorder out of the chest of drawers and bring it to me, please. Top right drawer.”

As Crusher fetched McCoy’s tricorder, McCoy sat the ring down on top of his PADD and lifted his cup of tea. The display on his PADD changed, filling with text. McCoy pushed his spectacles back into place and gave the text a curious glance. He had to set his cup down and lift the PADD to get it close enough to do a serious read.

“What is it?” Crusher asked.

McCoy peered at Crusher hovering over him with the tricorder. “It would appear to be a letter from God,” McCoy said. “You can put the tricorder back up, son.”

As McCoy read the letter silently, the only sounds were from Wes as he put the tricorder back in its place and then took his seat. McCoy sat the PADD down in front of him, removed his glasses, and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

“Well?” Trini asked, speaking for everyone.

“It’s private,” McCoy said.

“You get a letter from God and you’re not going to share what it says?” Tam asked.

“It’s not the ten commandments, son,” McCoy snapped. “Now, you trusted me well enough to trouble me, so I expect you to abide by my decision.”

“Sorry,” Tam said.

McCoy set his glasses on the table and handed Rivan back her ring. He pushed away from the table and walked over to the window. Even with all the city lights blazing, one could still make out some of the brighter stars. A meteor flared across the horizon and was gone. Everyone was watching him and waiting. He came back to the table and put a hand on Tam’s shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” McCoy said. “I shouldn’t have raised my voice. I am just so amazed that even today at my age I can still be surprised. Rivan, what would you like to do?”

“I would like to learn and observe,” Rivan said.

McCoy nodded. “And have you given any thought to where you might like to live?”

“Oh, yes,” Rivan said without hesitation. “I would like to live at the Tam commune.”

McCoy nodded, not surprised by the declaration. Tatiana rolled her eyes and slouched into her chair, crossing her arms.

“I can put a spare bed in my room,” Trini offered. “I shared with my sisters all my life, so I wouldn’t mind the company.”

Rivan smiled and bowed her head to Trini.

“And I can arrange for you to audit classes at the local college, and even at Star Fleet Academy if you find something that interests you,” McCoy said. He turned to the others. “There are some guidelines. Rivan, to make your stay easier, the less people that know where you’re from and why you’re here, the better. As for the rest of you, you’re now in charge of her well being. Act like your Star Fleet careers counted on it, or better, as if God were watching you, for lack of a better term. Tam, you should understand this well enough. Remember the old Fabrini custom. If you rescue a person, you’re responsible for the person. If there are any questions or dissent, speak now, because I’m asking all of you to keep Rivan’s personal information classified.”

Everyone present agreed. McCoy nodded. “Good. Now I’m going to go get some sleep. You can let yourselves out. Take a tin of that fruitcake with you. I don’t know why people keep sending me that crap, but find something to do with it. Give it to an enemy, use it for a door stop, I’m sure you all can be very creative. Rivan, it was a pleasure meeting you. Please, feel free to visit me. I am going to want you to keep me updated as to your progress while you’re here. Weekly reports, which you can email me, or deliver in person. Hell, bring Tam with you. It’ll give him a reason to come visit. That invitation to visit is for all of you, as long as you don’t bring me any damn fruit cake.”

McCoy shuffled off to his room, the last bit about fruit cakes muffled by the door closing. Tam sighed. He felt bad for McCoy and wished he could do something to make aging less bothersome.

“I love him,” Rivan said. “Will you bring me back to visit him?”

“Sure,” Tam said. “Well, I guess we can go home then.”

Crusher went to Rivan and took her hand. “Josh and I need to get back to studying. If you need anything, please let me know. They’ll teach you how to contact me.”

“Thank you, Wesley,” Rivan said, hugging him and then kissing his cheek as he stepped back. “I am glad, now, that you were not executed. Your value to your community seems to outweigh the impact of your infraction. Perhaps a cost benefit analysis should also be a part of the judicial system.”

Joshua offered his hand, but Rivan hugged him, too. “Wes is right, we need to go, but I wanted to say, welcome to Earth,” he said. “Good bye for now.”

“Wesley’s friend, Joshua,” Rivan said. “We are friends, connected by friends. Joy and love.”

“I’m going to be sick,” Tatiana mumbled.

Rivan turned to Tatiana. “I will care for you. Come, let’s get her home,” she said, sounding as if she had made herself quite at home already.

Tatiana rolled her eyes, but led the way back to the tram. They decided they would build her a bed on the morrow, and figured out who was going to give up their room for the night by playing the “paper scissors rock” game. Rivan liked the game part, but she didn’t want anyone to forfeit their room for her.

“I can sleep on the couch, or with you, Tam,” Rivan offered.

“One of the rules you’re going to have to abide by, Rivan,” Tatiana said. “Is restricting the number of people you proposition. Our society is not as sexually liberated as yours seems to be, and there are some females on this planet who would think badly of you, especially if you come on to their man. Human females don’t share well.”

“I will try to remember,” Rivan said.

“Don’t listen to her,” Afu said. “You can hit on me anytime.”

Trini hit Afu in the arm. “Like that?” she asked. “All three of you boys listen up. Rivan is off limits. Do you hear?”

“I don’t see why I have to be included in this exclusionary process,” Lenar protested. “I’m not human.”

“All of you males are the same,” Tatiana said. “It doesn’t matter what species.”

“Thank god,” Rivan said, not quite in accord with Tatiana’s context.

As was their custom, thanks to Trini, everyone removed their shoes at the door, and entered the house barefoot. Just inside the door were house shoes. Rivan was yawning and barely able to keep her eyes open, so Trini led her directly to Tam’s bedroom and saw to it that she was comfortable. She was sound asleep before the door closed behind Trini on her way out. Tam had already transformed the couch into a bed and had made himself comfortable. Afu sat in the chair next to Tam, reading from his PADD and drinking another cup of tea.

“Tam, if you need to freshen up, you can use my lavatory,” Trini offered.

“I already used Lenar’s,” Tam said.

Trini sat down on the bed with Tam and laid back. After a moment of silence, she rolled on her side and faced Tam. "Thank you," Trini said.

"For what?" Tam asked.

"For helping me help Rivan," Trini said. "And introducing us to the Admiral. I never thought I would meet him, especially in such an informal setting such as his own home. That portrait over the chest of drawers, who was that?"

"That was his wife, Natira," Tam said.

"He was married?" Trini asked.

Tam nodded, staring at the ceiling.

"How do you know so much about him?" Trini asked.

"It's a long story," Garcia said. "Maybe I'll tell you someday."

"Do you think you'll ever get married?" Trini asked.

Afu lowered his PADD just enough to let people know he was listening. Tatiana entered at that moment, saw Trini and Tam on the bed together, and decided to join them.

"Scoot over," Tatiana told Tam, pushing her way on before he could move.

"Should I leave the room?" Afu asked.

"Cute," Tam said.

"Now Tatiana and I both can say we've been in bed with Tammias Parkin Arblaster-Garcia the great," Trini said.

"Yeah, like that's an accomplishment," Tatiana said.

"If Afu were to join us, that would lend some bragging rights," Tam said.

"I'm not in to all that," Afu said, raising his PADD to start reading again. "But since we're altogether. Let me quiz you over tomorrow's exam."

"I'm tired," Tammias protested. "I don't want to study."

"You never study!" Afu said.

"Yeah," Tatiana said. "How is it you have the highest scores at the Academy, second only to Crusher, and no one ever sees you lift a book or study."

"Just lucky, I guess," Tam said.

"Luck, is it?" Trini asked. "I thought you didn't believe in luck?"

"Hey," Afu said. "Am I the only one concerned about this test? Now, describe the functioning units of a class one warp core module."

Tatiana started listing them and before she got to the fourth unit, Tam was sound asleep. He was so far gone that he didn't even stir as Tatiana and Trini got up from the couch-bed an hour later to retire to their own rooms for a couple of hours of sleep before they started their next day. Tam didn't stir when Ambassador Clemmons came in through the kitty door, toured the living room, walked right over him, and then went to his room. The Ambassador's collar had a chip that opened the kitty door and Tam's bedroom door automatically, and so Clemmons just went about his normal kitty business. He hopped up on Tam's bed and started cleaning himself.

Tam woke suddenly and sprang out of bed as if a Charley horse had awakened him, requiring him to stretch his leg. He turned around in the dark of the living room, looking for some sort of threat. He would have sworn that he had heard a cry for help. As he looked around and saw everything was fine, he relaxed a little. That's when he heard it again. It was one of those breathless, silent screams for help, and it was coming from someone so caught up in fear that they were unable to vocalize it. He only had to focus for a second to realize it was coming from his room.

Tam entered his room assuming a defensive posture while ordering the lights up one quarter of full illumination, using an implant assist. The low light was to avoid needing time for his eyes to adjust should he have to fight. Rivan was frozen with fear and Ambassador Clemens was lying on her stomach, calmly licking its right, hind paw.

Tam sighed, visibly relieved that it was only Clemens that had frightened her. He picked the cat up. As soon as the weight of the cat was gone, Rivan sat up and grabbed hold of Tam for dear life. She began to sob.

“Shhh,” Tam whispered, touching her head lightly with his free hand, and kissing her gently on the forehead. “Everything’s okay. It’s just a cat. Do you want to touch him?”

“No!” she cried. “What is it?”

“It’s a cat,” Tam repeated. “A pet. Don’t you have pets on your planet?”

“No,” she said.

“There are no animals on your planet that are tame and friendly?” Tam asked.

“There are people,” Rivan said. “And there are plants.”

“I’m so sorry, Rivan. I should have disabled Clemmons’ clearance,” Tam said.

“This is my fault. Look, there’s nothing to be afraid of. It’s a cat. It’s nice. Feel its fur. I promise, it won’t hurt you.”

She reached out tentatively and touched it with a finger. She jerked back as Clemmons moved its head to scent mark her fingers. Tam demonstrated how to pet a cat and she emulated. Tam felt her relaxing. She scooted closer to the edge of the bed, wiping her tears, and petted Clemmons again.

Rivan chuckled. “I was pretty scared.”

Clemmons started purring from all the attention and Rivan pulled her hand back.

“It’s okay,” Tam said. “They make that noise when they’re happy. Here, touch under his neck like this and you can feel the vibrations. This is a good thing.”

Rivan nodded. “Yes. This is nice.”

Tam nodded. “Are you okay now? I’ll take Clemmons with me.”

“Tam,” Rivan asked, grabbing his arm as if to tell him not to leave yet. Rivan wanted to kiss him but refrained from fear of making him uncomfortable. Instead, she continued to engage him in conversation. “How did you know?”

“I don’t understand,” Tam said.

“How did you know I was in distress,” Rivan said. “I was so frightened I couldn’t speak. It was like a bad dream. But then, you came to me.”

“I just knew,” Tam said. “I’m particularly sensitive to strong emotions.”

“Then you know what I’m thinking, even now?” Rivan asked.

Tam chuckled. “I can guess what you’re thinking, based on your body language and emotions, but...”

Rivan scurried from out of the covers and embraced Tam. “Don’t leave.”

“I’m right in the next room,” Tam said.

She kissed him hard on the mouth. “Please,” she said, whispering. “I’ve never been alone before.”

Tam returned the affection, turning his body towards her, forcing Ambassador Clemmons to the floor. Ambassador Clemmons recovered from his surprise and decided to clean himself right there as if to say he was not going to dignify that rude behavior with a rebuke. Rivan wrapped her arms around Tam and pushed him to the bed.

## CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

Two days before the Kobai test, after Tai Chi class, Crusher stayed back to talk to Garcia. As always, Garcia had a number of students vying for his attention. Most of it was for technical information, to be checked on their technique, but a couple were simply listening, or otherwise just being social. Mat and Arly tested for their second belts simultaneously and Tammias signed them off. Crusher stepped up to Tammias.

“Do you have a moment?” Crusher asked.

“Sure,” Tammias said.

“In private,” Crusher said.

“I’ll talk to you later,” Mat said, hitting Tammias on the back. A couple of Mat’s friends said farewell, and departed with him.

“Thank you, Tammias,” Arly said. She grabbed her pack, retrieving a bottle of water from it before slinging it over her shoulder. She smiled at Tammias, saluting with her drink.

Tammias turned to Crusher, inviting him to walk with him. “What’s up?” he said, as they stepped out into the evening air. There was too much light pollution in this area for the stars to be visible, and the building lights and street lamps were poor substitutes.

“How’s Rivan doing?” he asked.

“Fine,” Tammias said. “I’m sure she’d be happy to see you if you want to drop by.”

Crusher nodded. Tammias could see he was a bit anxious about something. They were entering the circle of light that shone down from a street lamp. Crusher hesitated, and Tammias paused.

“You know, sometimes it helps just to spit it out,” Tammias said. “What’s on your mind?”

Crusher was always amazed at how light Garcia traveled. He rarely carried a PADD, even to regular classes, much less a pack with miscellaneous items. Normal people always brought at least something with them to athletic training. A towel. A change clothes. Something. Was he that much more organized, or was his simplicity the trick in his ability to focus? Crusher wondered, but knew nothing about Tammias was simple. He almost hated telling Tam what he had to say. “I want out,” Crusher finally said.

Tammias knew what Crusher was asking and forced himself to bite back on his emotions. “I can’t let you out. You know how that will look after the scene with Locarno.”

“I’m having a change of heart,” Crusher said. “I don’t want to participate in this.”

“It’s a bit late for that, don’t you think?” Tammias objected.

“I’m willing to stay silent if you let me out,” Crusher said.

Tammias showed his irritation. “I won’t be blackmailed. Go public.”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Crusher said. “Look, Albert is still in. I just... I don’t want to do it this way. And strangely enough, what got me thinking about it is Rivan’s presence.”

“Oh, please,” Tammias said. “Don’t blame it on her. The Edo’s acute sense of socially constructed morality has nothing to do with us.”

“Doesn’t it?” Crusher asked. “What about principle?”



“Did you not learn anything from visiting them?” Tammias asked. “You wouldn’t be alive today if there wasn’t some moral flexibility. What we’re doing is not criminal, and so it doesn’t require this level of reflection.”

“I disagree,” Crusher said.

“If there was another way of winning, I would have already taken it,” Tammias said.

“Winning isn’t everything!” Crusher said.

“Since when, Mr. ‘I have the highest grade point average at the Academy?’” Tammias said, sarcasm evident in his voice.

“Look, I don’t want to fight you on it. I just want out. And I have legit out. I have an opportunity to travel stand-by and hook up with the Enterprise. I want to go home. I want to see my mom. I have earned vacation time due to my active duty status and I would like to exercise this option. The Gettysburg is leaving Earth orbit in four hours and will rendezvous with the Zhukov in three days. The Zhukov is scheduled to rendezvous with the Enterprise four days after that. This window of opportunity won’t last long and I have to go now. And I can only go if you put your approval on this.”

Fuming, Tammias grabbed the PADD away from Crusher. The flight schedules were legit. Not that he suspected Crusher to be lying about that, but he was hopeful that the schedules might not be as in sync as Crusher was making it sound, giving him a reason to refuse. He needed Crusher.

“Computer,” Tammias said, opening the PADD’s menu. “Release Crusher from the Kobayashi Maru test, acting Captain Garcia, authorization code, Omicron, Omicron, Zulu, the sky is blue.”

“Acknowledge,” the computer responded.

“Reset my pass code to the next pre-arranged sequence, Garcia out,” Tammias said. He handed the PADD back to Crusher.

“Thank you,” Crusher said, sincerely.

Tammias turned and started walking away. Crusher followed.

“Please, don’t be mad. I would like us to be friends,” Crusher said.

Tammias rounded on him. “Don’t be mad? How dare you! Our friendship is irrelevant to my anger. I’m disappointed. I have to figure out a way to replace you in the test. I considered us partners. I needed you.”

“I did what I agreed. All you have to do is win the test,” Crusher said.

“I intend to,” Tammias said. “It’s just a game, Crusher. It’s not a critical test, you know.”

“I’m not here to try and persuade you out of this,” Crusher said. “I know your mind is set and you intend to win at all cost. I’m not willing to do that, and you should just accept that. This is not my path.”

“And maybe Star Fleet isn’t your path,” Tammias said.

“That’s unfair,” Crusher said.

“Maybe. And you can tell anyone you want that I cheated, as soon as the test is over,” Tammias said. “I won’t have you holding that over my head. No one will hear from me that you assisted me in this. Like I said before, I’ll take full responsibility for cheating.”

“I know. And I believe you,” Crusher said. “I might not have gone this far had I believed otherwise. I just don’t want to play this game. Not like this.”

“Have a nice trip, Crusher,” Tammas said, walking away.



The Kobayashi Maru test was a big affair, almost as big as a baseball tournament two centuries previous. People actually placed bets on how long it would last. And because there was a lot of pre-game work to be done, the entire crew had to be assembled hours before the official starting of the test to go about their duties, just as they might if they were actually assigned to a real ship. A starship was more than just a ship. It was a small, self contained city that required constant upkeep, round the clock shifts. Some of the crew would have to report to their assigned quarters and do nothing, if that's what their ship schedule called for. Not that it was a break. They knew what was coming. Everyone knew, and those pretending to be sleeping were wishing they were out doing something, anything other than lying there awake running through previous game scenarios.

Naturally, all of that would change the moment they went into battle. Then the quiet little city would become a hornet's nest of focused activity. Because the simulator was so precise in its recreation of an actual starship, the duty assignments could be logged as actual flight hours. So, for many of the participants, it wasn't just a day free of studying and regular classes, but an opportunity to put in some quality practice to prepare them for their eventual tour of duties on a Starship.

Tammas took this pre-game time to walk the ship, to see for himself that everyone and everything was in the proper place. He had chosen them all for their particular talents based on their academic files and he knew everyone of them by name. Though he could have memorized more details, like lists of hobbies they engage in, he usually left it at just their names and job descriptions, because anything more tended to freak people out. Very few people had his ability to recall names with faces the way he did, much less personal detail. One would think that people would appreciate a person who could remember your name, even though you've only met once, maybe twenty years ago, passing in a turbo lift, on a space station trillions of miles away, but instead they found it a bit spooky. Other than being a good party trick, it didn't always win him the friends he thought it should. Humans scare too easy, he thought. Then he remembered he was human. Sort of. Is this me, or the Kelvin imprinting?

After inspecting several decks, Garcia made his way to the bridge, talking to people as he went. There was no doubt that the morale was low. Arly, the Zaldan from his Tai Chi class, stopped and had him okay a roster. The only noticeable feature which designated her as non-human was the webbed fingers on her hands. He had met Zaldans before, and knew they also had webbed toes on their feet, and were excellent swimmers, and because they spent so much time in the water, they were generally twice as fit and strong as the average human. He had experienced some of her strength while sparring in Tai Chi class with her, and she was always happy, and playful. At this moment, she wasn't her usually cheerful self.

“What's wrong?” Garcia asked her.

“This is my third time being summoned,” Arly said.

Garcia reflected on what he should say. Knowing that Zaldan's are infuriated by social niceties, being courteous might offend her. “I chose you because of your competency in your field. Is there anything else?”

Arly hesitated, wanting to ask him something without coming off unprofessional, which was a struggle for her as she strived to achieve balance in normal human social etiquette, avoiding sounding too demanding. She decided she would just be her normally assertive self. Garcia would either respond well or not. "I want to share a meal with you. It is customary for the Captain of this test to buy meals for his command staff on losing, but I want our dinner to be just you and me, alone," she said, ignoring the glances several cadets gave her as they passed

"And when I win?" Garcia asked.

Arly laughed and hit him in the shoulder. "If you win, I'll make you a home cooked meal from scratch," she said.

"I would like something Ethnic, from your culture, and it has to be Vegetarian," Garcia said. "Let's say Sunday, after I return from my Survival Test."

"You're very confident," Arly said, finding strength in his optimism. She liked how he was always direct and up front with her, not like the other humans who often wasted time with meaningless words of empty chatter before getting to a point.

"Sometimes," Garcia said. "We will talk again later."

Arly had a slight bounce in her walk as she walked away, which suggested to him she was feeling better. She wasn't the only one that had been in this test three times now, for Garcia had chosen people with the most experience, many of them Senior Cadets, graduating this term. Many of them had no intentions of taking this test again and had hoped to slide out of school putting this all behind them. Though it was obvious to everyone that morale was an issue, it would be no excuse for a loss. As Garcia saw it, the morale wasn't simply due to the fact that some of the participants didn't want to be in the test but also because it had been so long since anyone had actually won. People were beginning to become discouraged. Tammias just tried to be upbeat, and if anyone expressed concerns, then he assured them all they had to do was perform their duties to the best of their abilities. He also answered any questions anyone had. To just say, "We're going to win this time," seemed too over the top arrogant, and that wasn't an image he wanted, even though it was an image he was having difficulty shaking. He merely reminded them of their level of competency and the trust that he had in them, making it more about them than about him or about winning or losing.

"Captain on the Bridge," Locarno announced. The words were right, but Garcia heard only contempt.

Tammias looked around the Bridge, noting Lenar at Ops, Locarno sulking at tactical, Albert at the helm, and Kletsova standing in front of the Captain's chair watching him as he entered. He did a double take on Kletsova, for she was in a skirted uniform. It was official, but the length of her skirt was probably pushing the approved length. Her hose were opaque, a hint of chocolate, with sparkles. She was definitely pushing it.

"Number One?" he addressed Kletsova, wondering if she was wearing that to purposely distract him.

"Everything is proceeding on schedule," Kletsova assured him, smiling. She was glad she had his attention.

"Excellent," Tammias said, walking far enough forward of his chair to address Albert without him having to turn all the way around, and getting Kletsova and her

Cosmic Cheerleader outfit temporarily out of his sight. “You look comfortable there, Mr. Albert.”

“I’ve been here before,” Albert admitted, still showing a bit of hostility towards Tammias out of deference to his friend Locarno. He pretended well. “Our course is laid in, Sir. Engine room reports all lights are green. We can be on our way at your discretion.”

“Very well, Mr. Albert,” Tammias said. “For now, I would like you to proceed at Maximum impulse. Course objective on screen.”

That got a few stares from the Bridge crew, even a double take from Albert. Still, he complied. “Aye, Sir. Impulse engines activated. Showing forward momentum. Acceleration curve is plotted and on screen,” Albert confirmed.

Tammias nodded and sat down in the Big Chair. Kletsova looked at him. “At our current location, it’ll take a long time to get to the Rigel finals using only Impulse Engines, Sir.”

“Ah, you can be more precise than that, can’t you?” Tammias chided.

She gave him one of those looks that said she didn’t appreciate his sarcasm, sat back, crossed her arms, and then, as if an after thought, her legs. She rocked her booted foot to and fro as she made her mental calculations. “At the current rate of acceleration, one hundred, seventy five years, four months, ten days, six hours, and forty four minutes, Sir. And that’s not calculating the need to stop and replenish fuel...”

“Maximum Impulse velocity in ten seconds,” Albert announced, though it wasn’t truly the maximum. They could continue to accelerate indefinitely. It sounded odd to say they could accelerate indefinitely, because everyone knew the restriction of physics: nothing travels faster than the speed of light. But they would truly continue to accelerate as long as they continued to run thrusters. What would happen, though, is as they approached their maximum impulse speed the slower the rate of acceleration would become until it would seem as if they were no longer gaining any speed. In truth, they were gaining. It was just gain at ever infinitesimally smaller increments.

“You’re right, Number One,” Tammias agreed, after ten minutes of watching the acceleration curve. “Mr. Albert, Kletsova thinks you can’t make this thing go any faster. Can you change her opinion?”

“I believe so, Sir. Permission to go to warp?” Albert asked.

“Permission granted, Mr. Albert. Warp factor six,” Tammias said, feeling rather pleased with his performance so far. He could only wonder if Crusher would have performed as well. At least Crusher hadn’t given away the secret, true to his word. Unless, he had ratted him out and the Professors were all in on it, in which case, this was still a no win scenario... No, Garcia didn’t have time for that kind of thinking. He had to play the game to the best of his ability as if he could win.

“Warp factor six,” Albert said, making it so.

Trini stepped out of the turbo-lift, approached Tammias and handed him a PADD to examine. He put his thumb print on it and handed it back to her. She was also wearing a skirt and he was beginning to suspect a bit of conspiracy between her and Tatiana. He wondered if Rivan had anything to do with this. “I hear you’re taking us all out to dinner tonight,” Trini said.

“Naturally,” Tammias said. “Losers pay, wasn’t that the deal?”

“Something like that,” Trini said. “By the way, that poem you wrote the other day was impossible to read. I don’t know why you gave it to Rivan. It had more references than a T. S Eliot poem.”

“Please, it wasn’t that bad, was it?” Tammias asked.

Tatiana nodded. “It really was. And if Trini and I struggled with it, I’m sure Rivan had a bear of a time,” Tatiana said. “Trini, who was it that said that Eliot was so well read that even God himself would have to do research to understand his humor?”

“Barlo, I think,” Trini said.

“Yeah,” Tatiana said. “Barlo’s online journal. He said, and this is a quote, and when God got lost on an Eliot reference, God sought out Tammias Garcia’s counsel.”

“Well, that’s why I don’t read Barlo,” Tammias said.

“With this poem you revisit the idea that the galaxy is seeded and the T’Kon Empire may have contributed to it before it disappeared,” Trini said. “How often are you going to repeat that theme?”

“I’m sorry that no one else in the universe seems curious that there are so many humanoid, bi-pedal species, with two eyes and a nose and ears all in the relatively same place on the face as humans,” Tammias said. “You can’t explain that with conventional evolution. We all must have diverged from a common ancestor.”

“I did like the idea about pocket starships,” Tatiana said. “The idea that the T’Kon ships might have been completely holographic in nature, and the device for generating the ship hologram might be small enough to fit in your pocket. Clever.”

“Pure fiction, though,” Trini said. “They’ll never make holographic ships.”

“Are you kidding?” Tatiana asked. “If you could have a holographic generator, the size of a class one probe, for example, that could generate an entire Galaxy class starship, you could close down all the ship yards and have as many ships as you need. Hell, everyone might have one.”

“But who would want to fly on one? If you ever lost power, you would lose your entire ship instantly, and find yourself floating in space,” Trini said. “I wouldn’t get on one.”

“Perhaps they would just make holographic crews, no more need for Star Fleet officers,” Tammias said.

“It’ll never happen. You can’t write people out of the equation. With out people, there is no equation,” Trini argued.

“We already have computers that can operate without humans, it’s only a matter of time before all computers are equally sentient. Data is a prime example of that,” Tammias said. “So, what difference does it make if it’s a desk top, a star ship, a class one probe, or an android? We will eventually have to recognize that they all have certain liberties.”

“You mean rights?” Tatiana asked.

“No, I mean liberties,” Tammias said. “Henry didn’t say, give me rights or give me death. He said, give me liberty or give me death. Constitutional law was designed to give us liberties, defining negative rights and positive rights and how governments will interact with their citizens. It was never meant for people to carry their rights around on their sleeves as if they were special super powers that they can call on in the time of need. I have my rights! Look out.”

“You’re too comical,” Trini said, walking to her station.

“Sir?!” Lenar interrupted, acting extremely surprised. Perhaps overdoing it a bit. “Sorry to interrupt, but I am receiving an SOS from a Kobayashi Maru. She has struck a mine and has drifted into the Neutral Zone bordering Federation and Romulan space.”

“Tactical, on screen. Are there any other ships in the vicinity that can come to the rescue?” Tammias asked. He was very calm, collected. After all, he had already done this once...

“No, Captain. We’re the closest,” Locarno responded.

“Very well. Mr. Albert, without bringing us out of warp, put us on an intercept course with the Kobay, and accelerate to warp factor nine,” Tammias said, pushing the red alert button on his arm rest. “All hands, red alert. Battle stations. I need medical teams ready to receive wounded. I also want two teams ready to transport over to the Kobay to aid in rescue.”

“Medical teams are already reporting in, Sir,” Kletsova noted.

“Excellent,” Tammias said, activating the chair Comm. unit again. “Nova squadron, please report to hangar deck four and prepare for deployment. Trini, take the helm.”

This got a few unexpected stares, but it was the reaction Tammias had expected, especially from Locarno. Trini slid into the chair the moment Albert stood up. Locarno was still catching on as Albert stepped in front of the Turbolift doors, depressing the button for an immediate lift.

“Locarno, Albert,” Tammias said. “Let’s make this work.”

Albert gave Locarno a nod that said “this was for real,” and Locarno’s whole attitude suddenly changed. He wanted to say something, but was finding the words hard to come by. The turbo lift doors opened.

“Is there a problem, Locarno?” Tammias asked, looking back over his shoulder.

“No, Sir. Good luck, Sir,” Locarno said.

“Luck is not a factor,” Tammias told him, quoting another obscure movie that no one present would probably know. He winked at Albert.

Albert and Locarno stepped into a turbo lift and were whisked away. Tammias hit the comm. again. “Engine room, put Torres on.”

“Torres here, Sir,” Torres answered.

“Torres, I want you to take two people and an emergency six kit, and report to transporter room two. You’re transporting over to the Kobayashi Maru as soon as we come out of warp. The moment you hit the deck, you’ll have exactly three minutes to eject their warp core. Understand?”

“Three minutes, Sir, I understand,” Torres said.

“Lenar,” Tammias said. “Put a timer on that. As soon as she transports over, give me a count down.”

“Aye,” Lenar said.

“Also,” Tammias said. “Twenty second before we drop out of warp, I want you to eject all the emergency life pods.”

Lenar whistled as he programmed the cue to launch the life pods at exactly twenty second prior to coming out of warp. As soon as the cue was programmed, he said, “I don’t understand why you’re doing that.”

Tammas smiled. "If you remember your recent history, we won't need life pods. The Romulans don't take prisoners." This time he hit his personal comm. badge. "Garcia to Afu, how's your pet project coming?"

"I need seven more minutes," Afu answered.

"You have two minutes thirty seconds," Tammas said. "Just give me what you can. You can now enlist help if you want."

"Oh, thank you, great Czar," Afu said, closing the connection before his sarcasm shorted the circuits.

Tammas rose and walked over to Trini. "I need you to keep a heads up for the Kobay's warp core. The moment Torres ejects it I want you to put us between the core and the Kobay, raising shields on the side facing the core. I'll need us as close as you can get us to the Kobay. Understand?"

Trini just smiled. "Sir, I'll have us so close the remaining passengers will be able to step over to us."

"That's my girl," Tammas said, touching her shoulder. He looked back to see who had taken over tactical. It was an Olina Mirren. She was new at the Academy, filling a vacancy created when someone had recently dropped out. As this was her first experience with the Kobayashi Maru test, she was no doubt feeling a little anxious. He hadn't officially met her yet. She had been inserted into the roster after Crusher vacated his post, and all he knew of her was her name. And that she was cute, for a human. He frowned, telling himself to keep his thoughts professional. "Mirren. As soon as you have a visual on the core, I'll need you to target it, but hold your fire until I give the word."

"Aye, Sir," Mirren said, wondering why he had frowned at her. Had she already done something wrong? Was he expecting someone else?

"One minute, forty seconds, until we drop out of warp," Trini announced.

"Be ready to raise the shields if we need to, Lenar," Tammas said. "Oh, and for the last of the crazy orders, as soon as we come out of warp, I want all torpedo bays to start launching class one probes at will, as fast as possible and as many as possible. Basically, don't stop until we run out probes, or I give the order to start loading photon torpedoes. I want each probe broadcasting transponder recognition codes for various types of ships on all frequencies, and, at my command, I will want all probes to begin radiating the entire visible spectrum of the EM band. Have the probes gather in a Sigma spheroid formation, with the Kobay as the focus. We're going to light this space up."

At that, Tammas took out a tin of gum he had stashed in the command chair's hidden compartment, opened it, and popped a piece in his mouth. He noticed Tatiana giving him a queer look, and so he held the open tin up to her, offering her a piece.

"No, thank you," Tatiana said.

Tammas shrugged and pocketed the tin. He chewed contentedly, confident that there was nothing more he could do but wait and admire the dedication of his fellow shipmates. He noticed Kletsova staring at him, seemingly agitated. "You're perturbed about something?"

"Either you're over confident, or you're chewing a valium," Tatiana said. "Either way, you're making me nervous."

Tammas smiled pleasantly, as if this was just another day in the park. "Did I tell you, you look cute in that cheer leader outfit?" he asked her.

“Umph,” Tatiana said. “Surprised you even noticed.”



“How is this possible?” Locarno asked Albert point blank the moment the turbo lift doors closed on the Bridge.

“We have assault fighter simulators set up on the hangar deck and they will be tied in tandem to the Kobayashi Maru simulation,” Albert said. “Though technically we won’t be leaving the hangar deck, from inside our assault ship simulators we will have the same experience we would if we were actually flying our fighters.”

“That’s not quite what I meant,” Locarno said. “I wanted to know how this is possible. I never thought to bring a squadron along with us.”

Albert nodded. “It’s permissible under the rule structure. It’s just not advertised.”

“Alright, I’ll have to compliment Garcia on that one. We’re still going to have communication issues with all the jamming the Romulans will be doing. We need to come up with a way to signal each other using our beacon lights...”

“Tammias has provided a solution to the communications problem,” Albert said.

The turbo lift came to a halt, the doors opened, and Albert was the first one out, running.

“What kind of solution?” Locarno asked, chasing after Albert.

They entered the hangar deck at a run and came to a screeching halt. The rest of Nova Squadron was there, but so was Sierra Squadron. Sendak immediately came up to Lorcano.

“Sir,” Sendak said. “Sierra Squadron volunteers to fly shot gun with your team in order to facilitate communication via your squad’s ships and the Enterprise, using our telepathic abilities.”

“You know, Albert,” Locarno said. “I think we might just win this one! Everyone take your ships, and welcome your Sierra Squadron member. Thank you, Sendak. I suppose one of your pilots can fill in for Crusher? Let’s move, people. We’re launching the moment the Enterprise drops out of warp.”



Torres grabbed an emergency six kit from a wall and pulled it free, tossing it to one of the Engineers coming towards her. “You’re with me, Cadet. And you, over there. Yes, you. Whatever your name is, come with me, now.”

The two followed her to the transporter room where two security personnel were waiting. There was also a medical team standing by to treat patients brought on board via transporter use.

“What’s your names?” Torres asked the two crew members she had brought with her. They seemed bored.

“Kelly, Sir,” Kelly said. “Nathan Kelly.”

“Phillips, Sir,” the other answered. “Terry Phillips”

“Great,” Torres said. “Our job is to eject their warp core.”

“But there’s nothing wrong with their warp core, Sir,” Kelly pointed out.

“Did anyone ask you if there was anything wrong with the warp core, Kelly?” Torres asked. He shook his head no. “Good, because all I know is the Captain says eject their warp core. So, what am I going to do? I’m going to eject their warp core. Do either of you have a problem with that?”

Neither volunteered a complaint. She was satisfied that they agreed with her.





“I still see no signs of Romulan activities,” Mirren said.

“Oh, they’re there, Olinana,” Tammass assured her, not facing her. He studied the tactical, looking for any inconsistencies. “But we won’t see them until after the first transporter wave. Transporter teams get ready. All transporter rooms, I want to beam as many Kobay passengers over as we can immediately after our teams have materialized. Lenar, coordinate as long as you can with the Kobay.”

The Enterprise dropped out of warp so close to the Kobayashi Maru that people on both ships thought there would be an immanent collision. It didn’t help any that the Enterprise still carried the momentum of having been at full Impulse Power before entering warp, so they literally just barely avoided rubbing the paint off each other as the Enterprise pushed right by.

“Trini, prepare to bring us around,” Tammass said. “Keep us in transporter range.”

“Aye,” Trini said, not correcting for their previous momentum yet.

“Sir, we’re being jammed,” Lenar said. “I’ve lost all subspace frequencies with Starfleet. Nova Squadron is ready to launch. Three minutes on Torres, mark.”

“Stand by, Nova squadron,” Tammass said. “Mirren?”

“Nothing yet. Wait, there, off our starboard bow,” Mirren announced.

“Go, Nova!” Tammass said. “Starboard shields now! Prepare to fire torpedoes.”

“Incoming!” Kletsova yelled. “Brace for impact.”

The simulator shook and a shudder rolled through the deck plates, which was surprising because the shield had absorbed the full impact of the torpedo.

“Shields held, Sir!” Lenar announced. “Preparing to rotate shields as we come about.”

“Three more Romulans uncloaking,” Mirren stated.

“Abort further transport, raise all shields,” Tammass ordered. “Trini, I want us to take as many of those hits as we can, so keep us between the Romulans and the Kobay.”

“Aye,” Trini said.

“Fire torpedoes,” Tatiana said, coming around to help tactical.

“Mirren, fire at will,” Tammass agreed. “Lenar, let there be light.”

Over two hundred class one probes suddenly went hot, and since there weren’t many things for them to shine on, it didn’t seem to immediately brighten the place up. Other than the ships dropping their cloaks for their attack runs, along with the two Federation Starships, plus Nova squadron, plus the growing bits of debris and splinters from exploding torpedoes and ripping fragments of ships, one might not have noticed the new lights at all until you flew into one. The two hundred probes had the appearance of stars, and with few objects near by for the organic eye to compare and contrast, gauging its size and proximity was challenging until you were right up on it. The probes were a navigational nightmare for Nova Squadron, but they wouldn’t do much damage to a larger ship. One might knock out a window if it was lucky. Mostly, the probes would either bounce off the hull, or blow up against a ship’s shield. Either way, if the probe took on sufficient damage, its light would go out, which was something Tammass was hoping for.

“Mirren, anywhere you see a probe’s light go out, fire in that direction,” Tammass said.

“Aye, Sir,” Mirren agreed, thoroughly impressed with the tactic.



Torres and party arrived in the Engineering section of the Kobayashi Maru. All in all, it looked in good condition. The Kobayashi chief engineer, Lt. A Roberts, greeted Torres with exuberant expectation. “Oh, thank god,” Roberts said. “If you help me reconnect these coils, I’m certain we can have warp power back in twenty minutes.”

“Sorry,” Torres told him. “I’m here to eject the warp core.”

Roberts’ enthusiasm became anger. “There’s nothing wrong with my core!”

“That’s what I told her,” Kelly said.

Torres turned to one of the security personnel that had accompanied her and gave him one of those looks that said, “Would you take care of this?” The guard nodded, and motioned his men to sweep out the Kobayashi’s engineering team, per Garcia’s prior instructions.

“Sir, if you and your team will come with us, we can prepare for your transport back to the Enterprise,” the security officer said.

“She’s going to eject my warp core!” Roberts argued. “I can’t let her do that...”

“I know, Sir. Come with us,” they said, leading the Engineer out of the Engineering section. “

The Kobayashi Maru rocked with a sudden impact. “Damn it!” Torres said. “Phillips, see if you can get the shields up. Even half is better than nothing. Just rotate it to face wherever the Enterprise isn’t. Kelly, start powering down the anti matter stream, while I prepare to deep six this core.”

Kelly did as he was instructed, but not without mumbling. “Nothing wrong with the core, mam. It’s a perfectly good core.”

The ship rocked again.

“There won’t be a core, or a ship, or anything else, if they hit any closer to the Engineering section!” Torres yelled. “Come on, we have just a little over two minutes left to achieve our objective.”

“Fine,” Phillips said. “But what do we need a D-six kit for?”

“The captain tells me to bring the D-Six, I bring the D-Six,” Torres yelled. “Any more questions, you can take it up with him later.”

The ship rocked with another explosion and Kelly suddenly understood her point with such clarity he began to hustle. “Anti matter stream is contained within the core, you can eject it at your discretion. The ejection system is online and ready.”

“Thank you,” she said, plugging her gear in.

“See, told you we wouldn’t need the D-six kit,” Phillips said.

“Just activate the ejection routine,” Torres told him.

Phillips pushed the button. They looked up to watch the core slide away. Only, it didn’t slide away. Phillips looked to Torres and then back to his station controls. “I don’t understand. It should have ejected.”

Torres slapped the panel. “Damn it.”

“You know, profanity isn’t going to help us here,” Kelly observed.

She glared at him, wondering if he was a complete imbecile, pulled out her tricorder, and began taking scans. “Why isn’t this working?”

Kelly ran over to the Kobayashi’s Engineering table to try and trace down the issue using the dynamic map on its electronic surface. He changed screens several time,

his finger following the flow chart. An item blinked red at him. “Oh, my. That shouldn’t have happened.”

Torres joined him at the station, and when she saw it, she bit her tongue. “The Sagan device failed?”

“That’s impossible. It’s a straight forward mechanical devise. It can’t fail,” Phillips said, coming over to see for himself.

“Well,” Kelly said, pointing. “That’s why we need the D-Six kit.”

“But how would he have known that would fail? That’s not supposed to fail,” Phillips said.

“Well, it’s wrong. It has to be. Phillips, go down the Jeffrey’s tube and check the sensors and then the wiring,” Torres ordered.

“And what if they’re right?” Phillips asked.

“Then pull the Sagan device by hand,” Torres explained.

“That’s a death sentence!” Phillips argued.

“We’re all dead if we don’t eject the core!” Torres said.

“There’s nothing wrong with the core!” Phillips said. “I could see giving up my life if this meant something, but there’s no issue here, and I can’t afford to loose that many points on this test.”

“Neither can I,” Kelley said.

“Fine,” Torres said, deciding to do it herself, pushing them angrily out of her way. Did one still get a badge if you ended up dead? She proceeded to the Jeffrey’s tube, opened the hatch, sat on the floor with her feet into the hole, and then she climbed down. She reached back up and pulled the six-kit down in after her. They peered down at her.

“Secure this hatch!” she yelled back up at them.

The work space darkened as they sealed the hatch behind her. There was the smell of ozone and an indication that a fire had burned briefly, before the force fields kicked in to smother it. She proceeded down the ladder. When she got level with the Sagan device, she could see the housing that held the gears had come free, and several of the gears were sufficiently out of alignment as to make the device incapable of functioning. Though she knew it was very unlikely that this scenario would ever happen in real life, not without a warp core breach, anyway, here she was, facing her own no win scenario. Her dilemma was to wait until the core was actually in danger of breaching, which meant she would be violating orders, or she could reach in, pull down on the Sagan Device, which would cause a door to open revealing the billions of stars below the ship. Consequently, the warp core would slide out, and the tube would be exposed to vacuum, killing everyone in the tube. This meant her.

Torres wedged the kit between a ladder rung and a corrugated panel, opened it, and pulled out one tool.

“God speed, Garcia,” Torres said, reached between the rungs on the ladder with the tool, clamped it into place, and pulled on the Sagan Device. It didn’t move. She cursed and threw her body into it, putting a foot through a rung to push on a panel for more leverage. She dislodged the deep-six kit with her effort, sending it falling to the floor two meters below. The various tools dislodged from the kit that fell clattered against ladder and rungs. The Sagan Device moved through its arc and a door below her opened.

Someone, probably the Engineers that built the simulator, had thought it would be funny to add some dramatic effects. Like wind in the tube and the sound air might make

as it leaked away into a vacuum. For a moment Torres thought she might actually die. It was a very real experience and her heart raced, as she watched the warp core slide out occluding less than one percent of the billions of stars. Then her wrist comm. lit up, and a voice told her not to move. She was instructed to stay where she was until the conclusion of the simulation. For all effective purposes, as far as the simulation was concerned, she was dead. She climbed the rest of the way down the ladder, sat on the floor, and looked out at all the stars. She was surprised to see some of the stars appearing much closer than she imagined they should, and then she realized they weren't all stars. She wondered who in the world would have launched class one probes. She also wondered why they were all radiating in the visible spectrum of the electromagnetic band. It was all very pretty, and a nice touch from the engineers to put a screen below this opening so that someone might look out on the stars should they ever find themselves in this position. Now that was foresight.

Billions and billions of stars.



As Nova Squadron ran through their preflight checklist, Locarno couldn't resist trying to strike up a conversation with Sendak, sitting directly behind him. Sendak, true to his Vulcan nature, was also going over the preflight checklist, just in case his human counterpoint missed anything. The first two minutes of the battle might very well be the determining two minutes, and they were going to need every advantage.

"So, how long have you been friends with Garcia?" Locarno asked.

"We have a history together," Sendak said. "That doesn't qualify us as friends."

"Yeah, but you're more than acquaintances," Locarno pointed out. "Why else would you have asked him to join Sierra Squadron. Isn't it supposed to be one of those Vulcan's only club?"

"He carries a Vulcan Genetic history," Sendak explained, scrutinizing the checklist all the more harder the more Locarno spoke to him. Perhaps he was one of those human, he thought, that required conversation to help calm his preflight nerves. "Consequently, he has a sufficient level of empathy making it possible to establish a telepathic link, which is the only requirement for joining Sierra Squadron. That telepathic link helps us to act as one when we need to, or to help us rally around a team member that is in trouble. Naturally, it would make more sense for us to be flying this mission, since it will take time to relay information to you and then wait for your response. But knowing Garcia, I suspect he wasn't looking to completely master the test, but rather, he simply desired to level the playing field."

"Still, you're upset that he chose my team," Locarno said. "So, Garcia is a telepath. Is that how he knows everyone's name? He's not remembering, but just pulling it out of their heads."

"No. Even if he was capable of doing that, that would be a violation of a Vulcan ethic instilled in us to the heart of our being," Locarno said. "Garcia is only a strong empath. Strong enough he could probably create a telepathic link if he physically touched you, but I know the people who trained him. He has sufficient psychic boundaries and self control to avoid accidental meetings of the mind."

"Yeah, but it would explain so much. Like how smart he is," Locarno said. "You don't get to be that smart without some sort of psionic ability. Isn't that why Vulcans are so smart? Because you're telepathic, you share community knowledge?"

“Why do you humans like to blow things so out of proportion and mystify that which is alien to you?” Sendak asked. “Yes, at an early age a Vuclan, or any empathic or telepathic brain, is influenced by the brains around it. The brain tends to mirror the physical structure of the brains around it, which can save it developmental time by not requiring direct stimulus to build certain types of structures. All sorts of stimulus have an effect on the actual physical structure of the brain, from the environment in the womb, to the environment it is born into. As the brain evolves over its natural life span, the user of the brain begins to have an equal effect on how the physical structure will develop, or be reinforced. For example, the more you fly, the more neural links between your flying brain cells are laid out, and those all ready laid out get reinforced with constant use. It’s like working a muscle, the more math you do, the better at math you will get. Stop exercising your math muscle, and those pathways will begin to degenerate, and eventually atrophy.”

“Garcia to Nova Squadron, we’ve identified one target as of now,” came Garcia’s voice over the intercom, followed by Lenar’s voice. “You’re cleared to launch when ready. Good hunting.”

“Here we go team,” Locarno said. “I want a clean dispersal, split up, and we’ll rendezvous two hundred clicks in front of the saucer section of the Enterprise. Once there, we’ll execute a second dispersal and meet again two hundred clicks behind the warp nacelles. Follow me out.”

Locarno took the lead, with two ships on either side. The two outer most fighters banked, one going portside, the other going starboard. Of the inner two ships, one went above the Enterprise, and the other below. As for Locarno, he took a swing by the Kobayashi Maru to get a feel for how much damage it had sustained, accelerating to meet the squadron as planned. As he glanced over his instrument display, he noticed that the TCAS monitor was displaying the transponder signatures for various ships and their proximity to him.

“What the devil?” he asked, looking up to see if he could spot one of the other starships. “TCAS says we have all sorts of help, but I don’t see any other ships.”

“They’re class one probes,” Sendak explained. “We can use them for rallying points if you choose.”

“Class one probes?” Locarno asked. “There must be over a hundred of them.”

“Two hundred, twenty three,” Sendak said. “The last one launched 4 seconds ago and has just entered the sigma spheroid pattern, with the Kobayashi as the focus. A network has now been established in hopes of sustaining computer telemetry between our ships.”

“Yeah and make flying really hazardous,” Locarno complained.

“When ever you want me to take over, let me know,” Sendak said. “Albert is firing on a Romulan War Bird, at two point seven, mark twelve.”

“I see it,” Locarno said, bringing them around. “It’s raising its shields. They can’t fire their energy weapon and sustain their shields, right?”

“To the best of our knowledge,” Sendak agreed. “They can still fire phasers, but to fire their energy canon they can neither be cloaked nor shielded. Two more coming uncloaked aft of the Enterprise.”

“Jaxa, take your wingman and sweep aft of the Enterprise,” Locarno said. “I wonder why the Romulan spaceships are so reminiscent of Klingon spaceships? Albert, tighten your formation up.”

“I’ve relayed your directive to Jaxa,” Sendak said, ignoring Locarno’s question for rhetorical. “She’s grumbling that our assault fighters are doing little damage.”

“Tell her we just have to harass them for the most part, but focus your fire on the vulnerable spots, like engine nacelles, external sensor arrays, any phaser turrets, or their torpedo bays. We could always get lucky. We have a limited number of missiles, so save them for opportunities to strike at their bridge section.”

“Relayed,” Sendak said. “Garcia wants us to be cautious flying too close to the Kobayashi. They managed to get a quarter of their shields up, and they’re keeping it facing away from the Enterprise.”

“I see it,” Locarno said, suddenly seeing the flash and energy dispersal as the Kobayashi shield absorbed a phaser attack from a Romulan. “Now I see it. How many ships does that make?”

“There are six identified ships. The jamming of communications is obviously working against the Romulans, or they would have called reinforcements,” Sendak said.

“Or they called for reinforcements before they started jamming the frequencies,” Locarno said.

Nova Squadron was proving itself to be difficult targets for the Romulans to hit. Part of that was due to their fast attack speeds and greater maneuverability, but the most significant fact was they were designed to resist targeting sensors. Targeting computers would find it hard to keep up even if there wasn’t any jamming of radio frequencies, or jamming of general sensors. With all the jamming going on, computer targeting systems were virtually useless, and it would take an exceptional Romulan to take out an attack fighter using visual information alone, and a little bit of luck, hoping that as he led the target the target didn’t up and change it’s speed or direction. Outside Locarno’s cockpit window was a raging storm, but instead of lightening it was flashes of light. Sometimes the light was well defined phaser paths, or visual streaks from torpedoes, an optical illusion based on his vantage point of the torpedo, but mostly it was the glow of energy dissipating from the shields. In addition to the phaser fire was an intermittent web of lasers connecting all the probes to the Enterprise. When the fighters intercepted one of these laser branches, their computer navigational aids were updated.

“Holy crap!” Locarno said, the first time he intercepted the laser web. “They have a laser communication grid up and functioning! Garcia thought of everything.”

“Apparently,” Sendak said. “In order to stay in contact with the Enterprise, you only need to remain in visual contact with a probe. Setting the communication-laser to auto. There is a minimum distance for optimum exchange rate to be maintained.”

“As many of probes as there are, that shouldn’t be a problem. With that C-laser network, I don’t think we’ll need your telepathy,” Locarno said. And then thought better of it. “But I’m glad you’re here, just in case.”

Then, strangely enough, night became day as he passed directly under one of the probes. Day without blue. The probes were hot, shiny points of light that were illuminating the battle area. Sparkly bits of dust and debris like clouds of glitter a drift in a vacuum gave the scene an eerie look. The fact that there was no sound, other than from the vibration noise of his engines and life support flooding the cockpit, and the occasional

heads up from the computer when it perceived a threat or managed to connect via the network of probes to the Enterprise for updates, just added to the surreal quality of the battle. The computer voice would sound, "TCAS out. TCAS in, information update. Warning, proximity alert..." The forward thrusters which seemed to sporadically burst into life as Locarno continued his evasive maneuvers were silent, but the brilliant, flame would cause a reflection on the cockpit windows.

"Albert is in trouble," Sendak announced.

"Nova squadron, rally around Albert," Locarno said. "What's up?"

"He took a hit," Sendak said. "His inertial dampeners have failed."

Locarno knew that wasn't good. Without the inertial dampers, Albert would not be able to make the acrobatic turns at the speeds necessary to evade being hit. The ship could still do the maneuvers, but the g-forces would literally kill the pilot, breaking every bone in his or her body. "Tell him to head back to the Enterprise, we'll cover him."

"He says don't waste your energy," Sendak said. "I have a visual on him. There."

"I see him," Locarno said. He also saw the Romulan War bird de-cloaking directly in front of Albert. "Albert, get out of there. Forward thrusters full to eight g's. Back out of there!"

The Romulan's main energy cannon had the pre-glow of an imminent energy release, an angry red leaking out of the forward section of the ship. They were certainly wasting a lot of energy just to wipe out one small fighter. Albert wondered if their ship was really a simulator somewhere with real people in them who were having an emotional response to the fighter's harassment. Albert punched up full acceleration, which would have been more g-forces than he would have been able to withstand without inertial dampeners, but his intent became obvious within a few seconds. He rammed his ship full speed right down the mouth of the Romulan energy weapon. The resulting explosion from the collision timed to coincide with the cannon's energy release was phenomenal, taking out most the forward section of the ship.

"Nova Squadron, focus all your fire power on that Romulan. We're taking him completely out of the game," Locarno ordered. "This one's for Albert. Arm missiles, we're going in fast."

"Missiles armed," Sendak said.

The death throws of the Romulan War-bird was dramatic, even for a simulation. Fire sprayed away from the hull where seams opened, allowing the atmosphere it held to leak out. Several bodies were ejected into space, one of them passing close enough to Locarno's cockpit window that he could see the dead man's face. He shivered, realizing the simulation was giving him a taste of reality. War was hell. He squashed his personal reaction and watched as one of the openings allowed for several rockets to enter, which accelerated the ship's demise, severing the ship into two pieces. The pieces drifted away from one another, slowly tumbling. Locarno shouted in triumph, avoiding fragments as he flew through the area where the ship had previously been.

His joy of taking out the Romulan ship was short lived, however, for as he came out of the smoke and debris he saw that his short range scanners were now giving him more information. Now that there was one less ship jamming frequencies, his sensors were revealing what looked to be an entire armada about to enter the battle field at full impulse speeds. His heart sunk and he told Sendak to pass the word.

“We’ve got company,” Locarno said.

“Hajar has a visual on them,” Sendak announced. “They’re life pods.”

“Life pods?” Locarno asked.

“Garcia is ordering us to the far side of the battle field, opposite the life pods.

The Kobayashi just ejected its warp core, so we need to act fast,” Sendak announced.

The Nova Squadron regrouped, making their way for the far side, with two war-birds turning to give chase, apparently not aware of the looming disaster. The Enterprise fired what look like a wild shot that wasn’t going to hit anything specific, only, when it detonated, it caused the Kobayashi Maru’s warp core to breach, allowing antimatter and matter to mix uncontrolled. The resulting explosion rippled from the source like waves from an exploding star. Part of the energy lit up the Enterprise shields as it fought to hold the energy at bay, and the wave, as it continued to push outwards, rode up one side of the Enterprise shields and down the other side of the Kobayashi Maru’s shields, the two of which joined seamlessly due to their close proximity and because of the shield swelling with excessive ionic discharge. The energy wave released so much energy into the battle field, that all the war-birds that were cloaked became visible, and the only two war-birds that had their shields up lost their shields when they became saturated with energy. Since the Kobayashi Maru and the Enterprise were focusing all their energies into half of their shields, their shields held out long enough that the worse part of the energy release from the exploding warp core had come and gone before they failed.

“Awesome!” Locarno shouted. “Nova Squadron, return to attack formation. Everyone pick a target.”

“They’re turning to run,” Sendak said, repeating Jaxa’s exuberant observation.

“No, they’re just regrouping,” Locarno said. “But we’re not going to give them time to get their shields regenerated.”

“Garcia sends his compliments and orders us back to the Enterprise,” Sendak announced.

“He’s crazy! We won’t have another opportunity like this again,” Locarno argued.

“We’re not here for a war,” Sendak pointed out.

“But they started this…” Locarno said.

“Garcia wants us back so we can leave the area before reinforcements arrive,” Sendak said. “He’s making it an order. Hangar deck four is ready to receive us.”

Locarno hit the instrument panel, dropping profanities. “Nova Squadron, return to the Enterprise, hangar deck four. Let’s go.”



“They’re headed for the pods,” Kletsova announced. “Nova Squadron can finish them.”

“We’re here only for a rescue operation,” Garcia said.

“If they get shields back up and return, there won’t be a rescue,” Kletsova argued.

“I know,” Tammias said. “Lenar, divert all energy from our shield bank to transporter operations. I want everyone off that ship in less than four minutes. Have them use their transporters if they have to in order to speed things up.”

“Aye, Sir,” Lenar said.

“Mirren,” Tammias said, drawing her attention. She had that look in her eyes that he had only seen in the eyes some of his fans. It was the eyes he held for Deanna Troi. He ignored it. “Target the nearest grouping of life pods and prepare to fire on my orders.



Like the warp core, you don't have to have a direct hit, just a close enough detonation to shake things up a bit."

"Aye, Sir," she said, having long since given up trying to understand everything that was going on, or even what she was being asked to do. Everything was going so fast her questions were only getting in the way of her focus. She was relieved that she had been able to simply keep breathing and follow orders. She could make sense of it all later. If they got out of it alive.

"You're banking on them believing we won't fire on them if they take cover amongst our life pods?" Kletsova asked.

"Something like that," Tammias said.

"Those life pods are still coasting at full impulse speeds, with a trajectory that will bring them right here, and the Romulans will surely be back up to full power by the time they arrive," Kletsova pointed out.

"Yes," Tammias agreed. "Mirren, fire away."

Mirren launched a volley of torpedoes detonating them near the first grouping of life pods. One of the life pods sustained a direct hit. Several of the life pods exploded, and in true domino fashion, the life pods around them exploded, causing the life pods near them to explode until the full chain of life pods had all exploded. The Romulan warbirds, having nested between the life pods, were now all heavily damaged, and weren't likely to be of any threat before the Enterprise had finished its operations.

"I don't understand," Kletsova said.

"Basic laws of physics," Tammias reminded her. Of course, he had only been hoping for more obstacles against the Romulans, and so it was only serendipity that the Romulans had taken refuge within the grouping of life pods. "An object in motion tends to stay in motion, unless you blow it up. I had Afu fill the life pods with armed photon torpedoes before we launched them. Once outside our warp field, they continued on their previous heading, and at their previous velocity, thanks to a little thing called momentum."

Tatiana Kletsova was awed. She couldn't think of anything to say. He reached up and pushed on her chin so that her mouth closed. "It's okay. You can celebrate with me later."

"Sir," Lenar said. "All Kobayashi Maru passengers and personnel have been accounted for. We're finished!"

"Trini," Tammias said. "Plot a course that will take us out of the neutral zone as quickly as possible."

"Aye!" She said, overwhelmed with joy that she couldn't help but release a shout. She was smiling ear to ear, shining like one of the probes they had launched.

"Yeah!" Tatiana cheered, joining the growing chorus on the Bridge. She hugged Garcia.

"We're not out of here yet," Tammias told her.

"But?" Tatiana began.

"It's not over until the fat lady sings," Tammias said. "And I don't hear any singing."

"Should we get the shields back online?" she asked

"Sir," Lenar said. "I'm receiving a distress call from one of the Romulan ships. It's the Pelora, Sir. She's asking for medical assistance."

“That’s new,” Tammas said.

“It’s a trap,” Tatiana said, her Russian sense of trust no-one shining through.

“They just want to prolong our stay until reinforcements arrive.”

“Perhaps,” Tammas said, thinking for a moment. “But, the one thing I have learned about Star Fleet is that they always answer a distress call, isn’t that right, Trini? Lenar, open hailing frequencies. This is Captain Garcia, on a rescue mission to aid the Kobayashi Maru. Perloria, can we be of assistance?”

All the lights, computer controls, and monitors on the simulator went dead. Emergency power came up. Everyone looked around to see what went wrong. Had they been hit? Was there a critical failure? Then a voice came over the Comm. “This is Professor Chapman. The Kobayashi Maru test has been concluded. Please stay at your current position until further notice while we make final evaluations.”

The bridge erupted in another chorus of cheering, with both Tatiana and Trini leaping from their chairs to reward Garcia with hugs and kisses. Mirren wanted to join in, but she felt it was out of place, given that she had never met him before. Had someone taken notice, they might have thought she was a bit envious not being with Tam’s “in-crowd.” Tammas pulled free and went over to Lenar who was doing just what Garcia wanted to do: check the stats. Lenar was using his personal PADD, with Tammas looking over Lenar’s shoulders, watching as statistics of their performance was being updated. Tatiana and Trini joined him as they also looked at the information.

“I guess that fat lady is singing now, eh?” Trini asked.

“Damage?” Tammas asked.

“Minimal,” Lenar said. “All with-in acceptable parameters. We only lost eleven crew members.”

“Never say only. Their names?” Tammas asked.

“Ablert, Borie, Kent, Mentar, Nelson, Olsen, Renalt, Singer, T’Lan, Torres, and Victors,” Lenar said. “I don’t have the how or whys yet, but that should be available soon. Casualties coming in now...”

The door to the Bridge opened and five admirals entered. Mirren shouted, “Attention, Admirals on the Bridge.” Everyone went to attention.

Admiral Chapman appeared to be peeved. “Clear the bridge. Except you, Garcia,” he said, a quality in his voice indicating Tammas was in trouble. Chapman refrained from speaking again till the bridge was cleared of all personnel except him, the Admirals, and Tammas. The doors to the bridge slid shut, with Kletsova, Trini, and Afu trying to witness all they could before the doors closed. They closed. “Wipe that smug look off your face, cadet. You’re in a lot of trouble. And swallow that gum! What do you think this is? One of your Escape novels? Your personal holosuite simulation?”

“No, Sir!” Tammas said.

“I want the names of your all your co-conspirators,” Chapman demanded.

“No, Sir,” Tammas said.

“What was that?” Chapman demanded, pushing his nose even closer to Tam’s face.

“I take full responsibility for any potential corruption to the Kobayashi program,” Tammas stated.

“Who helped you?” Chapman demanded. “The Garcia commune? I don’t think Trini or Lenar could do it. So who?”

“Sir, permission to speak freely?” Tammias asked.

“How dare you?! You cheat on this test and you expect me to let you speak freely?” Chapman asked. “Do you think you can justify what you’ve done?”

“No, Sir,” Tammias said.

“You think you can sweet talk yourself out of being punished?” Chapman asked.

“No, Sir,” Tammias said.

“So, what is it you want to say?” Chapman asked.

“Sir, I did violate the code of ethics by altering the test parameters so that it was possible to accomplish the mission,” Garcia said, and then he looked right in the man’s eyes. “For that, I will take whatever punishment is due me. My crew, on the other hand, deserves their victory. They worked hard, and I am sure their evaluations will show you they went above and beyond the call of duty. Punish me, but give them their Kobayashi Maru badges.”

“Oh, we’re going to give them their badges, alright,” Chapman said. “And you’re going to get an accommodation for thinking outside the box. Congratulations, Garcia.”

Tammias did a double take. Not only was Chapman offering his hand, but he was smiling from ear to ear. The other Admirals were pushing in to also offer their congratulations. The last, Admiral Madison, added: “You’re still in trouble for breaking Star Fleet’s code of ethics, so you’ll need to stop by my office at 15:00 hours in order for us to discuss your punishment. As a fellow sociologist, I know you’re a strong proponent of Exchange Theory, and so you’ll understand that I require balance to be restored.”

“Yes, Sir,” Tammias said. “Your office, fifteen hundred hours, Sir.”

“Oh,” Chapman said. “One last thing. How you won must remain a secret. So, make sure any of your little helpers who you are unwilling to name understand this.”

“Yes, Sir,” Tammias said.

“Well?” Chapman asked. “What are you waiting for? A medal. Dismissed!”

Tammias saluted, pivoted on his heels and exited the Bridge. He was going to leave via the nearest exit, but Tatiana rounded the corner and intercepted him. “Garcia? Come this way, will you?”

He nodded and followed her off the simulator via one of the port air locks. Outside the airlock was just a typical everyday hallway that ran the length of the simulator. The other side was a glass wall with sunlight shining through. Lining the hallway were all the cadets that had participated in the Kobayashi Maru test. The people in the front of the line snapped to attention as Garcia made his approach.

“Oh, please,” Tammias said. “At ease, cadets.”

Everyone began to applaud. Tammias approached the first person in line and shook his hand. “Thank you, Williams. Good job,” and in such fashion went down the line until he had personally thanked everyone. Tatiana followed him, adding her own comments. Arly, from his Tai Chi class, accepted his handshake, and pulled him into a hug, and whispered in his ears: “It’s going to be the best damn meal you ever had?”

“Okay,” he whispered back.

As they moved on, Tatiana moved in closer for a moment. “Did she just ask you out?”

“Sort of,” Tammias said, and quickly moved to the next person in line, which was Albert. Tammias shook his head in mock disappointment. “You ever pull a stunt like that again, I’ll kill you.”

“I guess I need some more practice,” Albert admitted.

“Well, it was a cheap shot that took you out,” Tammas agreed. “I’m sure you’ll fly better next time.”

“I’ll try, Sir,” Albert said.

Tammas hesitated, “By the way. You remember that thing I confided in you the other day. That thing I broke?”

“Yeah,” Albert said. “Are you in trouble?”

“Apparently,” Tammas said, sending a full explanation via email to both Albert and Crusher via his implant. “I’ll make it right. It’s just, I’m a little embarrassed, and, you know, I would like you not to tell anyone. Contain it!”

“Done,” Albert agreed.

“Thank you, Albert. Good work, today,” Tammas said.

Jaxa was next. “You’re amazing,” she said.

“No, you are,” he said.

“Photo op?” She asked, handing Albert her pocket camera.

Garcia posed with Jaxa, and then Hajar demanded one alone with him also, and then both girls posed with him, each kissing his cheek. They thanked him and then he started to move on, but Jaxa shook his hand again. She hesitated letting go of his hand, but she finally did and watched as he went on to Locarno. A scowl passed over Tatiana’s face, but it disappeared the moment Jaxa turned to greet her. As Tatiana passed, Jaxa’s eyes returned to Garcia. Albert waved his hand in front of her eyes to see if she were still there or dreaming. She smiled, pushing Albert’s hand away playfully, and shaking her head in admiration of Garcia. She confiscated her camera from Joshua.

“Locarno,” Tammas said. “Everything square with us now?”

“I’m still going to kick your ass one of these days,” Locarno said.

“Very well, then,” Tammas said, shaking Locarno’s hand.

When he came to Torres, he hugged her. “Thank you. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“Just make sure I get that medal,” Torres said.

“Post humorously,” Tammas agreed. “Have dinner with me tonight?”

“No,” Torres said.

“I guess some no win scenarios are always a no win?” Tammas asked

She shook her head. “No,” she said. “It’s just I have plans for tonight. I’ve heard rumor of this huge party and I want to attend.”

“Very well,” Tammas said. “See you in class tomorrow.”

It took an hour to personally thank everyone, leaving him no time to eat before going to Admiral Madison’s office. He made his way there, trying not to obsess over the lyrics, “May the punishment fit the crime,” from the musical, “the Mikado.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

Admiral Madison office was on the hundredth floor. The reception room was large with a vertical, opaque, monolithic fountain in front of the far wall, and a couch arranged for the comfort of guests. The monolith was self illuminated with a soft glow, varying in hues. Sunlight streamed in freely from the plate glass wall, which added to the warmth of the room. The secretary looked up as Tammias entered and gave him a huge smile. She even went as far as standing to greet him, adjusting her skirt as she stood.

“Hello, Captain Garcia,” she said, enthusiastically pumping his hand.

“Please, I’m not a captain,” Garcia said. Her desk was transparent, no drawers, or file cabinets, but if you looked at the desk just right you could see the computer interface which had several documents opened that she was obviously working on. His file was one of them.

“Not yet,” she said, brushing her hair out of her eyes, with her free hand. She continued to pump his hand. “I’m Arlene Barton. Will you remember that?”

“For the rest of my life,” Tammias promised her, matching the strength in her grip.

Madison poked his head out of the office. “Garcia? What are your intentions with my grand-daughter?”

Tammias actually blushed. “Just saying hi,” Tammias said, pulling his hand free from hers.

“Well, now that you have, get in here,” Madison growled.

Tammias glanced back at Arlene as he passed over the threshold and into the office. Arlene mouthed the words, “call me.”

The Admiral pulled the door shut, passing a warning glance to his grand daughter through the closing space. She smiled innocently at him. Admiral Madison had been in conference with Professor Chilton, chair of the Criminal Justice Department. Chilton stood to greet Cadet Garcia. Tam was left wondering just how much trouble he was in.

“This is Captain Chilton. Have you two met?” Madison asked

“Not formally,” Tammias said, shaking the man’s hands. “You conduct the Academy’s orchestra.”

“Yes, a little hobby, mostly, but I much prefer playing to conducting. Especially jazz,” Chilton said. “I’ve seen you in the recital hall, listening to the orchestra practice. What do you think?”

“Are you asking my personal opinion, or my professional opinion?” Tam asked.

Both Madison and Chilton laughed, taking their seats again. Madison, a big, heavy set guy, leaned forward over his desk. He set into motion an old desk toy that was perhaps useful in demonstrating the laws of physics, but nothing else. Two silver weights swung from their chain, collided with companion weights sending an equal amount of mass swinging away at the opposite side, which in turn fell back and collided again with their mates. Tam found the rhythm annoying, and not just because it clashed with the rhythm of the grandfather clock in Madison’s office. In general, he had come to hate toys that made noise. Even someone drumming their fingers set him on edge.

“Really, what do you think?” Madison asked, telling Garcia to sit with a wave of his hand.

Tammias took a seat, wondering if he should be as direct as he was in his classes. He really did believe classes should be active participation, but this was not a class setting. This was supposed to be a discussion of his punishment. Then again, maybe

talking music would lessen the severity of the pending punishment. Then again, he knew how sensitive humans were about music, and if he were too harsh...

"Spit it out," Madison said.

"All of your selections will pass," Tammias said. "Except the Vulcan piece you're working on for the finale. It won't be ready for the graduation ceremony, if that's what you're thinking."

Chilton nodded, and to Madison he said, "I told you."

Madison frowned. "The Vulcan Ambassador, Lamone, came to me when she heard we were going to perform this piece and she asked me to drop it."

"I haven't met Ambassador Lamone," Tammias said. "But she gave you sound advice."

"Explain this to me," Madison said.

Tammias sighed. "This work is so rooted in Vulcan philosophy and history that it resonates to the deepest part of their being. If you were to perform this piece, and just one note is off, whether it be flat or sharp, even if it is off by a tenth of a percent, undetectable even to a dog's ears, every Vulcan in attendance will stand up and walk out of the ceremony, whether they're in the audience or in the graduation ceremony itself. And the Ambassador from Vulcan who has asked you not to attempt this piece, she'll pack her bags and head home to Vulcan. That's how serious it is."

"And if it is performed flawlessly?" Madison asked.

Tammias shook his head. "Alright. If you want to play what ifs. If you get it right, you will have every Vulcan in attendance so mesmerized that you might, just might, see tears forming in their eyes."

Madison sat back in his chair. He rocked a little. "I want you to make this piece happen," he said finally.

Tammias nearly fell out of his seat. "Oh, no. Oh, hell no. I don't want to be in anyway associated with this fiasco."

"Consider this your punishment for cheating on the Kobayashi Test," Madison said, his voice a bit gruff.

"How does committing professional suicide return balance for cheating on a test that was rigged against me to begin with? If I were to do this I'd never be allowed to set foot on Vulcan again!" Tammias said, coming to the edge of his seat. He reached out and stopped the motion of the toy to bring silence. "Look, I've seen the choir's and orchestra's performance. They can't do it. Not in six months. Not in two years!"

"This graduating class has done some remarkable things," Madison said. "And it seems only fitting that their hard work is exemplified in a challenging piece like the one I've chosen. I have heard this live and it's the most awesome thing I've ever heard. It moved me and I'm not the sentimental type. And since the Vulcans refuse to make recordings of it, I want us to perform it. I want this piece. You're a highly recognized musician, with a Doctorate in musicology, from the Vulcan Academy of Science no less, which is unheard of for a human, considering how damn perfect they want their music, as if it were a science and not an art, and I believe you are the one to accomplish this mission. I want you to make this happen."

"I'm schedule for a training cruise two weeks from now and I will be gone for two months. There is insufficient time to get this piece ready," Tammias said. He looked to Chilton for help. Chilton just shrugged, but Tammias could see in his eyes that he was

just relieved someone else would be responsible for the “fiasco.” For a moment Tammias thought about quitting. He would just up and quit. Forget the Academy. Forget Star Fleet! He didn’t need this.

But he wanted this. So, what were his issues about complying with Madison’s request? No lives were at risk. Was this about him being embarrassed? Was Madison trying to ridicule him? Probably not. He was just trying to see if Tammias would go into a no win scenario, knowing the full cost to him and his reputation. That was probably all there was too it. Maybe at the last moment they would pull the selection out of the concert.

Madison and Chilton waited for his answer. The sound of the old, weight driven, grand father clock clicked in the back ground. Tammias wanted to smash it. Looking out the window, Tammias could see the blue of the sky over the other buildings. Clouds like lambs grazed over the blue. The next building over had a garden on the top with a fountain in the center. The sun was crisp, sparkling against the water spraying into the air, and the garden reminded him of a funeral, minus the people in black. His funeral. They wanted to see him fail. Alright, then, if they want me to fail, let it be big time, he decided.

“I’ll want complete artistic license over this,” Tammias said.

“You got it,” Madison said. “You just make this happen. By the end of the concert, I expect to see crying Vulcans.”

“Is that all?” Tammias asked, wondering if releasing tear gas into the audience qualified.

“I’ll email you the names of all the performers,” Chilton said. “You might call some emergency sessions before your training mission.”

“Any chance I can postpone that mission?” Tammias asked.

“No,” Madison said.

“If that’s all, I’ll guess I be going,” Tammias said.

“There’s one more thing,” Madison said. “The press wants to talk to you.”

“No, I don’t think so,” Tammias said.

“You just pulled off the Kobayashi Maru test, and people want an interview with you,” Madison said. “And I promised BBC an exclusive.”

Tammias glowered at the Admiral.

“Your interview is with Ms. Brighton in one hour,” Madison said. “Put a smile on, be nice, and don’t walk out on her like you did on that reporter for the Fox channel.”

“Is there anything else?” Tammias asked, containing his anger. Most of it, anyway. He really didn’t care if the Admiral saw the anger on his face.

“Yeah. Stay away from my granddaughter,” Madison said.

“I prefer aliens,” Tammias told him.

“Dismissed,” Madison said. “And try not to embarrass Star Fleet during your interview.”

Tammias closed the door on the way out of the office and Arlene turned around to greet him again, leaning forward in her chair, deliberately showing off several of her assets. “You don’t look happy? Did he threaten you about seeing me?”

“Had he done so, I would date you just to spite him,” Tammias assured her.

“Awesome,” she said. “So, are you free this week end?”

“Your grandfather just increased my work load for the near rest of my life,” Tammas said. “But, email me your schedule and we’ll figure something out.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Arlene said.



After visiting with Admiral Madison, Tammas transported directly to the studio for his interview and asked if there was some place he could get cleaned up before he met with Ms. Brighton. After cleaning up, he made his way to Ms. Brighton’s office. She was expecting him and met him with a warm smile. It seemed sincere, so he relaxed a little. She was a brunette, about 33 years old, and was dressed professionally.

“You don’t know how much I appreciate you doing this interview,” she said, inviting him into her office. “You’ve been completely incommunicado ever since you came to the Academy. You haven’t even updated your official web sites.”

“Well, they sort of made this an order, Ms. Brighton,” Tammas said.

“Amy, please,” she said. “I’ll try and make it painless. Have a seat, make yourself comfortable. And may I call you Tam? Am I saying it right?”

“Yes, and yes,” Tam said.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like to record our pre-interview before we go live,” Brighton said.

“Go ahead,” Tammas said.

“Great, now the questions may seem sporadic, but that’s mostly because I’m looking for sound bites,” Amy explained. “After the show begins, I will be asking you questions that viewers have emailed me. I don’t direct the flow too much.”

“I’m familiar with your show format,” Tammas said.

“Really?” Amy asked, using her PADD to activate her cameras.

“As you’re probably aware, I am a subspace ham enthusiast, and, well, the BBC frequency is still the best test to verify that your radio is working. If you can’t tune in BBC, well, your radio’s most likely broken,” Tammas said.

Amy nodded. “Wow. That’s an old joke. Is there any topics you would like to avoid during the live interview?”

“I’d prefer to avoid speaking of the Vulcan incident,” Tammas said.

“The abduction incident or the computer virus vandalism incident?” Amy asked, pouring herself some tea. She offered some to Tam.

“Thank you,” Tammas said to the tea, and then to her questions. “Both of them, actually. The moon thing was a childhood prank.”

“I heard you did it for love,” Amy said.

“Really? You heard that?” Tammas asked, sipping from the tea. “Nice.”

“It would seem the animal enthusiasts protested your last book, *Both Hands Full*,” Amy said. “What’s that about?”

“Will fortune never come with both hands full?” Tammas quoted Shakespeare. “It’s written from the protagonist’s perspective, a cliché narrative style. On catching one particular bad guy, he makes a comment that ‘he was squirming like a dolphin stuck in a tuna net.’ He makes quite a few animal analogies similar to that.”

“You don’t like dolphins?” Amy asked.

“I love dolphins,” Tammas said. “It was just an off beat analogy by a gumshoe detective...”

“But you wrote it...”



“If writers have to start screening everything they write because someone might be offended then there will be no literature. There is always someone, somewhere, that’s going to be offended by something,” Tammias said.

“Is it true that you said the Borg are not evil?” Amy asked.

“If you’re referring to the quote in my BLOG, then you’re taking it out of context, but it proves my last statement,” Tammias said.

“Can you put it into context for me?” she asked.

“As opposed to you actually reading it?” Tammias asked. He examined the pattern on the arm of the couch cast by the sun-light refracting through his glass of tea and ice. “My BLOG entry two days ago was in response to the esteemed Federation Council Member Delaney who is trying to rally the troops in response to the greatest evil the Federation has ever faced. I’m paraphrasing, of course, and his intentions are good. The Borg is a serious threat, but they are no more evil than a rattle snake. What kind of fool am I if I get mad at a rattle snake for biting me if I step on its tail or cross its path? It’s just doing what rattle snakes do. This use of the archaic word evil suggests that the Borg are manifestation of something supernatural and they’re not. We don’t have time for myth building. We need to stay rational and deal with the facts.”

“So, you don’t believe in evil?” Amy asked.

“I don’t believe in ghosts,” Tammias said. “And to quote Ghandi, the only devils are those running around in our own hearts.”

“You can quote Ghandi but you dis Spock in a paper you wrote?” Amy asked.

“I assume you’re referring to the Iotian paper?” Tammias asked, and when she nodded, he continued. “I didn’t disrespect Spock. I hold Spock in very high esteem. I merely pointed out that the scope of his response to the Iotian problem was inadequate due to insufficient data and the lack of sophistication with the computer software he relied on for his analysis.”

“Sounds like a dissed Spock to me, and you have reportedly dissed quite a few Starfleet heroes in class,” Amy said.

“I have formed a few opinions,” Tammias said with a smile. “Which might explain the popularity of my BLOG.”

“Yeah, I just think it’s funny that you dis people like Kirk, when rumor at the Academy makes you out to be the next Kirk,” Amy said. “How do you feel about that?”

“I’d say, no one will ever replace Kirk,” Tam said. “Besides, one legend is sufficient.”

“We could always use more heroes,” Amy said, checking her time and her list of questions. “Well, five more minute till we go live. You’re not going to walk out on me, are you?”

“I don’t know,” Tammias said. “Did you watch that Fox interview?”

“Yes, and I will try to avoid the FAQs listed in your public profile,” Amy said, referring to the frequently asked questions to which the answers were available. “Can I get you anything else?”

“No, I’ll be fine. When do you insert your theme song?” Tam asked.

“The computer does it for me and gives me the cues on my PADD. Why did you join Star Fleet?” Amy asked.

“I wanted to see the Universe, and, I wanted to be part of a team,” Tammias said.

“Well, the Academy isn’t keeping you so busy that you’ve stopped publishing,” Amy said. “I guess your music fans are relieved about that.”

“Well, music is a bit of an obsessive compulsive thing with me. The music is just in my head, and so, if I want to sleep, I have to write it down,” Tammias said. “I wake up with songs in my head. They creep into my head during the day. I am compelled to write music.”

“And you can join fleet with OCD?” Amy asked.

“The only way a physical or mental handicap might disqualify someone is if it would prevent that person from performing their duties,” Tammias said. “There are lots of people with artificial limbs and organs.”

“But you don’t let someone with schizophrenia fly a starship,” Amy said.

“I don’t have schizophrenia,” Tammias said. “But if I did, they would cure it and reevaluate me, and offer me work suitable to my level of proficiency.”

“Rumor has it that you don’t sleep,” Amy said.

“Oh, I do sleep,” Tammias assured her.

“But this last piece of music you published has a time stamp of like three in the morning,” Amy pointed out. “Most of your publishing have early morning time stamps.”

Tammias nodded, and decided it was time to address the myth that he didn’t sleep. “The secret to my success, I suppose, is that I do much of my creative work in my sleep, while lucid dreaming. I have a neural implant which facilitates the recording of my dreams directly to a computer where I can later edit the audio visual information. I can also put it down directly into musical notation, and I often write my stories and letters while sleeping. So, though it may appear as if I don’t sleep, in reality, I’m only this productive because of technology. Technology in tandem with being able to remain lucid while dreaming. Lucid dreaming is better than being on a holodeck. I highly recommend learning the skill.”

“Well, you have to admit that’s still a pretty phenomenal feat,” Amy said. “Very few people are able to lucid dream.”

“As with anything, it takes practice,” Tammias said. “Anyone can do it.”

“That is one thing I would have to argue with you,” Amy said. “Not everyone can do it. That’s why you’re so unique and why you have the following that you do.”

“Everyone has the same potential,” Tammias argued.

“Maybe, theoretically,” Amy said, pausing long enough to form her words. “But even you, as a sociologist, have to admit that the statistical reality of the idea that everyone can achieve just doesn’t pan out.”

“I don’t like reducing everyone, people, down to a statistical formula,” Tammias said. “Look, sociology is a tool, a very useful tool for understanding the dynamics of social interaction, but that’s all it is, a tool. You can’t take everything in that field, or any other scientific field, and make it an absolute.”

“The Earth goes around the sun,” Amy interjected.

Tammias sighed and shook his head. “I think what you’re trying to get at is that it would appear that not all people are equal. And, on the surface, I would agree, that seems to be true. Under the law, everyone is equal. Our technology guarantees everyone a minimum level of comfort, with access to food, shelter, medicine, and education. That minimum is far superior in degrees of comfort than say the most pampered of royalty eight hundred years ago. It also seems, and this is a generalization, that people are so

comfortable that there isn't sufficient driving force to compel people to push themselves to the next level of being..."

"Which you define as productivity?" Amy said.

"No. You, Amy, are defining it as productivity, and you're using me as your measure," Tammias said. "You're saying, how do you do all this stuff? Look how much you do, and are doing, but in reality, everyone has access to the same stuff."

"You just refuse to admit that you're exceptional," Amy said.

"There's another way to look at it," Tammias offered. "If being normal or average is doing considerably less than what I am presently doing, then I must be the one with a problem."

"So, you're saying people shouldn't hold you as a role model, or aspire to be you because you're abnormal?" Amy asked.

"Statistically, that seems like a reasonable conclusion," Tammias said. "We can't all be Captain Kirks. Where would the fun in that be? If we were, we'd all be fighting for the command chair and the big chair isn't that big. I'm quite happy that there are Picards and McCoys and Spocks."

"Well, whatever it is you're doing, it seems to be working. It seems your contribution to literature and contemporary music is enjoyed by multiple species," Amy said.

"I've been very fortunate," Tammias agreed.

"You say music is an OCD thing with you. Do you have a song in your head now?" Amy asked.

Tammias simply smiled at her. As fast as she was hitting him with these questions, she might actually get enough material to have a second show.

"Would you be willing to sing it for me?" Amy asked.

Tammias sighed. He was willing to sing to her. The song in his head was an old, Earth, pop song that had come from a sound track to a popular movie maybe four hundred years before his time.

"Can I access the auditory system on your PADD?" Tammias asked. Amy consented and using his neural implant he used the PADD's MIDI system to lightly accompany his voice with instrumental music. He sang, "If I were a sculptor but then again no, or a man who makes potions in a traveling show, oh I, know it's not much but it's the best, I can do, my gift is my song, and this one's for you..."

"That's very pretty. Did you write that?" Amy asked.

"No," Tammias said, shaking his head. Because he had just sung it, it was now louder in his head. "That was written by Sir Elton John."

"Never heard of him," Amy admitted. "Let me guess: you download truck loads of songs and play them in your sleep?"

"The more experiences you have, the more material you have to synthesize new material," Tammias said.

"Nearly lost all track of time. Here we go, three, two, one," Amy said, and then looked towards one of her cameras. "Hello, everyone, and welcome to the Brighton show. I'm Amy Brighton, and today's special guest is none other than Tammias Parkin Arblaster Garcia. Hello, Tam. Thank you for coming today."

"Hello, Amy," Tammias said. "Thank you for the invitation."

“My pleasure. You’re a regular hot topic these days, especially here at Star Fleet Academy,” Amy said. “Has it been easy making the switch from being a celebrity to working towards being a Star Fleet Officer?”

“You mean there’s a switch?” Tammias asked playfully.

“Your fame hasn’t gotten in your way?” Amy said.

“I don’t think so,” Tammias said, sipping from his tea, deciding to make her work a little. Why make it easier for her? If he really wanted to get mean, he could simply answer with “yes,” or “no.”

“So, no one’s accused you of getting an easier go at it than others?” Amy asked.

“I don’t think anyone doubts the integrity and energy that I put into my work,” Tammias said, engaging in one of his relaxation techniques. “I don’t ask for special favors and I push myself as hard as anyone else.”

“I heard you don’t even study,” Amy said. “How is it you consistently score in the upper percentile when you don’t study?”

“If you’re assuming that because I don’t frequently carry books or a PADD that I don’t study,” Tammias said. “You’d be mistaken. I study.”

“How? Or better, when?” Amy asked. “Your schedule suggest that you’re super human. You attend classes, you volunteer at an animal clinic, you run a weekly gaming session for a local adolescents club, and teaching Tai Chi at the academy. When do you sleep? When do you study? Are you sure you’re not an alien in disguise?”

“I study,” Tammias assured her.

“And you never miss your own recreation,” Amy pointed out.

“My down time helps me process information,” Tammias said.

“And speaking of down time, can you talk about this thieves and assassinations guild thing you’re a member of?” Amy asked.

“It’s a game where certain players compete to build a better mouse trap and the other players try to steal the prize,” Tammias explained. “Other players volunteer to become targets, and others try to take them out of the game. Sometimes it’s mixed.”

“Are you a thief or an assassin?” she asked.

Tammias only smiled.

“Isn’t this game incompatible with Star Fleet code of ethics?” Amy asked.

“It’s a game,” Tammias reaffirmed.

“One that can be pretty rough, if I’m not mistaken,” Amy said.

“It’s strictly voluntary,” Tammias said. “The members are people that need an extra challenge in their lives, and no one has been killed in three game cycles, and that was an accident. But if you want to look at it as a club for deviants, well, that was my area of expertise in sociology. It gives me a means for studying the activities and behaviors associated with an element of society that is usually anti main stream. It’s a classic cops and robbers game, and really, that’s just two sides of the same coin. It’s stereotypical for me to say it, but there’s a certain segment of society that is preoccupied with what the old world would deem criminal, and they satisfied that compulsion with either engaging in criminal activity or engaging in counter criminal activity. Ninety percent of criminal activity was abolished with replicator technology. There’s no need to steal because everyone has equal access to material wants. But the game is still on. It may be that part of being a complex social animal means it is compulsory to play games.”

“And you love games,” Amy said.

“Yeah, I suppose you can say that,” Tammias said.

“You don’t like to loose,” Amy said.

“I don’t like to loose,” Tammias agreed, honestly.

“And from what I hear, you won a pretty big trophy today, something very few Star Fleet cadets have ever won. Would you like to brag about that here, or should I tell them?” Amy asked.

“If you’re referring to successfully completing the Kobayashi Maru test, there’s nothing to brag about,” Tammias said. “Star Fleet is about team work, and I had a superior team, extremely dedicated, and what we did today, we did together.”

“Are you just being modest?” Amy asked.

“Please, I’m not modest. Just ask any of my fellow cadets. They’ll tell you I can be as about as vocal and opinionated as they come, and I do love to be right,” Tammias said. “But really, it’s not modesty when I say I couldn’t have done the Kobayashi test alone. The crew earned it with sweat and virtual blood.”

“You assembled the team,” Amy pointed out.

“I had some influence in that regards,” Tammias said.

“This win puts you right up there with Kirk. It took him three times to beat this test,” Amy added.

“There is some variability when it comes to luck,” Tammias said.

“If I understand this right, they’re also evaluating your performance to see if your defense against cloaked ships is a feasible tactic,” Amy said. “Flooding an area with lit probes was pretty ingenious. They’re already calling it the Arblaster-Garcia Defense.”

Garcia laughed. “Don’t forget the life pod gambit. That’s a ploy of last resorts, which means you’re probably not expecting to come out of it alive. You loose points for that sort for thinking.”

“You still passed,” Amy pointed out.

“Again, I had an excellent team,” Garcia said.

“Any rivalries at the Academy?” Amy asked.

“No,” Tammias said.

“Not even with Crusher? Aren’t you and he fighting for the top scores in all of your classes?” Amy asked.

“He’s got the top score in warp physics and exobiology,” Tammias said. “He earned it.”

“Yeah, but you’re a vet,” Amy said. “Aren’t you even a little miffed that Crusher, who specializes in math and warp physics, beat you at your own game?”

“What are you looking for, Amy?” Tammias asked.

“Is it friendly competition or is it mean spirited?” Amy asked.

“Though the Academy is designed to help people worked together, I admit there is a spirit of competition that develops between the students. There is quite a bit of pressure to perform,” Tammias said. “But we keep things in perspective. And, Amy, I am a human being, not a grade point average. Crusher is a better test taker than I am. There’s no shame in admitting that.”

“Did you and he exchange practical jokes,” Amy said.

“Star Fleet frowns on such behavior,” Tammias said.

“Now that you have covered the politically correct position of Star Fleet, can you tell us what it’s really like?” Amy asked.

Tammas drank some of his tea. “No comment.”

“So, you weren’t the victim of any practical jokes?” Amy asked, scrolling through her available questions.

“Let’s just say I got as good as I gave,” Tam said.

“Moving on, then. If you wanted to help those kids out there who are considering if they want to be doctors or vets, what would you tell them?”

“Follow your interests. And remember, being a human doctor requires you to know the anatomy and physiology of one animal, the human animal. Multiply the level of knowledge needed to perform by a thousand to be a vet, and multiply it a couple of more times again if you’re considering exobiology. So know your limits, and make good choices.” Tammas said.

“Pretty standard advice. Nothing to help them get through Star Fleet Academy with honors, like you?” Amy asked.

“I haven’t graduated yet. Lots of hard work still to do,” Tammas said.

“Rumor has it you are on a fast track for Captain,” Amy said.

“If I’m found worthy,” Tammas said. “I still have lots to learn.”

“Your family must be very proud,” Amy offered.

Tammas nodded, thinking: go anywhere but here. “I have good people in my life. I’m very fortunate.”

“I read your latest Escape novel the other day, and I know you’ve said on your bio that it’s not about you, but, come on, not even a little?” Amy asked. “I mean, one of your characters is now at the Academy.”

“I suppose you can’t separate yourself completely from the work,” Tammas said.

“And so, you do your own stunts for the holographic versions?” Amy asked.

“Yes,” Tammas said. “If I can’t do the stunts, then I take it out of the story.”

“You ever hurt yourself doing these stunts?” Amy asked.

“A few broken bones here and there,” Tammas admitted. “Some bruises.”

“Who’s Melinda?” Amy asked.

Tammas looked at her curiously.

“You dedicated this Escape to her,” Amy prompted him.

“Oh, a work associate,” Tammas said. “And a friend.”

“Nothing more?” Amy asked.

“Nice weather we’re having today, don’t you think?” Tammas redirected the question.

“Too personal?” Amy asked, noting something on her PADD. “Isn’t there anyone special in your life?”

“Everyone in my life is special,” Tammas said.

“Yeah, but are you currently seeing anyone?” Amy asked.

“I am seeing you just fine,” Tammas said.

Amy smiled and moved on.

“If you don’t mind, I’m going to play an excerpt from Escape Twelve for the audience,” Amy said.

Tammas shrugged his shoulders, indifferent. Amy cued the excerpt. It was an action sequence, focused on the hero. To Tam it was just a generic scene, almost trite with the usual avoidance of pitfalls, set in motion by the hero setting off alarms after cracking a safe. He watched Amy, who seemed to be sincerely enjoying the progress of

the scene. The scene ends with the hero sliding to a halt outside the building, suddenly surrounded by six armed opponents. Amy turned her attention back to Tamas.

“How fun was that?! You certainly revived the cliff hanger,” Amy said.

“I think the whole point behind *Escape* was for me to practice extricating myself from extreme situations,” Tamas said. “I guess there’s a bit of a paranoia component to my OCD, and so I tend to imagine the worse, and conspiracy theories abound, so I put them into this format so I can work through them and figure them out, and in the end I feel like I have a little more control over my life.”

“You believe in conspiracies. Like a few key people taking over the Universe and stuff?” Amy asked.

“Sometimes, but, I can always reason my way back to a more tempered view point,” Tamas said. It didn’t matter to him if people knew, and there was really no reason to be secret about stuff that was typically available somewhere on the net. There were people that did nothing more than profile celebrities, so it was generally harder for Tamas to keep things secret than a regular citizen. Telling it all to Amy or revealing it in a personal profile was just one means of preempting rumors. “I mean, it just doesn’t make sense that one person, or one group, would want to expend that much energy to control a world or an empire for material or political gain. What’s the point? Everyone has what they need, so why would you want more? But, it’s fun imagining such things. Makes for good novels.”

“So, do you miss your wife?” Amy asked.

“Excuse me?” Tamas asked, an obvious shift in his emotional state taking place. Red alert, shields up, he thought.

“I’m sorry,” Amy said. “I know you were married young, but I didn’t know it was a secret. You are still married, aren’t you?”

“I’m not at liberty to discuss it,” Tamas said, repressing his emotions and surprise. No one outside of the “family” knew of the arrangements. It was always possible that it had leaked, for even Vulcans weren’t perfect at keeping secrets; they were just better than most.

“Is that because of the Deltan culture?” Amy asked.

Tamas blinked. Something wasn’t right. “I don’t understand your question,” he said, withdrawing emotionally from the conversation.

“Your wife, Persis, is a Deltan,” Amy said. “Right? You had a daughter with her?”

The glass Tamas was holding broke, spilling tea and broken pieces of glass into his lap. “I’m sorry,” Tamas said. Instead of jumping up he focused on his hand, observing the blood.

Amy immediately got him a towel from the replicator. He wrapped his right hand in it. “Are you okay?” she asked.

“Proceed with your interrogation,” Tamas said. He blinked, and frowned.

“Sorry, that was uncalled for.”

“I don’t understand your reaction?” Amy said, bringing a waste basket nearer to put the glass in.

“I am unable to discuss this with you,” Tamas said, chunking the bottom of his glass into the trash, and doing the same with the pieces he collected.

Amy called up a photo on her PADD. It was a portrait of Persis and her daughter. “Am I wrong here?” Amy asked, showing Tammias the picture.

Tammias discarded another shard of glass and then took the PADD from Amy. He felt the water pooling in his eyes, but didn’t wipe them free. “That is Persis. I’ve never seen her daughter before. What’s her name?”

“Tama,” Amy said. “Tama Orleans Garcia. You didn’t know?”

“This is beyond complicated and I don’t have the right to speak on it, partly because of the other people involved and the nature of the complications, and, well, because I don’t have all the information,” Tammias said. He handed her back the PADD. “You’re supposed to be a journalist. Did you not do your homework?”

“So, you didn’t know about your daughter. Are you and Persis separated?” Amy asked. She observed Tammias taking in a deep breath, allowed him a moment to regroup, but then he still didn’t say anything. “Tam, are you still with me? How long has it been since you seen her?”

“It’s been... Too long. There’s this thing, a medical condition that necessitates us being separated,” Tammias said, restricting his exhale so that it took longer to empty his lungs. “The best analogy is that of an allergy. If we were to ever meet in person again, it could result in my death.”

“Really?” Amy asked. “I didn’t know those kinds of things could happen.”

“How would you know that?” Tammias said, a little anger leaking out. “You’re just a reporter, skimming the surface, asking other people’s questions, how would you know anything? Your show is chaotic and all over the place. No focus. It fits the sound bite media format and the short attention span of your audience.”

“I can see this is really hard on you,” Amy said.

Tammias offered her a faint smile. “It’s certainly a scenario I haven’t been able to write myself out of. Well, thank you again for inviting me, Amy. I need to be going.”

“You promised me an hour,” Amy said.

“No, Star Fleet promised you an hour,” Tammias said. “I didn’t agree to sensationalism or tabloid headlines. I’m a human being, I have a life. I experience pain and joy, and have issues just like everyone else. Now, we can sit here together and pretend to be friendly towards each other, but quite frankly, I’m busy and I think you got what you wanted. Right? A boost to your ratings?”

“Tam,” Amy said. “I’m sorry. I did this badly.”

Garcia nodded. “Got to have the happy ending, too, uh?” he asked. Tammias sat down on the edge of the couch. “What else do you got? What foods do I like? Peanut butter. I can’t get enough of the stuff. Ferrets. I love ferrets. Not for eating of course. Don’t know why I like them. Maybe because they’re anti main stream. I do tend to stray off the beaten path, you know? People say they stink, but all animals have odors. We’re familiar with dog odors and cat odors because those pets are common. You go into a house with dogs, and you say, oh, that’s a dog smell, and you’re okay with that. But you go into a house with ferret smell and you’re not familiar with it you think: what’s that? Must be something bad. That’s the way the brain works. Associations. You love dogs, you generally like the way they smell. You hate dogs, and you go into that same house as above and smell dogs, you have a bad reaction because of your association. It’s always about associations. So, what was I talking about? Oh. Ferrets. You know, I really like animals, sometimes, more than people. You can always trust them to be straight up with



you. They're never trying to work an angle, or get one up on you. Interesting. My hand is still bleeding."

Garcia reached over and picked up the towel again. "Anyway, some of my life is private because there are other people involved and they have the right to privacy. I don't care so much for my own privacy. Mostly because I don't care what others think. I've made mistakes. The moon incident on Vulcan was clearly an example of bad judgment on my part. I was a kid and I was in love. Not the first time. For falling in love, or making mistakes. This one time, I built this space ship, no joke, and I launched myself into orbit. Ended up actually killing myself on that one. Was dead for like two minutes before I was resuscitated. Good times. But for love. Let me tell you, I had this crush on one of my counselors when I was even younger than during the Vulcan Moon incident. Oh, god, I was so in love, and she so knew it, too. I'm still in love with her, come to think of it. Her name is Deanna Troi. How's that for a revealing scoop. Anyway, she told me, Tammias, one day you will fall in love and it will be right and it will be mutual, or something to that affect. It was love, it was definitely mutual, but apparently it just wasn't right. How old is the daughter there? Ah, almost fourteen... Yeah. That would be about right. Why don't I know? That's a good question. A really good question. And, it's one I'm going to go find an answer to right now."

Tammias got up and started for the door. He paused, turned back to Amy. "You don't mind if I keep this towel, do you? No, I didn't think so. You know, I'm really glad we had this little chat. Would have preferred twenty billion people hadn't seen it. Your audience is about twenty billion, right? Up close and personal with Tammias Garcia, beamed to how many systems?. Yes, I can have a bad day and rant and rave like the rest of them."

Garcia stared at Amy. Amy looked a bit helpless. He smiled faintly. "Well," Garcia said. "I guess if this is one of my Star Fleet test, I just flunked. Loosing my cool with an audience. Lovely. Have a nice day, Amy."

♪♪▶

McCoy answered his door. "Hello, Tam. I was expecting you."

"Why the hell didn't you tell me?!" Tammias demanded.

"Come in," McCoy said, making room for Tammias to enter.

"I want you to answer my question!" Tammias said, defiantly standing in the doorway, and growing angrier at McCoy's level of calmness.

"I out rank you, son, now get your butt in here and sit down at the table," McCoy said, dropping into his command voice, which sounded ominous with the country drawl.

Tammias obeyed, taking a seat at the table. There were two places set with BLT sandwiches, cut in halves, and an iced, carbonated drink. McCoy sat some French Fries on the table as he followed Tammias into the room.

"Let me see your hand," McCoy said.

Tammias un-wrapped the towel and showed it to him. McCoy retrieved a dermal repair kit and administered aid. The wound healed before their eyes. Satisfied, McCoy sat down at the table next to Tammias, put some fries on his plate, and set the remaining portion in front of Tam.

"Now, before you go getting yourself all tied up in knots about this," McCoy began.

“Tied up in knots? You act like I’m over reacting here. Why didn’t you tell me I had, sorry, I have, a daughter?” Tam asked.

“I am bound by an ethical duty to comply with a doctor patient confidentiality,” McCoy said. “Ketchup? Everything’s better with ketchup. Suit yourself. Persis and her parents decided it was best not to mention it because as far as they were concerned it would only add to your grief. The same reason you can’t see Persis applies to your daughter.”

Tammas put his elbow on the table and his head in his hand. “This sucks.”

“Which part?”

“Uh?” Tam asked.

“The fries or the sandwich? What do you think I’m talking about? You have managed to cope without being too preoccupied with Persis, so, was it simply the manner it was brought to your attention that sucks, or are we going to return to dwelling on a situation that sucks. A situation that is beyond your control, I might add,” McCoy said.

“You don’t understand,” Tammas said.

McCoy ate another fry. “You’re right,” he finally said. “I have never seen this before in my entire life. Not in a hundred and forty plus years, most of those as a professional, and as a human. This is just so beyond me. Never saw any one suffer from the loss of a love, or experienced it myself.”

“I have a daughter,” Tammas said.

“Yes, you do,” McCoy said.

“Does she know about me?” Tammas asked.

“There’s about a four hour delay in sending a subspace transmission between Earth and Delta,” McCoy said. “Would you like to use my phone?”

“You have her number?” Tammas asked.

“This wasn’t the way we wanted you to find out,” McCoy said. His voice as quiet, thoughtful. “We were going to tell you, but you know, people get busy, and distracted by their lives.”

“I can’t believe there was never a good time to inform me,” Tammas said, getting up to go for the phone.

“And when would a good time be?” McCoy asked. “Things like these get more difficult to repair the further time goes on. Perhaps we handled it badly, but at the time, it seemed like the right thing to do. Trust me, Tam, whether it’s in the command chair or in your daily life, you’re going to end up making decisions that seem good at the time, but in retrospect could have been handled differently. That’s part of life.”

“I’ll never choose to keep a secret like that,” Tammas said, activating the phone unit. Confident that it was on and recording, he continued. “Persis, it’s me, Tam. I know. Not a great intro, but I have questions. I can’t even begin to formulate all of them, so instead of hitting you with a barrage of what might seem like angry and confused queries, perhaps you can just fill me in on details. Oh, and if you haven’t seen the interview, or don’t have a clue, then know I’m calling about Tama Orleans.”

Tammas sat down in McCoy’s lounge chair. There was a fake fire roaring. “What a terrible opening. I miss you. How are you? How is she? Is there anything you need? Computer, send message.”

Tammas stretched out in the chair, told the computer to hold all his personal calls except any from Persis and then he went to sleep. He woke once when McCoy covered

him with a blanket. “Has she called?” he asked, sleepily. “Not yet. Give her time,” McCoy said. Tammias sat quietly for awhile, listening to McCoy go through his routine before retiring, and then he again slept silently until McCoy awakened him to receive a return transmission from Delta. He watched and openly wept as he viewed images of a daughter that he would never meet in person, the only comforting thought being that she was alive and well in an environment that loved and cherished her.

Tammias stayed the night at McCoy’s house and had normal dreams, not lucid. He dreamed of Persis and his daughter. He also dreamed of being banned from Vulcan because he failed to get the performers to sing Vulcan correctly. McCoy was still asleep when he rose, so he left him a note on the table, then transported back to his flat to change and make breakfast for himself. He could have eaten at McCoy’s, but it just didn’t seem like home. His room mates appeared to be asleep and there was a stranger sleeping on the couch. He made his way quietly to the kitchen and began preparing breakfast for himself. He ordered up four pancakes, rich with butter, syrup, and huge gobs of peanut butter on each cake in the stack. This was topped with two eggs over easy and bacon lying on the side, almost floating in the syrup. He cut a bite size piece with his fork, watching the yellow of the yoke bleed out into the rest of the mess.

“That is just gross,” Tatiana said, glaring at him from the entrance to the kitchen. She was wearing a nightgown, a loosely tied bath robe, and slippers. She crossed to the replicator and pressed in an order.

“But it tastes great,” Tam said, salting the eggs.

“Are you depressed or pregnant?” Tatiana asked, taking a milkshake out of the replicator.

“If this was chocolate, you could anticipate depression, but since it is peanut butter, you can just assume it’s because it’s the best food ever created,” Tammias said.

“Where were you last night?” Tatiana asked. “You never answered your communicator.”

“I went sailing,” Tammias lied.

“You realize that not showing up for your victory party was a bad thing?” Tatiana asked, sitting at the table with him.

“I needed to be alone,” Tammias said. He decided not to mention that he didn’t know there was a victory party.

“Maybe you’re alone too much,” Tatiana said, touching him lightly on the shoulder. “We saw the interview. We are here for you.”

“Thank you,” Garcia said.

“Did you see that your training cruise has finally posted?” she asked.

“Really?” Tammias asked. “What ship?”

“You were assigned to the Chance,” Tatiana said, handing him a PADD that had been left on the counter.

“Oh, god,” Tammias said, reviewing his orders. Not good. Not good at all.

“You weren’t expecting to be assigned to the Enterprise for training, were you?” Tatiana said.

“Anything but the Chance,” Tammias whined.

“What’s the big deal?” Tatiana asked.

“Hey, Tam, did you come here by Chance? Chance meeting you here,” Tammias began, with a comical voice.

Tatiana smiled. "It's not that bad. You sure did miss a party, though. I know I wasn't the only one extremely disappointed you weren't here."

Tammas didn't have a comment for this.

"By midnight that half Klingon girl was so fed up, she left in a rage," Tatiana said.

"Torres was here?" Tammas asked. Was that what she had meant by a huge party she was to attend? His party?

"You'd best stay clear of her," Tatiana said. "I think she could kick your ass."

Tatiana got up and took her drink with her.

"You know, milkshakes for breakfast just isn't right," Tammas said.

"Oh, and that monster of a breakfast is?" Tatiana asked. "I don't know how you stay as slim as you are eating the way you do."

Tammas gave her a quick smile, finished his breakfast, and went and cleaned up for school. He had one of those feelings that today wasn't going to be a good day, but he tried to tell himself that it was just left over bad feelings from the previous day. A gentle rap on his door alerted him to Rivan and he let her in. She was the only one that knocked. She kissed him as soon as the door had closed behind her.

"You missed the most wonderful party," Rivan said.

"I heard," Tammas said.

"Are you okay, Tam?" Rivan asked.

"Yeah, I guess so. Thank you, Rivan," Tammas said.

Rivan flashed him one of those smiles and hugged him a little tighter. "Do you have time to play before you go?"

"Oh, that's very tempting, but..." Tammas considered.

"Just tempting?" Rivan asked, and swept his feet out from under him so that he went to the floor. She followed him, landing on top. "Either, you're not resisting very hard, or I managed to master that technique."

"I'm not resisting," Tammas said. "Can we make it quick?"

Rivan laughed. "Sure," she said.



"Alright," Professor Adams said, noticing Tammas sneaking in the back door and sitting in back. "Survival training is just about over. You've learned everything I can teach you, book knowledge wise, at least. Now it's time to put your skills to the test. Today's the final grade. I hope you ate well like I recommended. Everyone will now come up, pull a chip out of this bag. Blue chip, water, yellow chip, dessert, green, tropical settings, black, space or vacuum, with a space suit of course, and the white chips, well, think very cold. You will then report to transporter room four, this building, where you will be transported to the appropriate remote part of the Earth. Though you must make it a minimum of three days for full credit, I don't want any heroes. If you're in trouble, call us. We'll pull you out. There is no shame in flunking this test. It's just a test."

Students lined up to pull their chip and then headed for the transporter room. Tammas pulled a green chip and nodded to Professor Adams.

"You okay, Cadet?" Adams asked.

"Sure. Looking forward to getting away for a bit of extreme alone time," Tammas said.

“Good luck,” Adams told him, and then turned to the next student.

Outside, Trini came up to him and showed him her chip. It was blue. When she saw his was green, she stepped closer to him. “Trade with me,” she begged.

Tammas was hesitant.

“Please, I can’t swim,” Trini said.

“You were born on an island and you can’t swim?” Tammas asked.

She pulled him out of the way so as not to be heard by other students. “I’m terrified of the water. I was in a boating accident when I was a kid. I would rather be stuck in the arctic than in the water. Please.”

Tammas shrugged. “I don’t know if I’m doing you a favor, but it doesn’t make any difference to me. You know, I think part of this test is facing one’s fear. You’d have had a suit, so you wouldn’t have had to swim.”

Trini kissed him, exchanging chips as she did, hoping no one else noticed.

“Thank you.”

They entered the transporter room together and Tammas handed the operator the blue chip. “Take that kit there and step on the transporter pad. We’ll be simulating an emergency transport from a damaged shuttlecraft. You’ll be transported to a position of three meters above the surface of the water. From there, you’re on your own. Activate your comm. badge to verify it’s functioning properly. Very well. We’ll be keeping tabs on you via your badge. Have fun.”

Tammas picked up the survival kit and stepped onto the transporter pad. Trini waved good bye and he nodded. A moment later, he found himself falling into an ocean, somewhere on Earth. He took a breath just before he hit the water. It was so cold he nearly screamed out, but he stayed focused on his task, and immediately kicked off his boots. He held his emergency kit out away from him and activated it. It began to swell as an inflatable raft emerged from it, taking him up. He didn’t let go of the kit until he surfaced, and when he did, the emergency raft fully deployed and he was able to drag himself into it. He stripped out of his uniform and dried off with a towel. Inside one of the many cubby holds, he found a wet suit and put that on, including the boots. And then he laid back. There was nothing more to do but wait out three days. This would be much easier, he thought, than trekking through some tropical rain forest, avoiding wild animals.

Shortly after thinking about how easy this was going to be, Tammas discovered that his raft was deflating. He focused on the problem, instead of wasting time wondering if he had jinxed himself with his own thoughts. He was unable to find a leak anywhere in or under the raft, but it was a certain thing that it was leaking, and would soon just be a worthless, sinking piece of plastic. He crawled back in and pulled all the supplies from their cubby holds. He tied a bag of rations to his right arm. He then attached the flares to his belt. There was also a place to attach a water bottle to his belt, one that would take in water from the ocean, while leaving out the salt and minerals. He also had access to a mask, buoyancy control belt, and a regulator. The regulator would allow him to breathe underwater, without the bulky scuba tanks, for it worked like the gills of a fish. This would be handy during a storm, for he could ride it out underneath the surface where he was less likely to be thrown about by the waves as he would on the surface. The regulator hung around his neck. He put the mask on, assured its fit, and then pulled it around his neck. By the time he had done all of this, his raft had filled with water, and was beginning to sink. It was a struggle to get out of it, but he did, and due to

the buoyancy of his wet suit and the current setting of the buoyancy control belt, he floated right back to the surface without effort.

The raft gone, he was now in a much more serious survival exercise. Maybe this was part of the test, he thought. He was confident he wouldn't freeze, thanks to the suit and his ability to regulate his own body temperature. He had enough rations in the bag to last four days if he stretched it. He had a source of fresh water. He could do this, he decided. That was his mantra for about an hour. "I can do this," he said, over and over. It was one thing to say this mantra from a life raft, quite another thing bobbing in the ocean with nothing but water for as far as the eye could see, even when at the top of a swell. Every now and then he dipped his head under water to cool his face after facing the sun too long. Had there been sun tan lotion in the kit? He wondered. Too late now. He speculated whether the raft had yet hit the bottom of the ocean. He also pondered how far it was to the bottom.

Tammias put his mask on, put the regulator in his mouth, and laid face down in the water. This was not your aqua blue green waters near the shore, but the dark blue, quickly fading to black water. While the sun was out, he had maintained confidence. Once the sun set, his confidence vanished with the light. The water was black mercury that threatened to engulf him. The stars kept him focused for a time, but the stars were becoming more and more obscure. He played games in his head to keep from falling asleep, games of fantasy where he was the hero. He was glad he hadn't turned Rivan down and gone off to class without "play." He thought about Persis. He thought about how odd it to suddenly know he had a teenage daughter, as opposed the nine months preparation time getting use to the idea. And though Persis had recorded events in the daughter's life, he felt he had missed out on the whole experience. He decided not to dwell and rehearsed Escape scenarios until he had a new scene for another book. He played 'what if' games. They were games where he replayed dialogue in his head from his real life, trying to reshape the events that had transpired. Things he should have said or done. Maybe had he said things differently, he would have stayed with Deanna on Betazed. Maybe Persis would be with him. Maybe... He desired the company of dolphins. He was never worried or sad when they were near.

Tammias tried to send an email, but he was too far from any networking device for this to work. He decided the first thing to do when he returned was to upgrade the transmitter on his neural implant. He composed a letter to Persis anyway and put it in the out-going box. It would transmit the next time he came into range of a wireless net. Rain began to fall. It was light at first and the ocean was still rather calm, but he was expecting it to change. He thought of music. He thought of the piece he was going to have to play for the graduation ceremony. A graduation ceremony that wasn't even his own. He had what, a little over two more years of school to go? All his life had been preparation for this? To die in the middle of the ocean?!

"You're not going to die," he told himself. Of course you're going to die, he argued. Just not at this moment. And, you could always call for help. It's not a shame to flunk this test. He hadn't even gone a day and a half, which would be half credit. He looked at the sky as he rode to the top of another swell. This storm was going to be really bad. He reconsidered staying and reached for his comm. badge.

The comm. badge wasn't on his chest. He panicked and began searching for it, and even lit a flare just to have enough light to confirm he had indeed lost his life line.

How could he have lost it? Had it pulled free of his shirt as he exited the raft for the last time? He replayed the whole event in his head and then convinced himself that he had never removed it from the uniform he had been wearing, and that uniform, along with the badge, was no doubt at the bottom of the ocean by now. He was screwed. No. Not screwed. He was dead. This was no longer a test, but a real life survival game. It was time he put his mind to that endeavor and cease fretting about what could have been and should have been. It was time to focus on the moment. One long endless moment that would have to sustain and carry him to the time of rescue. He was alive this instant, and he was doing what he had to do to stay that way. Outside of that, nothing else mattered.

♪♪▶

In the operation room, cadets and professors kept watch over their students participating in the survival test. It was a dimly lit room, with most of the light coming from the monitors at various stations, very much like the operations at an air traffic control facility. There were the quiet voices of staff workers talking, and an occasional chatter from cadets in the field reporting in. Every now and then there was a check to verify the test subjects well being. At a push of the button, a comm. badge could be made to relay vital statistics, and when heart and pulmonary functions were in normal parameters, the computer would log the information and time, and nothing would happen. On times when things were out of the set parameters, an alarm would go off. A student would go over and check it, and most often, it was just an error, or an overly excited test subject that needed to be calmed, and the watchers would reset the alarm.

Jenny Long was watching over four test subjects, one of which was Tammias Parker Arblaster-Garcia. She knew him by reputation only, but perhaps that reputation had made her too relaxed, and so she took it as part of his character when he hadn't reported in at the twenty four hour mark. Jenny gave him a few extra minutes before she pushed the button to call up his vital statistics. There was nothing. Not even an alarm. Perhaps his comm. badge was malfunctioning. She summoned her superior over.

Professor Wilbourn came over and looked at the information she had. Everything seemed normal, with the exception of no return on the comm. badge. There was no point in even trying to hail Garcia if the badge wasn't working. "Can you call up his coordinates?"

"No, sir. I've never heard of a badge malfunctioning so badly," Jenny said. "Is it possible he turned it off?"

"Unlikely," Wilbourn said. "Find out what satellite is above his region, and have it scan for his badge."

It took a moment, but she got her work request moved to the top of the queue, and a moment later they had an exact fix on Garcia's communicator badge. She stared at it, puzzled. "That can't be right. That's below sea level."

Professor Wilbourn stood erect, hitting his com. badge. "Operation rescue, we have an emergency..."

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Professor Adams didn't like being wakened, but knowing one of his students was in trouble was one thing that compelled him to ignore his grievances. He went right into work mode and transported over to recovery. It was a small room, and a team was examining a deflated life raft. The raft was empty and a Star Fleet Uniform was in a pile separate from the raft, suggesting that Tammias had at least gotten out of the uniform and

into his wet suit, which would explain the missing wet suit. In another pile was a pair of Star Fleet issue boots. Since the communicator was found inside the life raft, their best guess was that the communicator had been pulled free from the wetsuit as Garcia struggled to get out of the sinking raft.

“We found the boots at a different location, suggesting they were dropped at a different time than the sinking of the raft, most likely to facilitate swimming on arrival,” Wilbourn told Adams. “No sign of a body.”

“How can there be no signs of him. Our scanners could find a lit match at four million kilometers, and you can’t find one cadet using orbital satellites?” Adams demanded. The clothes and the raft and the badge all had technology making it easier to find with sensors and get a lock with a transporter. So would the cadet’s wet suit. It was unlikely Tammias had removed it, given the temperature of the water, and it was unlikely that it had also malfunctioned. “He has a neural implant. Can’t you locate that?”

“We’re doing our best. There is a storm in the area, and though that shouldn’t be an issue, we’re still having trouble locating him. We also have Chance in orbit and they’re scanning for him. We also have four shuttles flying search patterns over the area, and two rescue ships en route,” Wilbourn said.

“This just doesn’t make any sense,” Adams said. “I was pretty sure he pulled a green chip out of the hat. Check with all the cadets. I want voice verification that they’re all present and accounted for.”

“Done,” Wilbourn said, getting right to work.

Adams moved over to the team scanning the comm. badge. “This shouldn’t have malfunctioned,” the Lieutenant answered Adam’s unasked question. “There’s nothing wrong with the circuitry.”



The storm had grown much worse, but Tammias came out the other side of it with his life and his wits still intact. Somehow he had lost his rations, but he still had his fresh water. To avoid the sun, he put his face down in the ocean, and used his regulator to breathe. The sea seemed surprisingly empty. He had seen no fish, no sharks, no turtles, etc. What he wouldn’t do for a friendly dolphin. Could he really be this alone? He asked. The sea at the Garcia’s place seemed so much more alive. Dolphins playing, fish by the millions. Even Betazed seemed more alive than this place here. Was the Earth’s oceans still recovering from the damage man had done over the all those years? He wondered about this for another day and night. On the third day, about mid noon, he felt something touch his back. He rolled over and looked up at what was poking him. An old man on a sail boat stared down at him. The man poked at him again with the long stick.

“You alive?” the old man asked.

Tammias nodded.

The old man looked around, as if looking for a wrecked ship, or at least some flotsam and debris. He looked back to Garcia.

“Are you just going to lie there, or are you coming on board?” he asked.

Garcia wasn’t sure if this was a hallucination, or just good fortune, but he didn’t question it. It was a struggle to get out of the water, but the old man helped. He helped him down into the cabin and laid him on the bed. The next thing Tammias remembered was waking up some time later. The sun was setting, and the air in the cabin was warm and stale. He made his way up to the deck.



“So, you’re still alive?” the old man asked. “Here, drink this.”

“I need to call Star Fleet,” Tammas said, taking the proffered glass and sniffing it. It smelt like rum. He didn’t drink it. “May I use your radio?”

“Don’t have one,” the old man said.

“No radio at all? An emergency locator beacon perhaps?” Tammas quizzed, thinking he could activate that and get someone else out here to rescue him.

“What’s the point of sailing around the world if you carry the world with you?” the old man asked. “You better sit down. You still look like death warmed over.”

“I’d rather stand,” Tammas said. “Where are you headed?”

“Australia,” the man said. “We’ll be there in seven days, if the winds hold.”

“Any chance you can speed that up?” Tammas asked. “It’s very important I get to a radio.”

“Who said youth was wasted on the young?” the old man asked no one in specific. He made eye contact with Tammas. “We’ll be there in seven days. Why don’t you go get a shower, clean up, put some of those clothes on I laid out for you, and then we’ll eat supper. You like fish?”

“I prefer synthetic proteins,” Tammas said.

“Well, I don’t have any synthetic proteins. What I do have is fish. You’ll eat fish, or you won’t,” the old man said.

Tammas turned in frustration and descended back into the cabin. He did feel much better after the shower. He was starving, but was more anxious to let people know he was alive than feeding his hunger. His implant was still in search mode, searching for a wireless connection. No doubt, there was a fuss being made over him by now. Or at least, he hoped at least a little fuss was being made when he didn’t report in on schedule. He returned to the deck to see the old man eating fish. There was a plate for him, but it still looked too much like a fish, head and all. Tammas felt a bit sick at his stomach. The old man shrugged and continued with his meal. His hunger fought with his ethical dilemma. He had always felt if he couldn’t kill it, then he shouldn’t eat it. Of course, the fish was already dead, cleaned, and cooked. If he didn’t eat it then it would have died for nothing. It would be wasted. He had seen Afu eating fish, head and all, and had always found reasons to leave the room. There was also an issue of being rude to his host, but he could tell the old man didn’t care if he ate or not.

“So, what’s your name?” Tammas asked him. The smell of the fish was almost overwhelming. He wanted to give in and eat the fish.

“Codswell,” the man said. “Eugene Codswell.”

“Interesting,” Tammas mused. “I’m Cadet Garcia.”

The old man nodded and reclined back. He stared out at the night and picked his teeth with a fish bone. No longer able to resist, Tammas began to eat.

“You’re not the least bit curious how I came to be out here?” Tammas asked, barely chewing, and trying to distract himself from his activity of eating with nonsense dialogue.

“I came out here for the peace and quiet,” Eugene said. “Not out of a sense of curiosity.”

“No radios,” Tammas said quietly.

“People are strange,” Eugene said, presently. “Why would you want to associate with people? Nothing but drama and conflict. All a person needs is a boat, a few supplies, and a bottle or two of rum.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Tammias said. “I kind of like people.” He realized that wasn’t what he was saying the other day on Amy’s program. In front of twenty billion other sentient beings. He berated himself.

Eugene snorted. “Feel free to use the cabin if you want to sleep. I sleep out here, mostly.”

“I appreciate your helping me,” Garcia said. “I’m sure I can repay you once we reach port.”

Codswell snorted and waved him off. “Just don’t disturb my peace. That’s all the payment I want.”

Tammias nodded and retired to the cabin. There were no personal items that could further help him understand this strange man. There were no books, no photos, no maps, no music disks... For that matter, there wasn’t even a computer. He was surprised it even had a working light bulb, but at least that explained what the solar panel he had saw above was used for. He clicked off the one light and then arranged himself on the bed so that he could see out the window. The night sky rolled back and forth as the boat rose and fell and rocked. He turned the light back on and went quickly to the head and threw up the fish.

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Rivan used Ambassador Clemmons to pass into Garcia’s room. She entered, carrying the cat with her. The light came on automatically and Trini jumped up from the bed, saying Tam’s name. She acknowledge Rivan, not hiding her disappointment, and sat back down on the bed, wiping her eyes.

“Trini?” Rivan asked. “Are you okay?”

Trini just shook her head. Rivan sat down beside her.

“I have found petting the cat brings me much joy and comfort,” Rivan said. “Would you like to hold him?”

Trini nodded and took Ambassador Clemmons from her. Clemmons seemed to know something was up so offered less resistance to being held prisoner than usual. Garcia’s door opened and Tatiana and Afu entered.

“What’s going on?” Afu asked.

“A pity party,” Tatiana said.

Trini burst into tears, sobbing so much that they thought she might hyperventilate. Rivan put an arm around her. “Tammias will be okay.”

“Rivan,” Tatiana said. “It’s not likely they’re going to find him alive. It’s been six days.”

“He was probably eaten by a shark,” Afu said.

“Would you shut up about sharks!” Trini yelled at him.

“It’s the only logical explanation,” Afu said.

The door chime rang. No one moved.

“Maybe they found his body,” Afu said.

Trini put her head on Rivan’s shoulder and sobbed. Clemmons got away. The door bell rang again.

“Are any of you going to get that?” Lenar yelled from the other room.

“This is not how Tam would want us to act,” Afu said.

Tatiana looked at Afu. “How the hell would you know what Tammas would want in a funeral?”

“Well, he certainly wouldn’t want any of us sitting around here crying about it,” Afu said. “If anything, you could have gone to the candle light vigil they held for him last night.”

“We don’t know that he’s dead,” Trini said over the door bell.

“Fine, I’ll get it,” Lenar said, sounding exasperated.

There was silence while they waited to hear who it was. They heard Lenar welcome someone in, and from the sounds of Lenar’s voice, it was someone of high rank. Trini sobbed a little harder. Tatiana’s shoulders sunk a little.

“Right this way, Admiral,” Lenar said. “Everyone’s in here.”

Afu and Tatiana moved further into Garcia’s room to make room for the Admiral. They went immediately to attention.

“I didn’t see any of you at the candle light ceremony,” McCoy said. “I just wanted to see if you were all okay.”

“It’s a bit premature for candle light,” Trini said. “They use to have evidence that you were dead before they actually declared you dead.”

McCoy entered the room and sat down on the other side of Trini. He sighed. “I understand all of you were very close to him. I would really like you to be there at his wake. It would mean a lot to me.”

“It’s my fault,” Trini said.

“What’s your fault?” McCoy asked.

“I should have died, not Tammas,” Trini said. “I switched chips with him because I’m afraid of the water. It should have been me.”

Rivan got up from the bed. “Are you saying you broke the law?”

McCoy took Trini’s hand. “This doesn’t mean it was your fault.”

“Did you break the law?” Rivan asked again, more agitated.

“No, Rivan, she didn’t break the law,” Afu said. “What she did break is an unwritten code, it violates personal ethics, but it’s not against the law. At the worse she might get a disciplinary action due to the fact that she didn’t follow through with test protocols.”

“I’m sorry,” Trini sobbed. “I wish it had been me. I’m so sorry.”

Rivan glared at Trini, angry. “Are the rules here so flexible that no one is held accountable? There has been an infraction and Tammas might be dead because of it. This is not like Wesely trampling flowers. Sorry just doesn’t seem sufficient.”

“Rivan, that will be enough,” Tatiana snapped.

“Don’t you think I would take it back if I could?” Trini asked.

“But you can’t,” Rivan said. “A man is dead!”

“Not because of what she did,” Tatiana said. “And don’t look at me like that, Rivan. We’re not ignorant about you and your secret rendezvous with Garcia? Your anger is bias, so don’t start preaching to us about ethics.”

“You’re just jealous because its not you,” Rivan snapped.

“Why you little tramp...” Tatiana said, moving closer to Rivan as if wanting to strike her. Afu stepped in between them.

“And this is how the world breaks down,” McCoy said, shaking his head, sadly. “It wasn’t because of moral outrage that you didn’t attend the candle light vigil. You didn’t show because you’re all so caught up in your own personal feelings that you’ve lost sight of the big picture. Okay, Trini. You swapped chips. Big deal. You wouldn’t have been able to swap chips if Garcia hadn’t been willing to do so. He chose this, and it was bad luck, but it was not because of anything you or he did or didn’t do. Garcia’s gone, and you all have choices. You can rally together and support each other through this crisis, or you can viciously attack each other like wounded animals. I thought you were supposed to be in training to be Star Fleet Officers.”

Garcia’s posse seemed sufficiently cowed by the good doctor’s chastisement. He waited a moment to make sure that what he had said had sunk in before he softened a little.

“Sometimes we’re angry when we lose someone close because we failed to say the things that we should have,” McCoy said. “I know that’s going to be my hardest part getting past this particular loss. You see, Tammias Garcia is my son. Before he was even old enough to decide, we had decided to conceal this little bit of knowledge from the world. We keep the charade up now mostly out of practice and because he doesn’t want it publicly known for fear of being treated differently. I’m sharing this with you, not because you need to know this, but so you will know that when I say today I am feeling the greatest sense of loss that I have felt since I lost my closest friend, that I’m not exaggerating. And you don’t get to be my age without losing friends. Now, I want you all to pull yourselves together and make a good showing at the wake. Because there are a whole bunch of people feeling this loss and it’s not just about you.”

McCoy stood up, patted Trini on the head, and departed. After a few moments of silence, Rivan turned to Trini.

“I’m sorry, Trini,” Rivan said. “I shouldn’t have raised my voice.”

“We do need to start getting organized,” Afu said. “Cards and flowers started arriving an hour ago. We may be hip deep in them before the evening is up.”

“I’ll take care of the flowers,” Rivan offered.

“I’ll help,” Trini said.

“That leaves us with the cards, I guess,” Tatiana said to Afu.



Seven days came and went and the sail boat arrived in sight of the Australian coast. Tammias began to pace when it seemed the ship wasn’t making any headway. It was actually making headway, but not fast enough to quell Tam’s anxiousness. He tried willing the ship faster, as if this were a ship on the holodeck, but his willing it only seemed to have the opposite affect.

“You’re disturbing my peace,” Eugene yelled at him. “Sit down, or go below deck.”

Tammias sat down and watched as the shore just barely crept closer. The sun was just connecting with the horizon as they were pulling into a remote dock. Tammias helped in securing the boat and then ran up the dock. He stopped and ran back. “Would you mind waiting while I report in, so I can come back and thank you properly? I’m sure Fleet will want to officially thank you, as well.”

Eugene just snorted and went about his duties on the boat. Tammias ran back up the dock and made his way to an open bar at the top of the beach. As soon as he stepped

up on the beach, his implant managed to log onto the computer network and automatically transmitted all his outgoing mail. Without bothering to search further for a radio, he sent a text message to Star Fleet command.

“WHERE ARE YOU?” Starfleet wrote him back.

“I think I’m in Australia?” Tammias wrote back. “Can you trace my signal?”

“Yes, we got you. A shuttle is en route. Don’t move,” came the response.

Tammias didn’t question the shuttle. It was probably already in the area searching for him, and so it made sense for it to swing by and pick him up. Besides, he didn’t want to use a transporter.

Tammias ran back to the dock to thank Eugene, but he was gone. And so was the boat. He stared out at the darkening sky, but could see no trace of the boat, and there was no way Eugene could have departed so quickly. He ran back up to the beach and approached the bar. There were a couple of people there, drinking, and the bar tender was drying glasses and setting them in rows of four.

“Excuse me, but did any of you notice which way the boat that I arrived on departed?” Tammias asked.

“Ay?” the closest asked.

“The boat that came to that dock and dropped me off. Did you see it leave?” Tammias asked.

The man turned to talk to his friend. “You understand his English?” the closest man to Tammias asked.

“I think he asked if we saw his coat,” his friend answered in a thick Australian accent.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” the first said, his accent equally harsh. “It’s too warm for a coat.”

The bar tender helped them. “He was asking about a boat. Did you see his boat?”

“He said boat? I saw no boat,” the man said. He looked to his friend who shrugged and took another sip of his drink.

“How could you miss it? You’re looking right at the dock. You saw me come up the dock, didn’t you?” Tam demanded.

They both just shrugged. “I can’t understand a bloody thing the guy is saying,” said the one.

“Must be an American,” the other said. “They never did learn to speak the Queen’s English.”

The bar tender smiled at Tammias. “Can I get you a drink and maybe a vegemite sandwich?”

“A what sandwich?” Tammias asked. A song began to play in his head: “He just smiled and gave me a vegemite sandwich. We come from a land down under, where women glow and men plunder...”

“Vegemite,” the bar tender laughed. “Here, you look half starved. It’s on me.”

“No, thank you,” Tammias said, refusing out of politeness. A shuttle would arrive for him shortly, and they would have rations, and something to help settle his stomach. But then, when it was right in front of him he found that he couldn’t resist. “Alright, I’ll try it.” He really hadn’t noticed till just now how depleted he felt. “A sports drink, please.”

Though the sandwich tasted great going down, it was less pleasant coming back up. He forced himself not to be sick at the bar and started to walk away. The bar tender came around to help him. "You okay, son?"

Tammas waved him off and vomited into a waste basket. Completely spent, he stumbled towards the beach and sat down in the sand. He could see the white crest of the waves because of the moon light, but the rest of the sea looked dark and mysterious. The sky was dark, except around the moon. The stars near the moon were faint and difficult to see. Further away the stars shone more clearly. He saw a star moving. As he examined it further, he recognized the beacon lights of a shuttle approaching the shore.

The shuttle landed behind him, stirring up the sand, but he didn't get up. He looked out to sea hoping to see Codswell and his boat. The rescuers were happy to see him, but were a bit thrown off by the clothes he was wearing. They helped him up and walked him back to the shuttle. The medic began a precursory check, while the pilot, at Tam's request, circled the area twice, searching for Tam's alleged boat. They found no trace of it, and a boat the size of Tam's description would not have been invisible to scanners. Both pilot and medic were skeptical about the story. It seemed obvious to the medic that he had been fasting and figured he was possibly delirious. He was dehydrated to the point that she wanted to start administering fluids intravenously, which she did. The saline filled material strapped to his arm like a Velcro bracelet and immediately began to pump the solution into a vein. She made an oral report to her PADD, citing Garcia's explanation of events, noting her skepticism.

"Then explain my clothes! And how did I get to Australia?" Tammas asked.

The medic didn't have an answer.

Angry, Tammas sat back in his chair and rode to the Academy in silence. He realized that he had drifted to sleep when the next thing he knew they had arrived. He no sooner stepped off the shuttle than he was mobbed by his room mates, a primary care physician, and a nurse. Doctor McCoy was there, looking very relieved. Trini and Rivan both lavished him with kisses, wiping their tears.

"Odysseus returns," Tatiana commented.

"Who's Odysseus?" Rivan asked.

"Alright, let me see my patient," Doctor Erikson interrupted the good will, indicating that he wanted Tammas to sit in the wheel chair his nurse was pushing.

"I can walk," Tammas argued.

"Procedures," the doctor said. "We are taking you to medical. Now, you can go by chair, or by stretcher, which will it be?"

"I said I'll walk..." Garcia resisted.

"Sit down," McCoy ordered.

Tammas sat down in the chair, clearly sulking. "I don't see what all this fuss is about when it's obvious that I'm quite alright."

"Yeah, you hit that one square on. You look like you've been on vacation," Afu noted, touching the Hawaiian style shirt as if to test its thread count.

His clothes were definitely not Star Fleet issue. It wasn't even close to resembling the emergency suit they expected he would have been wearing.

"The emergency medic said you had hallucinations about a boat?" Erikson asked.

Tammas relayed the short version of his story as they accompanied him to medical. After being treated and a new IV armband started, he told the long version of

his story again, this time for the record. Admirals Adams and Wilbourn questioned him, continually having him repeat things. His roommates also asked questioned, except for Rivan who simply sat close to him, holding his hand. Though there was a lot of skepticism, no one could disprove his story. The problem was that he couldn't prove his story any more than they could disprove it.

"Maybe it was god," Rivan said.

"Or maybe it was guy in a boat," Tammias offered.

"Yeah, a boat with a cloaking device," Afu said.

"Oh, it doesn't matter. We're just glad to have you back," Trini said, which everyone agreed with.

"Well, I've certainly seen some strange things in my time," McCoy said. "So, don't think that we're dismissing your story."

The only thing the medics could do was confirm that he had at least five days exposure to the elements and that he had severe reduction of caloric intake. They were treating him for dehydration, sunburns on his face, and he had a few sores consistent with being in sea water too long.

The main reason they had to consider his story as having happened was the fact that he could not have swam to Australia from where they had originally dropped him. A sail boat was a reasonable explanation for the missing time. So, at least they knew he wasn't having a jolly old time at a bar on a beach while everyone else was roughing it.

McCoy patted him on the arm. "I'm going home, son. I'll visit you tomorrow if they don't release you."

"Thank you, Admiral," Tammias said, not paying any attention to the emphasis McCoy placed on the word son. Everyone was "son" to him.

They all said their good nights to the Admiral, personally shaking his hand, except for Rivan who hugged him and kissed his cheek. They settled back in around Garcia. Trini and Rivan sat on either side of the bed. Lenar and Tatiana stood. Afu sat on the Doctor's rolling stool. Rivan held a PADD and was showing him some of his E-Cards.

"And this is a really nice card from Deanna Troi," Rivan said. "I really like the colors."

"Is there anyone you don't know?" Tatiana asked. "You must have gotten a card from everyone in Fleet."

"And you won't believe how many flowers we have at home. Oh, they are some of the most beautiful flowers I have ever seen," Rivan said.

Trini just shook her head. "You know, Garcia, you have more adventures than a hero in an Indian movie."

"Oh, here we go again," Tatiana said.

"What?" Trini asked. "What's wrong with me comparing life to an Indian movie?"

"Well, for starters," Afu said. "You've seen one Indian movie you've seen them all."

"And they're all over three hours long," Tatiana added.

"And they all have the compulsory scene of a man and woman running, singing, dancing, through a garden," Afu added.

“In the rain,” Tatiana added. “And the head turn thing, always right before the hero kisses her. Let me show you. Kiss me, Afu. Nope, got to be faster than that.”

Trini was more pretend mad than anything else, while everyone laughed at Tatiana’s antics. “Tell me Garcia doesn’t fit the bill,” Trini said. “He can sing, dance, always cheats death, and out of no where pulls up some odd skill, like being able to fly a helicopter.”

“I can fly a helicopter,” Tammias said.

Trini laughed. “See, just like the hero in the Indian cult classic, Hum Kissee Kum Naheen”

“That’s actually why I learned to fly one,” Tammias said.

Everyone looked at him for an explanation. He rolled his eyes, and shook his head, because it was just obvious, common sense to him. “In order to re-enact the role of the hero in Hum Kissee, I felt it necessary to learn how to fly a helicopter. Don’t look at me like that. It was in the script. Sure, the helicopter was a plot contrivance, but it called for the hero being a pilot.”

“So, that’s why you spend so much time in the holosuite,” Afu said.

“Learning to be a hero,” Trini said.

“Can we watch an Indian movie when we get home?” Rivan asked.

“No,” Afu, Tatiana, and Lenar all said at the same time.

“Are these folks bothering you?” Locarno asked. The entire Nova squadron was with him. Except for Wesley who was still on vacation. Arly and Mathew Steward were also with them.

Jaxa came over and squeezed his hand. “We’re so glad you’re okay,” she said.

“You know this is what happens when you miss the celebration party in your honor,” Arly said.

“You didn’t think you were going to get out of an ass kicking that easy, did you?” Locarno asked.

Albert placed a box of chocolate on Garcia’s rolling tray table, and then shook Garcia’s hand. “We were sure you were eaten by sharks.”

“Enough with the sharks,” Trini pleaded.

“Crusher sends his compliments, and recommended we bring you these chocolates,” Albert said. “They’re imported from Germany.”

“I’m not eating any until I watch all of Nova squadron eat one,” Tammias said.

“Ah, that’s not right,” Jaxa said, crossing her arms, pretending to be hurt. “The war is over. We won.”

“Really?” Afu asked, surprised to learn this information.

“So, I guess Wes caught up with the Enterprise?” Tammias asked.

Albert laughed. “Well, he missed the Zhukov and had to take a long range shuttle, but he made it,” Albert said. “Anyway, in addition to the chocolate we brought you this bottle of wine, direct from France, non-transported as to your preference, with compliments of Captain Picard.”

Lenar whistled. “You know Picard?”

Garcia thought about it. “I don’t think so,” Tammias said. Then he remembered and grimaced. “Um, we met once. It’s a long story.”

“We love stories,” Jaxa said. “Especially yours.”

“Oh, brother,” Tatiana sighed, rolling her eyes.



Doctor Erikson entered. "Alright, it is getting way too crowded in here. Go home everyone. Except you, Garcia. I've decided to keep you over night for observation."

"Ah," Tammias grumbled. "I want to go home and sleep in my own bed."

"I'm keeping you over night," Doctor Erikson repeated. "I'll take the I.V. out in the morning after you've had a good nights rest and are properly hydrated."

"How do you expect me to get a good night sleep with this archaic medical delivery system attached to my arm," Tammias complained, thumping the fluid filled arm band.

"Don't argue with the doctor," Tatiana ordered.

"I am a Doctor!" Tammias protested.

"Indian hero," Trini said and kissed him on the cheek. "See you tomorrow."

Rivan kissed him on the lips. "Sleep well," she said. Rivan noticed Tatiana shaking her head. "What? You can kiss him, too."

Tatiana leaned down to kiss him, but then did the head turn and walked away.

Instead, Jaxa decided to test Rivan's theory and kissed Tammias. "Since you're giving them away free," she said. Arly and Hajar got in on the action.

"I wish I could be Tammias Garcia," Albert whined, playfully.

On that note, everyone bid their farewells and departed, leaving him sitting upright in his bed, staring out a tall, plate glass window over looking the city of San Francisco. All the chatter of his departed friends seemed to linger in his head and he wish he had been going home with them. Or out for pizza. He really wanted a pizza. And peanut butter. He wanted the peanut butter more than chocolate, but since the chocolate was there he reached for the table and pulled it towards him so that he could reach the box. The smell of chocolate was immediate on lifting the lid. It smelt good, but his stomach turned, and he closed the box, no longer hungry.

Tammias looked to his arm. He was aware of the IV arm-band because of the pressure. A tiny diode flashed in rhythm to the rate of delivery of the lactic ringer. He turned back to the city of San Francisco. The city lights, and lights from moving vehicles, held his attention for only so long before he found himself drifting to sleep, the head of his bead still upright. As he was fading, he again began to wonder if the whole event had been a hallucination. No, he said aloud, coming more awake. He wasn't going to start doubting his own senses. He had been on a boat.

There was a knock on the inside wall and he turned to see a familiar face.

"I heard you were back," Torres said.

He smiled, pushing himself back up. "I'm so happy to see you."

Torres sat next to him on the bed. She took his hand in hers. "I am so glad we met," she said. There were tears in her eyes.

"Well, so am I," Tammias said, feeling equally sentimental. There was nothing like being stranded in an extreme situation, alone, to improve one's appreciation for good company. "I'm sure they will release me tomorrow. Maybe we can have dinner."

She leaned over and kissed him. "Sorry. I'm leaving."

"I don't understand," Tammias said.

"I dropped out of the Academy. I don't fit in here," she said.

Tammias opened his mouth to protest, but he couldn't find the words. When he did finally speak, his words amazed him. "I love you."

"Come with me," Torres said.

Tam's head spun. Leave Star Fleet? He was suddenly feeling more tired than he could account for. Torres patted him on the leg and smiled. "It's okay. Maybe we'll meet again someday, who knows. The Universe is getting smaller, you know."

"Just tell me why. You're passing all your classes," Tammias said.

"Not quite," she said. "But the worse part was the Kobayashi Maru test. I gave an order for someone to go pull the Sagan device. He didn't follow it. Instead of enforcing my authority, I did it myself. Can you believe it? They evaluated me negatively on that."

Tammias didn't say anything. Torres nodded.

"I see," she said. "You agree with the verdict."

"Your expertise might have saved three more lives had you not self sacrificed at the time," Garcia said. "That was my opinion. I didn't put it in my report as a negative evaluation, but rather as an observation. This is a skill you can develop with practice. I will help you."

Torres shook her head. She got up to leave, paused, kissed Tammias once more, and then left without further ado.

Tammias wanted to get up but he found all his strength completely drained. He didn't even have the strength to cry, but he did keep thinking, "I do love her. I should go after her. I do love you, Torres. Why do I love you? Because you're leaving and it's easier for me to love this way. I must be really sick to love this much pain. I don't love you, Torres. Get lost. See if I care. Quitter! There are lots more fish in the sea. How juvenile is this? Good luck, Torres."

The image of Eugene eating the fish, head and all, came back to his mind. And then he remembered he had been so ravenous that he himself had eaten fish, real fish, head and all, like a Tongan and then he began to be sick. He made it to the lavatory, instead of being sick all over the floor. A nurse came in to comfort him, checked the IV drop rate, increased it, and then she helped him back to bed. They released him the next day and he took one day off before jumping right back into the routine of going to classes. The only thing different was that there were more cadets than usual wanting to stop and chat with him. A number of the cadets wanted to hear his strange story, first hand, which was getting more elaborate with each telling. It was almost better than his own works of fiction, and a select few of those who wanted to chat felt compelled to share their own ghost stories.

"I don't believe in ghosts," Tammias assured them, but they weren't having it. If it smelled like a ghost story, walked like a ghost story, and went boo, then, as far as they were concerned, it was a ghost story. Tam, on the other hand, was confident there was a sound, scientific explanation for everything. A scientific explanation that was beyond his ability to grasp at this particular moment in time.

Sendak volunteered a logical explanation. "You reprogrammed the computer to beam you to Australia for a bit of R and R, and while we are all suffering in our tests, you were on holiday. It was a very elaborate ruse that back fired when your raft sank because you weren't there to attend to it, necessitating your recovery by fasting."

"How dare you!" Trini snapped, coming to Tam's defense without hesitation. "Next you'll be telling us he reprogrammed the computer to beat the Kobayashi Maru test!"

"At ease, Trini. He's allowed to his opinion," Tammias said.

“And so am I,” Trini said, throwing her fork down on her plate. “Just keep your opinion to yourself, Sendak.”

“Trini, it’s okay. Sendak and I are friends. Right Sendak? Do we have any issues?” Tammias asked Sendak directly.

“No. I was merely presenting a theory that better explains what transpired than your explanation of events,” Sendak said. “A theory that seems to be more reasonable than the animistic approach many of the other human cadets are proposing.”

“You know what your problem is, Sendak,” Trini said, getting up from the table. “You never saw a ghost.”

Trini stormed off, tossing her tray into the recycler bin loud enough to be heard across the cafeteria. Afu glanced briefly at Tammias and then continued eating.

“And you wish to be more human, Garcia?” Sendak asked.

“Why are you eating with us again today?” Tammias asked.

“I was merely demonstrating my concern for your welfare,” Sendak said. “I’ve grown accustomed to your presence and it would be missed.”

“What did I tell you, Afu,” Tammias said. “Vulcans are very sentimental creatures. They simply need to practice expressing themselves emotionally.”

“I see no need for insults,” Sendak said. “If you want me to leave, simply say so.”

“I want you to stay,” Tammias said. “Eat. Be merry. Or grouchy, or whatever it is Vulcans do.”

♪♪▶

Garcia’s bedroom door opened and Tatiana leaned against the opening, watching him pack. The things he was packing seemed to defy explanation. They weren’t normal things, like clothes. Not that he needed those, since the replicator could supply them.

“Don’t worry about your cat, I’ll take care of it while you’re gone,” Tatiana said.

Tammias smiled. It was their cat and it had adopted him, not the other way around. Of course, Tammias recognized what she was doing. She was trying to find a way to talk to him. “Thank you, but I think Rivan’s already volunteered for Clemons duty,” Tammias said. He placed several harmonicas in the bag.

“How many harmonicas do you need?” Tatiana asked.

“A different harmonica for different keys,” Tammias explained.

Tatiana wandered in and sat down on the bed next to his bag. She examined one of the harmonicas while he gathered things. “I’m sorry about Torres. I know you liked her.”

“She’ll be okay,” Tammias said, not really wanting to talk about it. “She’s strong. She’ll find her way.”

Tatiana nodded, made a test noise with the harmonica. “Sendak really got on Trini’s nerves today,” Tatiana said.

“Yeah,” Tammias agreed. He found that rather amusing, since it certainly wasn’t worth the energy she had put into it. “You okay? You seem a bit out of sorts, too.”

“It’s nothing. I just wanted to say good bye,” Tatiana said.

Tammias leaned over to kiss her affectionately. It was meant to be just a friendly kiss, like a Rivan greeting. He had assumed, based on the time that she had previously kissed him that it would be okay. She started to kiss him back and it was more than he

had expected from her. He was okay with that, but then she pulled away while simultaneously pushing at him with her hands.

“What about you and Rivan?” Tatiana asked.

“She and I are good friends,” Tammias said, returning to his packing. He didn’t want to discuss that with her. “That’s the way it is and it’s not going to change.”

“Are you really married?” Tatiana asked.

“Yes,” Tammias said, maintaining eye contact. There was no reason to bandy words with her.

Tatiana got up. “Sorry, I can’t. Come talk to me when you’re single again.”

Tatiana left the room. Tammias sat down, not totally surprised by the turn of events, but too tired to get another cold shower, or go to the holosuite to seek comfort. The cat hopped up on the bed and pulled up along side him. Tam unconsciously scratched behind its ears, staring at the door. It was going to be a long day, he decided.

Rivan entered. “What, she didn’t want to play?”

Tammias shrugged. People are complicated and he really didn’t want to discuss it.

“Are you okay?” Rivan asked.

Tammias shrugged. She crossed over and sat next to him. Clemmons, still between them, looked up at her. She ran her hand along its back. Clemmons arched its back in response to the massage, its back rising proportional to the amount of force put into the petting.

“You’re going to be gone awhile,” Rivan said more than asked.

Tammias nodded.

“One for the road?” Rivan asked.

“Okay,” Tammias said.

Clemmons, as if suspecting what was coming, jumped off the bed.

## CHAPTER TWENTYFOUR

The Chance was a Constellation Class Starship and though the entire crew was not made up of trainees, enough of them were that the regular crew members were a bit apprehensive. They weren't concerned about mishaps. No, they were concerned about getting their work done in a timely manner, and baby sitting trainees didn't usually mean efficient. Even the Captain was technically "in training," from the crew's perspective anyway, since she was only filling in for this training cruise due to the ship's regular Captain being on emergency family-leave. With the exceptions of some darker rumors about the Captain, people seemed to like her on the whole, but Tammas, having never met her, decided to hold off on passing judgment. Everyone seemed to have at least one dark rumor, no doubt spread by malcontents and every rumor seemed to have sufficient entertainment value that they often stuck and continued to circulate. Rumors of such nature that if you dare try to deny them it would only reinforce and perpetuate the rumor. He didn't entertain the rumors of this Captain because his experience was that everything, even if partly truthful, was either taken completely out of context, or so over exaggerated that it was meaningless dribble. It was exactly the same thing with legends. Legends were simply rumors and stories that have taken on a life of their own. Just take the rumors about me, he thought. How could any one compare me to Kirk just because I have had a few alien romances?

Tammas focused on his assignments. It would be entirely possible, he thought, that he could go his whole tour of duty on this ship and never even meet the Captain. This was such a short cruise, comparatively, that there was no chance, he gritted his teeth at the potential pun, that he could get into trouble. Due to his exploits in the Kobayashi test, however, people's expectations of him had risen. He was scheduled to run Ops on the Bridge, and that was not what he wanted to do. He wanted to be in the communications department, quietly ferreting out signals from the back ground noise of space at large. He wanted to detect new life forms and explore strange new worlds from the comfort of his ergonomic chair. Let the probes fly, he'll direct them from his rocking chair in his office.

He struck up a little blues with his harmonica, filling the quiet recesses of his station's hidden alcove with music. He watched the information scroll across his console.

The interesting thing about detecting new species by means of radio transmission alone was that there was a very small window of opportunity. When one figured in the rate that technology advanced, along a normal curve, the window was less than a span of two hundred years. Once a civilization started using digital technology, like cable, and satellites that beamed signals directly to planet side receivers, radio transmissions were slowly phased out and a planet could virtually disappear from detection. Earth had been a very noisy planet, radio wise, for a very long time, with that bubble of radio noise expanding forever, but growing fainter with distance. And then, suddenly, it quits. Most civilized worlds had yet to hear an original Earth broadcast due to the time it takes for the signals to travel through space. When they finally do arrive, it would only be a hiccup worth of noise. If they're paying very close attention, they might be able to focus their radio telescopes in Earth's general direction, but all they would hear now would be silence, because not only was Earth completely digital, much of it's communication

energy was transmitted directly into subspace, requiring a totally different technology to detect it.

He loved the lay out of the communications department. Several rows of terminals, with maybe a half a dozen people monitoring things that didn't need to be monitored thanks to the computers, but because humans are what they are, they wanted to be there. They wanted their digital displays of information, back up copies, and files to examine. And, he was very much human in that respect. He liked being at his little station with all the monitors and controls available to him. His bank of computers dealt with incoming and outgoing signals, where as the station directly behind him dealt with all the intra-ship communications, which was more than just people chatting and exchanging emails. Every tool, from a spanner wrench to a tricorder, had an isolinear tag that not only identified it, but expressed it's location on the ship and its operational status. All these signals had to pass through somewhere and this place was it. The main computer was right below their station, and the back up computers were several decks up and back, but regardless of which of the dozen computers were talking, all communications passed through this station, an isolated and lonely part of the ship.

The communication center was rarely visited. Most people thought it to be just a dark whole, which was often too cold, due to the fact that the computers required extra cool, dry air to be continuously pumped in to keep them at their optimum performance temperature. Consequently, this was why Tammias had expected no one, other than his assigned team, would ever bother him. As team leader, he could send others up to the Bridge to run Ops, and he could sit his entire training cruise right here. Safe, comfortable, and quiet. Quiet, minus the hum of the computers, hum of the fans, hum the life support system, isolinear chip set harmonics, and occasional blast of rhythms from his harmonica.

"Hello, Garcia?"

Tammias spun his chair around to see who had addressed him, not lowering his harmonica. He sucked in air through the harmonica in surprise and nearly went to attention.

"At ease, it's a casual call," she said. "Sort of."

Tammias gave Captain Janeway a curious look. "Sort of?"

"It hasn't gone un-noticed that you're avoiding your Bridge assignment," Janeway said. "I wanted to encourage you to join us on the Bridge at your next scheduled appointment."

"I thought that, as head of the Communications Department, I can assign anyone to work Ops," Tammias said.

"You can," Janeway agreed. "Except when the Captain has personally requested that you be at Ops. Is there a problem that I should know about?"

"No, Sir," Tammias said, wanting to correct himself and say "Mam." Sir was just as appropriate these days, though, he reminded himself, it was because humanity was no longer hung up on all the politically correct gender titles. Well, for the most part.

"Good," Janeway said, looking around. "It seems a bit lonely down here."

"Hardly that," Tammias said.

"Then why the blues?" Janeway asked, pointing to the harmonica.

His whole demeanor seemed to brighten as he thought about his work. “The whole Universe is calling to me, and I have a front row seat. The blues is a separate thing.”

Janeway smiled. “You haven’t written any holo-novels lately. Academy keeping you busy?” Janeway asked.

Tammas nodded. He didn’t know what to say to her. He hadn’t felt like writing at all, ever since his interview with BBC, but offering that might lead to an impromptu counseling session, and he wasn’t about to open up to this stranger. She stood before him and seemed greater than life, with almost the power and aura of Katherine Hepburn in presence, but something all her own shining through. If he had to guess, he would have figured her to be a classic literature fan and so he couldn’t imagine which of his holo-novels, or lesser books of his, she had read.

“I’ve heard you have some terrific story lines for games. Perhaps you would join me and some friends at the holodeck when you’re off duty today?” Janeway asked.

Tammas nodded. “Do you have something special in mind?”

“Perhaps something Tolken related?” Janeway asked. “Tell you what. Meet us for refreshments at the lounge, and we’ll bandy around some ideas. Nineteen hundred hours.”

“Okay,” he said. He watched her leave, and turned back to his station. So much for just riding out the cruise under everyone’s radar. An invitation by the Captain would be difficult to side step.

Janeway turned to go, hesitated, and then turned back. “Just one other question, if you don’t mind.”

“Sure,” Tammas said, steeling himself for something bad.

“Just between you and me,” Janeway said. “How did you beat the Kobayashi Maru test?”

Tammas smiled, relieved that it wasn’t a more difficult question. “My understanding is that though you yourself didn’t accomplish the mission objectives, you got consecutively higher scores with each attempt, and you had some of the highest scores right up there next to Riker.”

“And that answers my question how?” Janeway asked.

“I’m afraid that the information you seek has been deemed classified by Starfleet command,” Tammas said. Could she know that he cheated and she was just testing whether or not he could keep a secret? He wanted to scream! See how lies and secrets can mess with a persons mind. Once the game starts, there is no way out.

“You’d tell me, but then you’d have to kill me?” Janeway asked.

“Essentially,” Tammas confirmed.

“I don’t suppose I could convince you that your secret is safe with me,” Janeway said. “And that I have Star Fleet’s full confidence.”

“Tell you what,” Tammas said. “If you and I are ever stranded in a remote part of the galaxy together, I’ll tell you my secret over a cup of coffee.”

“Assuming we have coffee?” Janeway asked.

“Oh, god, may there always be coffee,” Tammas said.

“My sentiments exactly,” Janeway said. “See you later.”



The lounge was a small room over looking a lap pool a half-deck below. Along the starboard side of the pool were treadmills and stationary bikes, while the port side of the pool had two hot tubs. Tammas wandered passed the bikes, returning a smile to one of the lady bikers who smiled at him as he passed. She was human and it was her eyes that first drew his attention, and quirky smile. He liked quirky. He was tempted to stop and talk, but settled for a double take as he passed her. He headed up one of the spiral stair cases leading to the lounge, and half way up the spiral stair case he recognized a voice. The voice belonged to Jaxa Sito, and she was talking about how Nova Squadron and Garcia had successfully completed the Kobayashi Maru Test. He shook his head and continued on up the stairs and came out of the spiral directly in her line of sight. She beamed a smile at him and raised her drink in salute. Her girl friends turned to see him, no doubt appraising him, but he only had eyes for the girl sitting next to Jaxa. Jaxa waved him over to join them and he complied, his eyes not leaving the girl to her right. He knew her, but was at a lost to find her name, which bothered him to no end. The fact that he knew her but couldn't recall her name was so perplexing he nearly walked right into the table just from being mesmerized by her. He blinked. She was beautiful, but his attraction to her was not romantically inclined, which was also perplexing, because he hadn't met a female yet that a romantic thought didn't push into his head. She appeared human and he was less attracted to humans in general, so he thought that might have been a factor, but though she looked human, he knew she wasn't. She was... What was she?

"Garcia," Jaxa said, making room for him, patting the space next to her. "Would you like to join us?"

"You don't remember me, do you?" the girl said, for she had been staring at him with equal intensity. Contempt and anger were visible on her face.

In contrast to her negative energy, Tam's eyes brightened at the sound of her voice. "Jovet?"

"You two know each other?" Jaxa asked.

"She's my sister," Tammas said.

"No, I'm not," Jovet corrected, vehemently.

"How are you?" he asked, ignoring all the warning signs that told him to raise his shields and take evasive actions.

"I was fine until you barged in," she said, standing. "It's not enough that you have to upstage me in every area of interest that we share, but you have to join Star Fleet and outshine everyone to the point that there isn't anywhere I can go that I don't have to hear about you and your exploits? Can't you do anything badly?"

Tammas was a bit taken back, and he felt like a kid again, trying to figure out how to play the game. He wanted so desperately to win her affection and approval that he would say and do anything. "So, you're not happy to see me?"

Jovet got up from the table. "It's bad enough that this Universe isn't big enough to keep us separated, but you have to be assigned to my ship. You invaded my family, my dreams, my life, my music, and now my workspace. What else do you want from me?"

"I'm sorry," Tammas said. I should be able to fix this, he thought. There is a psychological explanation for all this energy. I should be able to fix this, he thought again. Why can't I solve this?



“I just wish the others could see how truly sorry you are,” Jovet said. “Just once, I would like to get through a conversation without your name coming up and me not sounding like the bad guy because I know what a monster you are.”

Jovet stormed down the spiral staircase and was gone. The remaining group and another group nearby that had ease-dropped seemed a bit uncomfortable. Like most people, they wanted to help fix things, and as Star Fleet Officers, they really wanted to fix things. Unfortunately, as with most tech oriented people, fixing people was the lesser of their skills, and sometimes, it was just best to let people muddle through their own issues rather than have an outside force step in and try to influence things. It was the Prime Directive of personal affairs approach to life. The far group quickly returned to their drinks and conversations.

“I’m sorry,” Jaxa said, mouthing the words instead of speaking them.

Tammas smiled at Jaxa and her friends. “And, for my next trick, I think I’ll make myself disappear,” he said, jokingly. At least it drew some smiles so that he could make a graceful exit.

Tammas went over to the bar and leaned against it, putting his right foot up on a step that followed the contours of the bar. As he waited for the bar tender, he glanced back over at Jaxa, gave her a half hearted smile as their eyes met again, and then he took inventory of the people in the lounge area. There was small stage area with several musical instruments in cradles. Three people were performing. Old Earth stuff, and the strangest part was they were wearing sun glasses, Hawaiian style shirts, and hats with parrots on them. There was a girl on the drums, a girl on the piano, and a guy playing the guitar, and the words he was singing were beyond crude. The chorus was old slang for getting inebriated and making love. Garcia accessed the file library with his neural implant, found the author and began browsing through the artist’s material.

Tammas had a powerful sense he was being stared at, and true enough, sitting at the bar right next to him was a female doing just that. He smiled at her, turned and ordered a Klingon coffee. He turned back to see she was still staring at him.

The musician finished their set, the guy drank some of his margarita, and then they started right into the next set. Appropriately enough, the song was about the drink margarita. Tammas made note of the song, for it was rather catchy.

“You would be Cadet Tammas Parkin Arblaster-Garcia,” she said.

“Yes,” Tam agreed. “I would be.”

“Have you ever thought of shortening your name?” she asked.

Tammas chuckled as he retrieved his drink, and would have continued studying the people in the lounge further, but the female next to him continued to stare. He returned the stare with equal intensity, admiring the lay of her feathers, and wondering why the feathers seemed to grow exactly where hair would grow had she been human. There had to be a scientific explanation for so much symmetry in the Universe. So many humanoids with only minor anatomical differences couldn’t just be chance. The fact that there were at least two planets that had so closely resembled Earth, one physically, and the other historically, that it would almost suggest a deity playing games, or at least, an extremely intelligent race had been seeding the galaxy. He dismissed the idea so he could concentrate on her eyes. They seemed kind, but penetrating, like she could see right through him.

“I’m Cadet Navok,” she said, not offering her hand, but offering a slight nod. “We have not met, but I have heard a great deal about you.”

“All good, I hope,” Tammias said. She was cute, he thought, trying to gauge how much taller than him she would be when she finally stood up from her stool.

“You like drama,” she said. “It follows you. But it’s more than the general chaos that comes from a duality paradigm so classic in species with gender division.”

Tammias blinked. She in no way appeared to be Vulcan, but she sounded Vulcan. He wasn’t sure if he should consider her statement from a scientific perspective or a personal perspective. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I don’t recognize what species you are.”

“Is it relevant?” she asked.

“It might be, since you’re using a gender division analysis of my species in order to construct a model to understand and interact with me,” Tammias said. “As if that were relevant to how I personally operate.”

“I’m Helenian,” she said. “You are a human Vulcan hybrid. It’s a very rare combination, if I understand correctly, due to the amount of medical attention such an offspring requires just to stay viable in the womb.”

Tammias was so stuck on her being Helenian that he didn’t register the part about difficulties inherent in interspecies genetic exchange. Had he picked up on that, he might have gone off on a completely different tangent like how remarkably similar everyone is, and how much ‘coincidence’ seemed insufficient as an explanation. No, what he got hooked on was the fact that he was attracted to someone who was Asexual. Navok wasn’t a “her.” For that matter, she wasn’t even a he. There really wasn’t even a gender neutral word that could fully describe what she was, though their species tolerated the use of female pronouns from the human camp. “Shields up, red alert,” he thought, trying to suppress all of his previous interest in the person. “Why am I always attracted to the aliens,” he wondered. It must be Kirk’s fault!

“Your sudden withdraw of interest from our dialogue suggests that you have some preconceived prejudice about Asexual Beings, or have been biased by a rumor about me personally,” Navok said.

Tammias raised an eyebrow, trying harder to suppress any further leaking of emotions. Had he been that transparent?

“Perhaps you are curious about the reproduction process,” she said. “Your species just can’t imagine a Universe without a Duality Paradigm, a male female, light dark, or what is it, Yin Yang? Is it your Vulcan heritage which prevents you from asking, or a human modesty that prevails?”

“I’ve never been accused of being modest,” Tammias assured her, deciding brutal honesty was the only way out of this one. “And, you are quite perceptive. I had been entertaining the idea of you and I hooking up, right up till you mentioned you were...”

“Not Interested? I never said that. Just because my species is genderless, doesn’t mean we don’t have relationships,” Navok said.

“I backed off because I wasn’t sure about the proper protocols,” Tammias tried, but decided that sounded a bit lame even to him. “I’m sorry. My thoughts were unprofessional and inappropriate, and I shouldn’t have shared as much...”

“I appreciate that you did,” Navok said. “As this is the appropriate setting, provided you are serious about flirting. Most human males, though, run when they learn what I am.”

“I didn’t run,” Tammias offered in his defense.

“No,” Navok agreed. “As I said, you like drama. Perhaps too much so.”

“Just out of curiosity, how do you reproduce?” Tammias asked, still trying to figure out what she meant about “drama.”

“When the conditions are right, I answer the Call. A potential child, a spirit looking for entrance into the world, will come, declare its life’s mission, and I will decide whether or not I will be the Gateway for this vehicle of spirit,” Navok said.

“And if you decide not to?” Navok asked.

“Then the spirit goes elsewhere, looking for the right family dynamics to support its life-quest-learning goals,” Navok said.

“You abort?” Tammias asked.

“That is a human term,” Navok said, not offended. “If I, or any one of my species, answered the Call every time we had it, there would be no room left in the Universe to breathe. Imagine if every one of your sperm were viable, would you be the Gateway for the trillions you would produce over a life time? If you had the potential to father a child every week for the rest of your life, would you?”

“You receive the Call every week?” Tammias asked.

“I receive a Call ever day,” Navok said, standing. “And if I chose, I could lay two eggs a day. How responsible would that be? And when you consider that humans now have the technology to make every single egg a woman can produce in her reproductive life span viable, you don’t consider it abortion not to collect all the eggs and put them in incubators, do you?”

Tammias didn’t have an argument for her. The disparity between species could often be as polarized as the perspectives between male and female. If changing just one DNA combination had the potential of changing the human experience, just look at the diversity created when you had a completely different genetic code. It was amazing to him that there was any cross species communication at all, and he was genuinely intrigued by her, sociologically speaking. A race without gender would certainly have a unique view on the world and for the famed sociologist Berger, perspective all boiled down to place. From Tammias perspective, she was odd. Beautifully odd. From her perspective, well, he was going to have to visit with her longer to find out just what she saw.

“If you’ll excuse me,” Navok said. “I have Bridge duty.”

“Of course,” Tammias said. “Perhaps we can talk again.”

“No, too much drama. Too much chaos,” Navok said, and walked away. “I prefer peace.”

Tammias wanted to argue with Navok that he didn’t like chaos. He was a man of peace. Sure, he wasn’t a Depak, or a Guinan, but he was peaceful. He was sure of it.

The band finished another set. Something about a food and paradise. He walked over to the man sipping his margarita.

“May I sit in on a set?” he asked.

“Are you a parrot head?” the man asked.

“I think I could fake it if you will permit,” Tammias said, picking up the spare guitar. “I’m Tammias.”

“I’m Frank. That’s Lena on the drums, and Carol on the piano,” Frank said.

Tammas nodded to them. "I'd like to try the pencil thin mustache song. You know that one?"

"Sure," he said. "Lead off, the vocal is yours."

Tammas sang the song, reading the words scrolling across his mind's eye via his implant, making mental notes of the movie star references. He was going to have to do some homework. He was familiar with Ricky Ricardo, but he had no idea who Boston Blackie or Sky's niece Penny were. Carol and Lena sang appropriate back up. The song finished and Tammas returned the guitar to the cradle.

"Very nice," Frank said. "You sure you don't want to play on?"

"No. I've got an appointment," Tammas said. "Maybe another time."

"Sure. Make sure you get a hat," Frank said.

Tammas went back to the bar and got another coffee. He was early, but he suspected the Captain would probably be early, so he had been extra early in order to make sure he was present.

"May I join you?" Jaxa asked, slipping up next to him before he could answer. "I am really sorry. I didn't know she was your sister, or that the two of you were so adversarial."

"We not adversarial," Tammas argued.

"Okay," Jaxa said, raising her hands in the classic "I surrender." "I still like you, even if she doesn't."

"Thank you," Tammas said. He wanted to be appreciated at the moment. He really should get in the habit of reading over the ship's rosters to avoid future mishaps such as the one he had just had with his sister. He needed to make a list of people he would prefer not to work with. Jaxa waved her hand in front of Tam's eyes and he refocused on her. Except for the ridges on her nose, she could have passed for human. He studied her closely, and decided he could fall in love with a Bajoran. Yes. She was very cute.

"You still with me?" Jaxa asked.

"Yes," he assured her. "I'm sorry. I drift sometimes. Especially around music."

"You know, I've wanted to talk to you for a long time now," Jaxa said, swiveling her chair back and forth. She felt like a teenager.

"Before the streaking incident, or after," Tammas asked.

Jaxa broke into laughter, actually touching his arm to keep from falling off the bar stool. "Oh, that was a good one. And you were such a good sport about it. I would have been so embarrassed."

"You can thank my visit to Betazed for my modesty," Tammas said.

"Anyway, it just seems every time I've tried to chat with you, something happens, or your friends spirit you off," Jaxa said.

"Well, we are on opposing teams, you know. I was going to chat with you that time in lab, but then that chili fiasco happened," Tammas offered.

She raised her hands innocently. "I had nothing to do with that."

"So, here you are," Janeway said. "Right on schedule. This is Second Lt. Tuvok."

Tammas greeted him in formal Vulcan way. Tuvok responded appropriately.

"Your reputation precedes you," Tuvok added.

"Yeah, you just missed by how much," Tammas said.

Tuvok didn't understand, but then, he rarely picked up on, or even cared about, the human's propensity for humor. Jaxa got it and pinched his arm. Two other girls joined them. The closest stuck out her hand right away, apparently glad to meet Tammas. "Carol Jackson. I hope I'm not too late?"

"Not for you," Janeway said. "And everyone here has met my First Officer, Lt. Commander Shelby, I trust? She's a last minute recruit for the game."

"Yes," Jaxa said.

"No," Tammas said, not offering his hand until she reached out to him in the normal Earth fashion. His first impulse was he didn't like her, but he couldn't trace the source of his feeling. She had a firm grip, challenging. He made sure he wasn't the first to let go. It was a variation of the game not let go when you hand somebody an object, just to see what the other's reaction would be. He had only met one person who had ever beat the 'not let go' game, and it turned out that she taught kindergarten, so she knew how to play to win. Shelby played to win.

"I hear you'll be joining us on the Bridge soon," Shelby said.

"Yes, Sir," Tammas said. They mutually let go of each other.

"So, have you a game picked out?" Janeway asked.

"Would you mind if Jaxa joins us?" Tammas asked, noticing Jaxa was about ready to slip away.

"Really?" Jaxa asked.

"That would be fine," Janeway said. "The more the merrier, wouldn't you say, Tuvok?"

Tuvok only looked at the Captain.



As Tammas set the game in play, and explained the object, he began to realize Tuvok was being coerced into playing. He had just assumed, as they made their way to the holodeck, that Tuvok had wanted to join, but indeed, it was only through Janeway's insistence that he do so that had brought him this far. It wasn't until they were in a battle scene, that Tuvok decided it was time to protest. He had notched an arrow and let it fly. It missed the target by three arm's length.

"Freeze program," Tuvok demanded. "This game is defective. There is no way I could have missed from this distance."

"This is not about how Tuvok shoots. It's about how the character that you are role playing shoots," Tammas explained. "This is not a training game for real life. It's fantasy. Every task we perform is based on the roll of a dice. As your character gains experience, your character's performance will improve accordingly."

"You are cheating," Tuvok said.

"He has a point," Shelby said. "I mean, I know you have competed in gymnastic, but that display of athletic ability while fighting was just unbelievable."

"How did you jump over that giant?" Janeway asked.

"The character I'm playing is a monk, and he has superhuman strength and agility," Tammas explained. "Using my neural implant, I am able to access the computer program and alter the gravity in the deck plating below me. Reducing the gravity gave me the height in my jump. To simulate the temporary flight, I used the tractor beam that the holodeck normally uses to move holodeck matter around the grid. So, though I didn't have to do that, I wasn't exactly cheating. I'm still in context with my character."

“Come on, Tuvok. We have to take this ring and throw it into the lava pit, don’t you understand?” Carol asked, semi in character. “I’m just a hobbit, and I understand that.”

“Has it occurred to you that he does look like an elf?” Shelby remarked.

“If you have brought me here to ridicule me, I will return to my quarters,” Tuvok said.

“Its okay, Tuvok,” Tammias said. “If you would like I could alter your character’s modifiers to reflect more of your true life attributes, and give you challenges that you will find more rewarding.”

“Thank you,” Tuvok said.

“Ladies, that means this game is going to get much harder,” Tammias said.

“Would you mind if I play one of my more advanced characters?”

“More advanced than you hopping all over the place like some Chinese Master from an old Kung Fu movie?” Shelby asked, and then smiled when she added: “On steroids?”

“Like Tuvok, I often prefer that the game resemble true life attributes, and using my implant for tech assists gives me an advantage, so I up the ante accordingly,” Tammias said.

“I’m okay with increasing the odds, if you’ll bump us all up a level or two,” Carol said. “These first and second level spells are useless.”

“Very well, go ahead and level up,” Tammias told them, using his implant to open a number of access points for them. Four windows appeared in mid air, allowing them access to their character sheets. “Jaxa, I recommend you learn a few more daze spells.”

The game resumed and this time Tuvok seemed satisfied with his marksmanship. Of course, to bring balance back to the game, there were more bad guys, some of which were much more sophisticated when it came to fighting.

“This is better than Tribble base ball,” Carol shouted, notching another arrow.

Tammias laughed. “Tribble base ball?” He asked, considering the mental image. It appealed to his dark side. Most of the characters he played had a dark side, especially those that dabbled in magic.

“Stay in character,” Shelby admonished them, blocking with her sword, and then punching the masked man in the head. She was a little out of breath.

“I’m out of spells,” Jaxa yelled, readying her staff to fight. “Protect your magician!”

The group huddled around Jaxa. She felt as if she was on an Away Mission as opposed to being in a game. When the last enemy fell to their group effort, everyone but Tammias and Tuvok were exhausted. Tammias pointed out that this was only just the first battle. Changing the rules to make them work harder was not the real point of the game, but it was stress relief for them to work so hard. It was also a bonus to practice various combat styles.

“We didn’t find any treasure,” Carol complained, pretend sadness. “I say we go in that cave and dig up some gold.”

“Are you crazy? That’s where these trolls were coming from,” Jaxa said. “I need at least twelve hours to rest and memorize my spells.”

Tammias turned to Janeway. “You carry the ring. What says you?”

“Computer, freeze program,” Janeway said, in response to a double chirp from her comm. badge. Since the *Chance* only had one holodeck, time was limited, and everyone, even the Captain, stayed on a schedule. “Save this as Janeway’s Ring dash one. Can we pick up from here next week?”

“It’s okay with me,” Carol said.

Everyone else agreed. Even Tuvok. As they left the holodeck, allowing the next group to come on, Carol awkwardly rubbed her own shoulder.

“You okay?” Tammas asked.

“Yeah. My shoulder hurts from time to time, but I’ll be alright,” Carol said.

“Turn around,” Tammas instructed her. He put his hands together in the Indian “Nomaste,” fashion, closed his eyes, and then reached out and touched her shoulder, massaging it lightly.

“Your hands are hot,” Carol noted, nearly pulling free out of surprise. His massage felt so good, though, she overcame her surprise easily enough.

“Garcia, you’re sweating,” Shelby said.

“Oh, my,” Carol said, her eyes closed. “Where did you learn this?”

“It’s a Vulcan healing trance,” Tuvok said.

“No, just a Reiki treatment,” Tammas said, letting go. “All better?”

Carol moved her shoulder, satisfied, and then turned around and hugged him. “Thank you,” she said. As she pulled back, she said, “My, you are sweating.”

“Part of the trick,” Tammas said. “If it flares up, schedule an appointment with me, and I’ll give you a full massage slash Reiki treatment.”

“Well, you better schedule me in,” Jaxa said. “I think my shoulder’s hurting, too.”

Janeway laughed. Tuvok crossed his arms in front of his chest. If Tammas hadn’t known any better, he would argue that Tuvok was angry.

“You’re a Reiki Healer as well?” Janeway asked. “Is there anything you don’t do?”

Carol took Tam’s hands in hers. “I never heard of anyone raising their temperature on command. How do you make your hands so hot?”

Janeway and Shelby both touched his hands, and Jaxa wiped some of the sweat off his forehead using her sleeve.

“It’s a Vulcan healing technique,” Tuvok stated again.

“This is actually an old Earth thing I picked up,” Tammas said. “As a doctor, I felt it necessary to master various types of alternative healing practices.”

“It’s Vulcan,” Tuvok argued. “I don’t know who taught you this, but I believe you are misusing it in order to attract attention to yourself.”

“I don’t have to do anything special to attract attention to myself,” Tammas argued. “That comes to me naturally. And this is a human gift, not Vulcan. It has a long history on Earth.”

“As if it wasn’t possible that perhaps a stray Vulcan landed on your planet and taught someone this technique,” Tuvok said.

“You can speculate to no end,” Tammas said. “I’m not going to argue with you about it.”

“Who cares,” Carol said. “It works I feel better. And, I will schedule with you for a full treatment, flare up or not. Thank you, Doctor Garcia. Captain, are we still on for coffee?”

“Indeed,” Janeway said. “I think I should schedule a treatment as well.”

Tammas simply shrugged, it was certainly okay with him, but then he turned his gaze back to Tuvok.

“Tuvok and I are due on the bridge,” Shelby said, tapping Tuvok on the arm, as if she were telling him to back down from a fight. “If you’ll excuse us?”

“Captain,” Tuvok said, turning to accompany Shelby.

Janeway patted him on the back and said, “Good game.”

Tuvok frowned, glared at Tammas, and walked away. Shelby nodded to Janeway as followed Tuvok. The look she gave Garcia was curious and unreadable.

Janeway and Carol headed the other way, but not before Janeway said, “Garcia, I guess I’ll be seeing you tomorrow?”

Tammas nodded. “Yes, Sir, I’ll be there.”

Jaxa found herself alone with Tammas. She smiled at him.

“What’s tomorrow?” Jaxa asked, rocking on her feet.

“Bridge duty,” Tammas said, with a frown. “I’m running Ops.”

“And you look so excited about it,” Jaxa said, smiling mischievously.

He frowned. “Yeah,” Tammas said. “I can just barely contain it.”

“Are you hungry?” Jaxa asked.

“Famished,” Tammas said.

“Good,” she said, taking his arm. She led him back to her quarters where they shared a quiet meal and talked about life.



Tammas Garcia stepped out of the lift and onto the Bridge. No one seemed to notice, as they were all busy with their own tasks. As if it should be any different, he scolded himself. “What did you expect?” he asked himself. Did he actually think that people would come to attention as if Admiral McCoy had just come out of the lift? As he came around to relieve Ops, Janeway greeted him with a nod and returned her attention to Shelby. Once again she was talking Borg stuff. She was the Queen of Borg, having made that her life’s obsession.

“Nice of you to join us,” Shelby told him, pausing from her talk just long enough to mess with him.

“I just wanted everyone on my team to have a turn at the rotation,” Tammas said innocently.

“Of course you did,” Shelby said, not buying it for a moment.

Departing Ops was a Lt. Olson, who filled him in on the news. “I’m glad you’re here, things are getting too hot for me.”

“What’s up?” Tammas asked.

“A Star Fleet Operative on planet Romulus just alerted fleet that there was a high profile abduction that occurred on Romulus itself. It’s got the whole Romulan sector madder than a hornets nest knocked down by a kid pitching stones. Fleet just dispatched a ship to the neutral zone to conference with the Romulans, who think we’re responsible.”

“Some things never change,” Tam agreed.



“They’re sending the Enterprise,” Olson said.

“Like I said,” Tammias said. Some things never change.

“I guess they thought we had too many trainees to be sent,” Olson said.

“Anyway, we’re just monitoring our sector for potential intel, but we’re still headed to the star cluster 613-alpha. Cheery, name, isn’t it? Have fun!”

“Gee, thanks,” Tammias said, taking over Ops. Tammias scanned over his instrument panel to verify news, and was surprised that Olson hadn’t followed it up by checking the IS-Net for any information the media might have been running. Sometimes they had sources that Fleet overlooked. He began skimming the material, hot off the press, as it were, and compared it with the Fleet updates. Three Romulan ships had been immobilized in orbit, no damage taken on. Nothing the Romulans had done had been able to prevent the alien ship from reaching orbit. Tammias had flashbacks to Vulcan Space Traffic Control, as he read the minor details about what happened next at Romulus before the ship departed. Though it had only been in orbit approximately two minutes, the abductors had been able to kidnap twenty people. Such precision timing and efficiency suggested superior intelligence gathering capabilities, or a potential operative in the field.

Whether it was inside job or not, the Romulan sector was now bustling with activity as they searched for the intruder. They even contacted Star Fleet. The calls were mostly accusatory in nature, but there was a tone that suggested they wanted help but didn’t know how to go about asking for it. Apparently the abductees were of a very high stature in the Romulan government, or society at large, and there would be no stone unturned. The Enterprise was en route to meet with a Romulan vessel at the Neutral Zone in an attempt to “alleviate” concerns and stress on both sides of the border.

“So, Garcia,” Janeway said, wanting to draw him into her conversation with her first officer. “What do you think of Shelby’s theory that there’s a Borg Queen?”

Tammias frowned, turning to observe the two sitting together, evaluating whether or not he wanted to get into this. Though it was a constellation ship, there had been some updates in the Bridge layout, providing room for both the First Officer and the Captain to sit side by side. He became aware that they were appraising him as well and nearly made the mistake of saying, “There’s only one Borg queen, and her name is Shelby...” But for once he exercised the wisdom not to repeat a rumor he had heard. Tuvok, at his station to the left of them, suddenly appeared very busy, as if he didn’t want to be drawn into the subject again.

“I’m a Sociologist,” Tammias said finally, turning back to his station. “Not a soothsayer.”

“You’re well known for your candor,” Shelby said. “Tell us what you really think.”

“Very well,” Tammias sighed. “I’ve seen no evidence, in any of the material I’ve studied, that suggest that the Borg operate under a Hive mentality, much less any evidence that they operate under the influence, guidance, or direction of any semblance to ‘one’ centralized intelligence. We know they assimilate both male and female, and duty assignments appear to be handed out on a need by need basis, not by a gender division of labor. There has been no sign of any hierarchy, or any other sort of division of labor that we can or have imagined. Further, none of the Borg we have met have demonstrated any signs of sexuality. It’s as if they are all neutered or spayed during the assimilation

process. So, I find the idea of a Queen Borg, or superior, guiding intelligence that disperses directives, contrary to the concept of the Borg Collective.”

“So, how do you explain the Borg babies that Commander Riker found on his first Away Team mission to the Borg vessel?” Shelby asked.

“With all due respects to Lt. Commander Riker,” Tammias said. “I read nothing in his report that suggests he witnessed Borg babies being born. What he did witness were babies in an incubator. We do not know if these babies had been abducted and were in the process of being assimilated, or were indeed the off spring of Borg ship personnel. It seems unlikely that Borg have sex, since that method isn’t as efficient as other methods, such as assimilation. Further, since sex typically means personal gratification at some level, sex between Borg personnel would suggest a level of individuality which we have not seen to this date.”

The officer at the Helm, Cadet Navok, whistled, shook her head, and then said, just barely loud enough for everyone to hear, “Well, it appears the rumors are true.”

“What rumors would that be?” Shelby asked.

“Garcia would argue with God Herself,” Navok said.

Tuvok looked up from his station, for apparently he hadn’t appreciated the comment any more than Tammias had, though Janeway seemed amused. Shelby seemed amused as well, for just a moment, and then she drew a curious look as she realized who “god” was supposed to be in this scenario. She wanted to squash the rumor that she was “god,” or a candidate for a “god want to be,” but didn’t know how to proceed. Just because she was aggressive didn’t mean she had delusion of godhood. No one ever accused Kirk of having such delusions, she thought, and he was certainly more aggressive than I am.

“If,” Tammias stated calmly. “You accept the premise of a god centered universe then yes, I do have a number of questions that I intend to argue with god.”

“Logically derived at, I’m sure,” Navok said.

“Naturally,” Tammias agreed.

“And what makes you think God would entertain your questions?” Navok asked.

“That question is irrelevant,” Tammias said. “The fact is a deity paradigm raises certain existential questions, such as how, why, when and where.”

“Umm,” Navok said. “And science doesn’t raise those questions?”

“Of course it does, and we explore those questions within a reasonable framework,” Tammias said. “The scientific method provides a framework for me to answer those questions for myself, rather than having to wait for a burning bush to provide some cryptic answer to life, the universe, and everything. We wouldn’t be out here looking for answers if we were still back at home, sitting idly on some mountain top, awaiting an isolationist deity to grace us with answers.”

“A typical chaos driven response. Did you ever consider a supreme being might employ the same kinds of rules as we do? Rules like the Prime Directive? That’s the problem with Star Fleet,” Navok said. “We explore the Universe for answers, when ultimately, the answers are inside us. Wasn’t that the whole message in your Earth classic movie the Wizard of Oz? I certainly didn’t have to travel all the way to Alpha Gamma Prime to learn that peace is found from within. A mountain top would have been just as fine, and the view would have been just as pleasant.”

“And no doubt, the decreased air pressure and oxygen levels would have given your brain just the right conditions to give you an experience which you would have erroneously labeled as a supernatural event,” Tammias argued.

Novak looked a bit angry, but before she could respond, Janeway decided to intervene before a philosophical war took place on her bridge. “So, why did you join Star Fleet, Novak?” Janeway asked.

“I’m a people watcher,” Navok said. “I enjoy listening to all the debates, rationalizations, and arguments you explorer scientist type make. That, and I like the illusion of speed offered by piloting a Star Ship.”

Tammias wanted to continue to argue with Navok but his panel suddenly lit up like a Christmas Tree from one of the movies he had played on the holodeck.

“Captain,” Tammias said, apprising her of the situation even as information was still coming in. “We’re receiving a distress call from the Texas. They’re under attack.”

“Yellow alert,” Janeway said, coming to Ops. “Where are they, and who’s the closest ship?”

“We are,” Tammias informed her, pointing to the Texas’ coordinates. “I’ve just lost the signal. It’s being jammed at the source.”

“Red alert. Helm, put us on an intercept course for their last confirmed position, warp factor eight,” Janeway said, glancing at Shelby to witness her calling department heads for specific instructions, verifying things were going by the book. They were both very aware that the ship had rookies on board. “What else did you get from them?”

“A visual on the ship pursuing them,” Tammias said. “It matches the visual description of the alien ship that invaded Romulan space.”

“Send that information to Star Fleet Command, coded,” Janeway said. “Tuvok?”

“I have detected the Texas with sensors,” Tuvok said. “It has just dropped out of warp. Long range scans do not reveal an alien vessel.”

“Helm, adjust the coordinates accordingly,” Shelby assisted, noticing the cadet was wavering a bit. “How is the alien able to resist our scans?”

“Unknown,” Tuvok said.

“The Texas is still not answering my hails,” Tammias said.

Janeway looked to Tuvok, who seemed to be anticipating her question. “I detect minimal power. I’m unable to discern the extent of damage if there is any, or whether they were attacked at all.”

“Or?” Tammias said. Of course they were attacked, but he kept his mouth shut and tried to find any hint of an emergency signals from the Texas. The only thing that passed between he and Tuvok were facial expressions: Tuvok expression seemed to suggest, “you’re questioning me, cadet?” Tam’s expression seemed to suggest, “That’s all you got?”

The Chance dropped out of warp in visual sight of the Texas. “Detecting life signs,” Tuvok said. “No signs of the alien vessel. I’m detecting an energy build up...”

“Shields up!” Janeway yelled, before Tuvok finished his sentence of “Core breach imminent.”

The Chance had been too close to the Excelsior Class ship when its warp core blew. The Chance’s shields flared, radiating away energy until it over loaded and collapsed. The ship rolled along its Y axis, power systems failing, followed by a number

of explosions that ripped along the hull. Janeway was still holding firmly to Tam's chair when the rolling sensation stopped and emergency lights came on.

"Damage report," Shelby said.

"I've lost contact with everything aft of section twelve," Tammias said.

"Emergency power and life support available on all decks. Gravity fluctuations on decks ten and eight. Deck six is experiencing a reversal in the polarity of the artificial gravity field, so people have fallen to the ceilings. No reports from the engine room... Stand by. There is a person alive in the Engineering. She states the warp core is unstable. She can't tell how long the emergency shielding will hold."

"Eject the core," Shelby instructed.

"Says it can't be ejected," Tammias said. "The Engine room is in complete vacuum. A shield came on trapping her in a small bubble of air. Not only can she not get to the controls, but she believes the damage is serious enough to prevent the core from being launched."

Janeway seemed pale in the emergency lights, but she knew what she had to do. She had rehearsed this a million times in her dreams, probably practiced it twice as much in simulators, and now it was all instinctual. She said it before anyone had a chance to look to her for guidance. "All hands, abandon ship. Everyone to the life boats, now! Garcia, put out an SOS and launch the buoy."

Tammias activated the emergency distress beacon and launched the buoy, which would give Star Fleet the details of everything up till the buoy launched. Hopefully it would also visually record the Chance in its death throes, as the little buoy slash probe vacated to a safer vantage point. Tammias wished he could ride the buoy away, and then bit down on his wish. This was life and death and he needed to stay focused. This was what the Academy training was all about, and now it was time to see if he had retained any of his lessons. Everyone on the Bridge had departed but him, Tuvok, Janeway and Shelby, as they still had jobs to do. Tuvok was assisting with the evacuation from his station, and Shelby and Janeway were following along, giving instructions and suggestions as needed. Much of the audio information Tammias was getting was through his head-set, but occasionally he filtered it through his com panel to keep from getting too many voices yelling in his right ear at once.

"No, that corridor has depressurized, you will have to make your way up to the next level via Jeffries tubes," Tammias responded to a voice over his ear piece. "I understand. Stand by. The emergency shield that holds in the pool water didn't come on, and that floor has no gravity," Tammias relayed to the Captain, as he looked for an alternate exit for the caller. His computer crashed and rebooted in the process, and he was forced to start over from scratch, but finally he collected the information. "You'll have to take Jeffrey's tube six alpha down one level, go to section five, and then proceed up two levels through Jeffrey's tube five bravo. Communications are intermittent, but I'll try and follow your progress."

"Comm. badges are cutting in and out on all decks," Tuvok reported.

"Shelby, report to the life pod," Janeway said.

"Not until you go," Shelby said.

"Don't play this game with me," Janeway said. "I want you on the life pod to rally the troops."

“While you go down with the ship?” Shelby asked. “I don’t think so. My job is to see you safely out of here.”

“I’m not leaving until I know we’ve helped everyone we can,” Janeway said, and turned her to attention suddenly to a voice that came from the Bridge’s intercom. It sounded like a child.

“Yes, I hear you,” Tammias said. “What’s your name?”

“Sheila,” the child answered. “I know I’m not supposed to use this comm. badge except in emergencies, but I’m scared.”

“It’s okay, Sheila,” Janeway said. “Sheila, are you still there?”

Tammias scrambled to boost the signal strength in that area and got her back. “Yes, we can still hear you. Where are you?” Tammias asked, and as soon as she answered he pulled up a map of her section. The map flashed and his screen went dark. He hit the console and it came back on. According to the onscreen information, Sheila was blocked in her section. The Jeffries tube that led up to the next deck had been exposed to a vacuum, and the other exits were either blocked by debris, or fires. He began punching up personal information of the cabins near her.

“Tuvok, can we get an emergency team to her?” Janeway asked.

Tuvok shook his head, “No.”

Janeway turned back to Garcia who was still busy scrolling the map back and forth on his screen, looking for alternative routes out of that section. She approved of the soft, confident voice Garcia was using to speak with Sheila

“How old are you? Nine, uh? And living on a starship. Isn’t that an adventure.” The Poseidon Adventure suddenly came to his mind, and that damn song he had grown to love/hate began to play in the back of his head. “Cut through the deck,” he mumbled out loud.

“What was that?” Janeway asked.

“Can you help me?” Sheila’s voice sounded on the verge of breaking into sobs.

“Yes, I’m going to help you. Just stay right where you are for a moment,”

Tammias said. “Is there anyone else with you?”

“No,” she said. “The lights are flickering.”

Janeway whispered in Garcia’s free ear. “Her father, Tim Johnson, would have been in Engineering.”

Tammias switched lines. “Tuvok, are there any med teams or security in section four, Deck eight?”

“Negative. No one can get to that section due to a gravity change over,” Tuvok said. “There’s a four foot area where gravity has increased to seven times Earth standard. The upper deck has given way and debris block the path. There’s insufficient time to disable the artificial gravity and clear the debris.”

“Yes, Sheila, I’m still with you. Don’t cry. I’m not going to leave you. I want you to go two doors back and enter that room. I know its private, but the locks are disabled. Trust me. Alright, there’s a phaser in the bed room. It’s probably in a case, sitting on the dresser, or maybe in the dresser. Really? Good. Get it, and then proceed to room 217. You’re going to cut through the ceiling with the phaser and climb to the next deck. I’ll stay with you.”

“Captain,” Shelby said. “I will stay with Garcia if you will please leave the ship. I’ll make sure Garcia gets out.”

“All of you get out! I’ll stay and help as many as I can,” Tammias said. “No, I’m not talking to you. Do you need assistance? Then clear this channel and continue towards the life pods. I hear you, stand by. Shuttle Atlantis, is that you? Are you able to launch? Just a moment, I’ll check. Tuvok, do you have any life signs on deck seven, section one? When they launch, that whole area is going to depressurize.”

“Stand by,” Tuvok said. He was doing his best to assist in the evacuation, and was guiding med teams to injured crew members.

“Yes, Sheila, I’m still with you. Have you ever shot a phaser before? It’s okay, honey. There’s a first time for everything. You’re going to do fine. Look on the desk, do you see any glasses? Look in that case. Those are reading glasses. I want you to put those on before you activate the phaser. I know it’s hard to see with them, but we want to protect your eyes. Set the phaser to the highest setting, right, and keep it aimed within a half meter of the inner bulkhead. Right, that’s the safest place. Stand by, Sheila. I hear you. Jovet, is that you? Stand by, one. Tuvok, do you have any medical teams forward of section three?”

“Affirmative,” Tuvok said.

“There are people trapped between Turbolift Three, and corridor eight crossing two,” Tammias informed him. “Can they reach them?”

“Negative,” Tuvok said. “They’ve already tried.”

“I understand. I’m sorry, Jovet, they can’t get to your section. I show that there are two working life pods that you can reach from your position. Help all the injured you can to the pods and evacuate.”

“Deck Seven is cleared,” Tuvok said.

“Atlantis, you’re cleared to launch,” Garcia said.

“Atlantis, this is Captain Janeway,” Janeway said. “Do a fly by of the lower deck. I want a visual survey of the damage to Engineering.”

“Aye, Captain,” answered Atlantis.

“Alright, now it’s our turn,” Shelby said.

“I can’t leave yet,” Tammias said. “Yes, Sheila, I’m still here. I’m sorry. Now, aim where I told you. Then don’t stand right under it. Begin again, and this time hold the trigger down, a steady beam. You’re doing fine. No, you’re not going to get in trouble. Is the ceiling turning red? Keep it on that spot until you see through the ceiling, and then move slowly along the wall as if you were painting. I want you to draw a square on the ceiling big enough for you to fit through. It’s alright, just back up and move the beam slower.”

“I’ll stay with him to make sure he gets out,” Janeway said, while Tammias was giving instructions to Sheila. “Tuvok. Get yourself and Shelby to safety. That’s an order. Now, Garcia, you and I have six minutes, and then we’re out of here.” And then under her breath, she added, “One way or another.”

♪♪▶

After the explosion, the air pressure in the corridor where Jovet Garcia had been standing dropped so much and so quickly that everyone passed out. She had awakened to find her world completely upside down. She was on the ceiling looking up at the floor. She wasn’t sure if her ear drums had ruptured or not, but her ears hurt and there was a dull roar in her head. Disoriented, she got up and walked over to another down crew member. From the looks of the person, he had a broken leg, but he was alive. She took

the opportunity while he was unconscious to set it, and then looked around for something to make a splint. There was a pile of debris she believed might offer splint material, but as she moved a piece of cloth her breath stuck in her throat. There was a man there. She froze, unsure of what to do. He was buried up to his torso, and he didn't seem to be breathing, but then his eyes opened, and they orientated on her. It reminded her of a nightmare scene from one of her brother's books.

"Help me," the distorted face said.

"Of course," Jovet said. "I'll be right back."

"Don't leave me," he said.

She activated her communication badge. Nothing happened. "Look, I promise I'm not going to abandon you. I'll be back."

The man nodded and she went back to the guy with the broken leg. As she walked back, she kept trying to call for help. The ceiling plate shuddered beneath her feet and she fell towards the wall. There was a burst of noise over her comm. badge, as she passed an active terminal display. It was one of the few active displays and doubled for a source of light. A faint, pale light filtered through smoky air. She stopped and stood before the computer console. "Hello?" she asked. She took one step back. "Hello? Can anyone hear me?"

"Stand by, Sheila. I hear you. Jovet, is that you?"

"Yes," Jovet said, relieved to hear his voice. "I need medical assistance."

"Stand by, one. Tuvok, do you have any medical teams forward of section three?" she heard Tammas say. She could just barely make out Tuvok's voice. Tammas spoke to her: "I understand. I'm sorry, Jovet, they can't get to your section. I show that there are two working life pods that you can reach from your position. Help all the injured you can to the pods and evacuate."

"I need help down here!" Jovet demanded.

No one answered her. Jovet made it back to the guy with the broken leg and discovered he was awake. She went to him.

"Can you walk on your good leg if I help you?" Jovet asked.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"We're abandoning ship," Jovet said. "Come on. Let's get you to the life pod."

With her help, he was able to stand, and they limped around the corner towards the life pod. There were seven other people, lying about on the ceiling, all unconscious. They maneuvered around the other crew members and stopped at the life pod. The man supported his own weight by leaning against the wall while Jovet tried to reach the controls to open the pod. She could just barely reach the panel, standing on her toes. The door slid open and she struggled to help the man up into the pod. She spent the next two minutes checking the others for life signs and dragging the live ones into the same pod with the guy with the broken leg. All in all, she dragged six people into the pod. The three remaining were dead. She went back to the trapped man and studied the situation. She attempted to dig him out, but it nearly caused a cave in that threatened to bury them both.

"How could there be so much damn stuff?" Jovet yelled, throwing a piece of metal. A thin stream of water trickled down over the metal and insulation. The flow began to increase, starting a stream that pooled at the wall and started meandering down the length of the corridor.

Jovet looked around for a tool, or anything she might use for leverage, and, after finding nothing useful, she walked back to the one space her comm. badge had worked. “Tam, can you hear me? Are you still there?”

“Yes, I can hear you.” Again, she sighed with relief at the sound of his voice, and she once again pleaded for help. “Can you hear me?” Tam repeated. Apparently he had not heard her. He sounded rather calm, which irritated her to no ends, but it was a voice she could hold onto.

“I got seven people in the life pod, but there’s one man still trapped,” she repeated. “I need help with him, can you hear me?”

“Yes, I hear that he’s the only one left and you can’t get him out,” Tammas answered her.

“Is there anyone coming to assist me?” she asked, her voice was beyond pleading.

“No, Jovet. No one is coming. How is the man trapped? No, calm down,” Tammas insisted, trying to talk over her ranting. “Can you amputate a limb and pull him to the life pod?”

“No,” Jovet said. She was crying.

“Jovet, you’re going to have to leave him, then. If you have already pulled injured people into the life pod, then you must see to their well being.” Tammas said.

“I know,” Jovet said.

“Jovet,” Captain Janeway said. “You’ve done what you can, now get yourself and the others to safety. That’s an order.”

“Yes, Captain,” Jovet said, and walked away from the only spot where she was able to get a signal.

Jovet made it back to the life pod. Everyone was still unconscious, except the man with the broken leg. The gravity in the pod had reversed to match that of the ship on this floor, so none had been able to strap into the seats. The man with the broken leg looked at her for instructions.

“I’m going to close the door from the outside,” Jovet told him. “Can you reach and operate the launch controls?”

The man nodded. “And you?”

“I got one more to help out. I’ll take the adjoining pod to safety. You get these people out of here,” Jovet instructed.

He nodded. “Good luck.”

“By the way,” Jovet asked. “What was your name?”

“Cadet Philips, Mam,” he said. “Terry”

She smiled. “See you on the other side,” Jovet said.

And then she pushed the button to close the door. The pod door slid shut, followed by the airlock door that led to the pod. Jovet leaned her head against the inner airlock door and began to cry. Through her forehead, she could feel the vibrations in the airlock door when the pod disengaged, and she imagined she heard the sound of it thrusting away. What are you thinking, she asked herself. You should have been in there. Get in the other pod and get yourself to safety.

Jovet was shaking as she reached for the controls to the other pod. The airlock door opened and then the pod door cycled open in sequence. All she had to do was get in, and be off. Instead, she pushed herself up, taking on good posture, and marched back



towards the remaining man. She stopped once more at her “life line. “Tam? Are the transporters working?”

“No, Jovet. The transporters are off line,” Tammias said. “And there is too much radiation and interference to reach you even if they were. You’re going to have to leave him.”

“Thank you, Tam. I’m sorry. For what I said. For the way I was,” she said, walking out of the communication zone. “And for being such a bad sister. But you sure picked a perfect time to give me exactly what I asked for.”

Jovet sat down next to the trapped man, lifted his head and scooted closer so she could rest his head in her lap. He came around as she brushed his hair out of his eyes.

“Are they coming to get us?” he asked.

“Yes,” Jovet lied, caressing his hair. “Everything’s going to be alright.”

“I really appreciate you staying with me,” he said. “I’m afraid. I can’t feel my legs, or my arms.”

“Shh,” Jovet told him. “We can fix that as soon as they get us to sickbay. What’s your name?”

“Cadet Walker,” he said.

The lights flickered off.

“No, what’s your name?” Jovet asked.

“Kenny. My friends call me Ken,” he said.

“And where are you from, Ken?”



“Atlantis for you, Captain,” Tammias said, punching it through to Tuvok’s station.

“Janeway here, go ahead Atlantis,” Janeway said, trying to fine tune the monitor.

“No, I can’t see anything. Just give me the news.”

“The entire bottom of the fuselage has buckled. There is no way to eject the core,” Atlantis said. “A very bad radiation leak and a plasma fire forward of Engineering.”

“Atlantis,” Garcia interrupted. “How close can you get to the engineering section? Crewman Laston is trapped in a small bubble of air. Can you get close enough to use your emergency transporter? I know the radiation is bad, but can you do it? I need a yes or no. Thank you. Laston, hang on a bit longer. We might be able to get you out.”

“Med team one, your area is cleared. Go ahead and launch your life boats,”

Janeway instructed from Tuvok’s terminal. She walked over to Tammias and tapped him on the shoulder. “It’s time to go. What’s her progress?”

“Sheila? The Captain and I want to know how you’re doing? Wonderful! Now, you’re going to have to pull the desk under that hole. I know it’s heavy. Take out the drawers. Yeah, take it all out. Don’t worry about the mess. Pull it as close as you can to the wall. Now, go get the chair and put it on the desk. Yeah, let it roll so that the back is against the wall. Good girl. Now, you’ll need something else to put in the chair to stand on. A waste basket. A box, or maybe one of the drawers. There is? Great. Get that. Right, turn it over, and dump the plant and the dirt out. No, I’m sure it will hold you. Now put it on the desk, and then climb on the desk. Put the basket upside down in the chair, and climb carefully into the chair and stand on the basket. I know it’s shaky, but you can do it.”

A panel began to smoke on the Bridge and Janeway went back to Tuvok's station to reroute power away from that section. Something overhead couldn't take the power rerouting and several small explosions ripped at the ceiling, showering them with sparks and bits of paneling.

"Can you take this conversation on the go?" Janeway asked.

"Are you up?" Tammias asked, shaking his head "no" to Janeway. "Okay, wonderful. Go to the door and put your hands on it. Is hot or cold? Open it. Proceed down the hall. No, the other way. Okay, do you see the outline in the wall in front of you? Yes. There should be a red panel. You see the red panel? Put your hand on it. You got to push on it. Right, now push the big blue, little green twice. That's right, step inside. You see a cat? What do you mean you see a cat? No, Sheila! Don't go after the cat. Go inside the pod. Sheila?!"

"Garcia?" Janeway said.

"Sheila! Come back to the pod now," Tammias yelled. "I've lost her signal!"

"Put me on," Janeway said. "Sheila, this is the Captain. I am ordering you back to that life pod, now!"

"I caught her!" Sheila announced, triumphantly. Her voice resounded over the bridge audio system.

"Sheila, you have to hurry," Janeway said.

"I'm in the pod. What now?" Sheila asked.

"Pull the green handle. That's right, the door closed. Now go sit down and strap yourself in. The cat will be fine. Are you strapped in?" Tammias asked.

"Just launch the damn pod," Janeway snapped at Garcia.

"Sheila, stop talking and listen to me. I'm sure your mom and dad are already waiting for you," Tammias said, wincing as he looked to Janeway for approval. She understood and patted his shoulder. "Okay, now see the red button under the safety cover. Yes, lift the cover and push the button."

An indicator on Tam's console said the pod was away. Tammias sighed and slumped forward onto his panel.

"We're going now," Janeway said, jerking him out of the chair.

"I don't know if Jovet launched that life pod," Tammias said.

"We'll find out later," Janeway said, pulling him along.

Tammias tossed his head set down. He tried his comm. badge but it was useless, too, now that he had left his station. Apparently there were lots of holes in the wireless net, but something was obviously blocking the comm. badges from functioning normally. If he could get to the Communications Department, perhaps he could fix it. He didn't like leaving a puzzle like this unsolved. It was obviously a software issue, since it was unlikely that all the comm. badges on the ship would have the same issue. He might have turned to go and investigate but again Janeway jerked him back on path. They both stumbled suddenly.

"Gravity increase," Janeway said. It was like they were going up hill.

"It's not supposed to be this bad," Tammias said. "Jovet hasn't left. I'm certain of it."

Janeway pulled him along. She stopped at the first life pod, saw that it was ejected and went to the next one. It didn't open. She proceeded down the line until one opened, and then she dragged herself and Tammias inside.

“I can’t leave Jovet. I have to help her,” Garcia argued.

“Sit down,” Janeway ordered, shoving him towards the seats. She pulled the lever closing the life pod door.

The ship rocked with another explosion and the gravity changed. They floated free from the floor and then suddenly fell towards the door. Janeway landed hard, where as Tammias had time to roll into the fall. The gravity fell away and he and Janeway drifted towards the center. She was out cold, and her head was bleeding profusely, and it looked as if she had broken her wrist, for it was twisted wrong. He pushed over to the launch button, lifted the cover, and depressed it. Their pod rocketed away from the Chance, and as it did, its own artificial gravity system kicked in. They both fell to the floor. Tam opened a cubby hole and pulled out some medical supplies, sorted through it till he found the correct pressure bandage and placed it over her wound.

Tammias didn’t hear the explosion when the Chance’s Warp Core breeched, but he saw the light. It was a blinding white light that flooded into the life pod’s one window, forcing him to close his eyes. All the power went dead on the pod, probably due to the electro magnetic pulse. He knew this not because he saw the lights go out, for his eyes were still closed due to the blast. He knew because it was suddenly deathly quiet. No life support, no computer noises, no isolinear chip harmonics vibrating through the floor plate and energizing the air molecules with their peculiar noise. There was only the sound of his heart beating. Then the pod was tumbled as an energy wave and debris from the ship rushed by. He grabbed hold of the first thing that flew his way, which happened to be Janeway. His hand grabbed her hand. Their minds linked. She was in a bad way, due to her injury, and his brain automatically fell into a healing trance. This all happened while he was focused on a sudden loss. A connection had disappeared. Jovet was dead, and he was searching for her, probing the empty space in his mind like a tongue would the space of a missing tooth. It just so happened that Janeway was convenient. He was a child again, and very frightened, and he clung to her as if she were his mother. His mother! She had disappeared just like Jovet had. Unconsciousness took him.

## CHAPTER TWENTYFIVE

The Enterprise was bustling with activity, emergency crews running about in what might have appeared chaotic from a casual glance, but in reality it was extremely organized chaos. Sickbay was filled to capacity, and shuttle bay four had been turned into a makeshift triage. Anyone with any level of medical experience were being employed, even the EMH. Even people without medical training were being employed.

“Doctor Crusher, we’ve found another life pod. Life signs are faint. We’re beaming them directly to sickbay,” Data’s voice rang out clear over the Doctor badge.

“Clear this space,” Doctor Crusher waved, making sure the rolling equipment and people moved out of the area she was indicating. It was one of those days where her comm. badge needed to be left in the on position. Without even touching her badge, she answered: “Go ahead, Data. We’re ready.”

Janeway and Garcia materialized on the floor, and Doctor Crusher knelt down to take a tricorder scan. They were both unconscious, an obvious wound to Janeway’s head, but the most interesting thing was that their heart and respiration rates were in sync. That’s odd, she thought. She reached down to examine Janeway’s wound, removing the pressure bandage. In doing so, her hand came into contact with Janeway’s forehead, and Crusher fell to the floor, unconscious, her hand never leaving Janeway’s head. Shelby, who was just entering sick bay, called out for assistance and went to Doctor Crusher’s aid. As soon as she touched Crusher, she collapsed, making a chain of unconscious people, which might have been comical in any other situation. Lt. Robin Lefler, who was lending a hand in sickbay, reached for Shelby, and also went down.

“Don’t touch them!” Doctor Selar ordered, coming around at Shelby’s call for help. “No one touch them. I need Counselor Troi up here, now.”

Doctor Selar prepared several hyposprays and handed them to Head Nurse, Alyssa Ogawa.

“Nurse, I’m going to separate Janeway’s hand from Garcia’s hand,” she said. “As soon as that’s done, I want you to give a sedative to those four, starting with Janeway and going down the line.”

“But they’re already unconscious,” the Ogawa pointed out.

“No, they’re not. They’ve been pulled into a mind meld of some sort,” Selar said.

Deanna entered, assessed the situation, and grimaced. “Oh, dear.”

“Counselor,” Selar said. “I may need your help to keep Garcia calm. Whatever happens, don’t let anyone physically come into contact with him.”

Deanna nodded.

Selar knelt down, closed her eyes and took Janeway’s hand out of Tam’s, holding them both for a time. A few moments after the nurse gave Janeway a sedative, Selar put Janeway’s hand down. A moment later, Selar put Tam’s hand down and stood up. “It wasn’t as bad as I imagined it would be,” Selar explained. “It’s merely a healing trance. It is okay to handle the patients now.”

Selar turned to go back to work and then she collapsed.



Tammias opened his eyes. There was a bright light above him and then a shadow that became a face. He focused on the nice smile, and then the long red hair that framed her face, falling towards him. Red tentacles, he thought. An alien. And he didn’t care. She shined a light directly into his eyes. Her lips moved. The blue black of her uniform

made a tight fit and his eyes lingered for too long a moment before heading back to her eyes. He swallowed, his mouth dry. He felt like he knew her. He felt flooded with sincere concern and a warm feeling that caused him to wonder if this is what he projected to his Reiki patients. Her lips moved again. Her lips finished moving before he finished processing her words: “How are you feeling?”

“Are you an angel?” Tammias managed.

“No,” Crusher said. Her voice matched her lip movement. The world seemed more in focus.

“Then, this isn’t heaven?” Tammias asked, disappointed.

“You’re on the Enterprise,” Crusher said.

Tammias nodded understanding. “Next best thing,” he said, and then closed his eyes.

♪♪▶

Riker caught up to Deanna as she was heading back to sickbay. “Hey,” he said. “I hear another old love of yours has shown back up in your life.” It was meant to be a joke, but there was a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

“He’s an old friend of yours, too,” Deanna said with a smile.

“Yeah, it’s just hard to believe,” Riker said. “It seems so long ago. And to think, he’s turned out to be quite a genius.”

“He was always a genius,” Deanna said.

“Yeah, well, everyone has their faults,” Riker said.

“What does that mean?” Deanna asked, looking at the man as if he had just called a baby, or Data’s cat, “ugly.”

Riker looked a bit uncomfortable.

“Go ahead, say it,” Deanna said.

“I don’t like him. Rumor has it he’s spoiled, difficult to get along with, a loner, arrogant, and, the fact that he’s a celebrity and skates on his celebrity status makes me believe he shouldn’t be in Star Fleet. I mean, you know how hard it is to get along with geniuses,” Riker said.

“Yeah, I do,” Deanna said, a bit miffed. And then, with no suppression of her sarcasm: “Wes was just loads of trouble.”

“Wes is different,” Riker argued, quickening his pace to keep up with her.

“Why?” Deanna asked.

“He wasn’t a celebrity, not like Garcia,” Riker said. “And…”

“If I didn’t know any better, I would say you were jealous,” Deanna said.

“I’m not jealous,” Riker said, defensively.

“I hope not, because if anything, he’s a lot like you,” Deanna said. “And I wonder where he gets it from?” She pushed on ahead, leaving Riker puzzled.

What the devil do you mean by that? he wondered.

♪♪▶

When Tammias opened his eyes again, the room wasn’t as bright as the previous time. Two faces hovered over him and he recognized them both. They were standing over him like a cook watching a pot of water coming to boil. “Deanna,” he said, dreamily. “Selar” he added with less enthusiasm.

“You need to get up,” Selar insisted.

“No,” he said, closing his eyes. “I’m dreaming. Peanut butter sandwiches.”

“You’re getting up now,” Deanna said, using her “no arguments accepted” voice. He felt himself being dragged up off the table. “I don’t want to play any more,” Tammias resisted. “No more adventures.”

“Come on, Tam,” Deanna said. “We need you to walk.”

Tammias didn’t have the energy to even struggle, but perhaps he didn’t have to struggle at all. He could just let his weight take him down. One of the two girls prevented him from going to the floor. He heard Deanna say, “Oh, no you don’t.” And then he noticed a strange sensation in his face. He opened his eyes and witnessed Selar slapping him. Deanna was propping him up, preventing him from melting to the floor. “Damn,” he thought. “Selar just hit me.” About the fourth hit, he blocked it, started to close his eyes, but was hit again. He opened his eyes and this time not only did he block, but he blocked, ducked, and twisted Selar’s arm behind her back into a joint lock, put his foot behind her knee and then drove her hard to the floor. Deanna rallied, forcing Tammias to let go of Selar in order to deal with her. She had attempted to put him in a joint lock, but he countered by entangling their arms. A door opening distracted Tammias, and Deanna managed to get the upper hand. She flipped him over her shoulder. The flip was perfect, putting Tam flat on his back. He knew he was falling, as if in slow motion, and he hit the floor perfectly, just as he had been trained, but he decided not to let go of Deanna. Deanna had a choice, let her arm be broken, or fall to the floor as well. She chose to go to the floor. She fell correctly, but it gave Tammias back his momentum. He rolled and came up standing.

“Stop,” Doctor Crusher said, rushing in from her office. “Wait!”

Worf attacked Tammias from behind and suddenly Worf was on his back, looking up as Tammias was about to put his foot in his face. Fortunately Deanna had rolled out of the way or Worf would have landed right on top of her. Worf blocked, pushing up on Tam’s foot with enough force that it threw him up in the air. He flipped, like he meant to, landed squarely on his feet, his arms and hands up and ready. Suddenly he found himself embraced from behind. Data locked his arms around Tammias, putting him in a hold from which he was not able to break free. It was the same hold that Worf had attempted, but had failed. There was going to be no flipping Data like he had Worf, mostly because of Data’s weight, but also because of his stance. Tammias tried sliding out of it, but Data had him good. Worf was on his feet and ready to give another blow before Deanna stepped between them, giving Worf a warning look that said “Cool it.” She turned to Garcia and grabbed his head with both hands.

“Tammias Garcia!” Deanna yelled, in a no nonsense voice.

Tammias focused on her. “Deanna?” he asked. He looked back to see who was holding him. He ceased his struggles. “Data?”

“If you are feeling yourself again, I will release you,” Data said.

Tammias saw Doctor Crusher treating Selar. “Selar? What happened to you?” he asked, innocently.

♪♪▶

Tammias was surprised to find himself included in a briefing, but there he was in the conference room. Across from him sat Worf, who was glaring at him with an open scowl. Deanna sat on his right, and Doctor Crusher was on his left. Also in attendance was Riker, Tuvok, Shelby, LaForge, Picard, and Janeway. He was glad Deanna was sitting next to him, because he felt extremely out of place with this grouping of people.

LaForge stood next to a viewer, pointing out information. “As you can see, the debris field actually starts here, and spreads out over two astronomic units. This is where the Texas fell out of warp, and this is where the warp core finally breeched. According to the Texas’ logs, they did manage to hit the alien ship with two photon torpedoes. However, we can find no evidence of any debris from that ship.”

“Did we recover the remains of everyone from the Texas?” Shelby asked. “Can we determine if anyone was taken hostage?”

“There are people unaccounted for, but whether they were taken hostage, or simply incinerated by the blast... There’s no way to be certain,” LaForge said.

“Thank you, Geordi,” Picard said. “What else do we know about this alien ship?”

“It does match the one that had been visually seen in orbit of Romulus ten hours before the Texas encounter,” Data said. “And we know that that ship was responsible for temporarily immobilizing the Forester. It was also the same ship, or type of ship, that blasted its way into the Vulcan system and destroyed two Starfleet ships.”

“If it has the power to immobilize a ship without destroying it, why would it go out of its way to destroy the Texas?” Tammias asked.

Worf returned his glare to Garcia and Riker shifted in his seat.

“Good question,” Picard said. “Speculations?”

“Somebody on the Texas knew something that they didn’t want known?” LaForge offered. “Or it was an accident.”

“It was no accident,” Worf growled.

Tammias tried to figure out why Worf was so focused on him. He hadn’t intentionally hurt the Klingon.

“I have to agree,” Shelby said. “After all, there was no sign of a warp core breach until the very moment we dropped out of warp. That’s significant.”

“Are you suggesting that the Chance was the target and not the Texas?” Data asked.

“And the Texas was just the instrument to get to you?” Riker asked. “That’s a bit paranoid, don’t you think? With their technology, they could have easily just rendezvoused with you and destroyed you if that were the case.”

Shelby sighed. “I suppose. Unless in doing so that would actually draw attention to them-selves and that’s what they’re trying to avoid. These aliens have been rather illusive, don’t you agree? We have a string of mass kidnappings that goes back as far as the Vulcan encounter.”

Tammias accessed his internal implant to pull up a list of all those who had been kidnapped, just before Picard turned to Data and said, “Data, pull up a list of all the people that have been kidnapped that fits this profile of kidnappings, starting with the Vulcan Encounter. Try and find a pattern.”

“Accessing,” Data said, his head tilting as he performed the same task that Tam was, only Data had the ability to analyze the data he was retrieving much faster.

“Interesting. All the abductees were female.”

“And,” Tammias added. “They were all telepathic.”

Everyone turned their attention to Tammias. “How do you know this?” Riker asked.

“I have a neural implant and I was just looking over the information,” Tammias said. “There were two kidnappings before the Vulcan encounter. Betazed actually had a

similar incident to Vulcan, only, less space traffic was influenced, and so it didn't get the media attention that the Vulcan and Romulan encounter has. And, there was one on Andoria. O'Brien may be able to give you more details on that, for he and Captain Maxwell investigated the incident."

"Indeed," Data said. "With the exception of the two bigger raids, most of the kidnappings have been small scale events, very low key. All in all, there are six hundred profiles of female telepaths that have disappeared over the last twenty years."

"So, whoever this is, they've been with us a long time," Riker said. "Why females and why telepaths?"

"A week after the Vulcan incident, the mates of those kidnapped mysteriously died," Doctor Crusher said. "I remember reading that somewhere."

"Their telepathic bonds linking them to their spouses were severed," Tuvok said. "This sort of shared death is not unheard of, and indicative of an extremely close relationship between the betrothed, however, because of the rarity of such an event, it seems unlikely that all of the spouses of those kidnapped would die in this manner without some precipitating event."

"In other words," Tammias said. "The deaths were forced. This only happened with the Vulcan counterparts. None of the relations to the abductees on Betazed suffered any unnatural ill effects and they still all maintain that their loved ones are alive."

Tammias shuddered, wondering what would happen to him if Selar died. Would he die? Would Selar die if he died? Had enough time pass between their initial bonding that either would be okay? Maybe time wasn't a factor, since the bond had been sufficiently strong that they had been drawn together on his twenty first birthday. He had known Jovet for nearly twenty years and he had wanted to follow her into death. And he would have, too, had Janeway not been there to hold him back. They had needed each other at that particular moment and both would have died had it not been for the other. Janeway had held him back from crossing over into that abyss, he thought. Why did she care? He felt her looking at him. He avoided her eyes. Deanna touched his hand to reassure him. He felt like everyone was staring at him. He flushed.

"This really doesn't help us with who they are or why they're doing what they are doing," Riker said.

"Did the Texas have any female telepaths?" Picard asked.

"Yes," Data said. "Two. Their bodies have not been recovered."

"Then it's safe to conclude that they've been abducted. Other than Garcia, and of course, Tuvok, no one on my crew had any known telepathic abilities," Janeway said.

A voice came over the intercom. "Sorry to interrupt you, Captain. But you have a priority one call from Star Fleet Command. An Admiral McCoy requesting to speak with you."

Tammias suddenly wanted very much to talk with McCoy, but he knew now wasn't the time. There was obvious business at hand, and no time for chit chat. With the Romulans stirred up as they were, Starfleet was no doubt in "Crisis Control" mode in an effort to avoid a war between the two species.

"Alright, that's it for now. Anything comes up, I want to know about it," Picard said. "Dismissed."

"Tam," Deanna said. "Will you come with me?"





When they got to Deanna's office, she handed him a PADD, and went to her chair to sit down. "Put your therapist hat on for a moment, and tell me what you make of this profile."

Tammas sat down on the couch, browsed over the profile, set the profile down on the coffee table, and thought about it. "So, your case load is pretty low, uh?"

"Are you employing a misdirection technique on me?" Counselor Troi asked.

"No," Tammas said. "It's more like distraction. I'm still processing the information, letting it go through the filters or the creative parts of my brain. You know how when you got a name on the tip of your tongue, but you can't remember it for the life of you, but after you stop thinking about it, the answer just comes to you. That's usually how I process stuff like this. Some things take longer than others, of course, like days, or even weeks. Sometimes the answer comes in a dream, or I find the answers in my fiction while I'm editing it."

"Really? So you're still keeping that dream journal of yours?" Troi asked.

"Oh yeah," Tammas agreed. "Some of my best fiction has come from that. Of course, I seem to be having less randomly creative dreams ever since I started lucid dreaming. Did you know that offers a bigger rush than the holosuite?"

"Yeah," Troi said. "And it is more empowering than a holosuite. Speaking of which, back to the profile you just read."

"I would prefer to meet the person before making any evaluations, but, off the cuff, I'd say the person has some esteem issues. Obviously incredibly intelligent, a creative spirit, but for some reason he is overwhelmed with social inadequacies. Probably has some irrational fears, like perhaps of spiders, or the transporter, and I suspect he has some issues with an addiction, most likely the holodeck, since it's mentioned in the profile that he spends most of his free time there," Tammas said.

"Your recommended treatment?" Troi asked.

"Again, having not met the person, I can't say for sure whether medication might be needed to offset a neural imbalance, however, I would certainly recommend therapy with a behavioralist," Tammas said.

"Or me?" Troi asked.

"Or course," Tammas said. "And some sort of social integration therapy to help him become more comfortable in a social setting. Perhaps some performance art with a patient cast and audience."

"Does Barclay's profile remind you of anyone you know?" Troi asked.

Tammas mused for a moment and then shook his head. "No."

Troi only looked harder at him, as if trying to communicate something. His neutral expression fell to a frown, and then a micro expression of anger flashed across his face before going back to neutral. His posture became more rigid and his arms crossed.

"I am not insecure, nor do I have any social inhibitions, or limitations that might suggest shyness," Tammas said, resolutely. "And though I spend a good portion of my free time in a holosuite, I do have relationships outside of that technology."

"Any long term romantic relationships?" Troi asked.

"Oh, don't even go there," Tammas said, but then couldn't resist. "I have sex."

Troi didn't say anything. The pause, and her look, was sufficient to provoke further comments from Tam.

“I have sex frequently enough to be considered promiscuous even by Betazed’s standards,” Tammias said, as if bragging. You made me this way, he wanted to accuse her. “I just had an encounter the other day.” Tammias paused, his whole demeanor changing from threatened to concern. “Did Jaxa make it?”

“Yes, she did,” Troi said, noting his sudden shift in emotion. He always did have more affection than he knew how to channel. “Back to the issue at hand. How do multiple romantic interludes qualify you as having established a long term relationship?”

“Are you saying my choices are unhealthy?” Tammias asked.

“I would like you to answer that one,” Troi said.

“Why don’t you just slap an ism on whatever it is you’re accusing me of so I can either fix it or dismiss it,” Tammias asked.

“It’s not about labeling you or your issues,” Troi said. “It’s about examining yourself, your motivations, and understanding why you make the choices you do.”

“I understand the choices I make,” Tammias said. “I’m well educated.”

“I’m not calling you stupid by any means,” Troi said.

“Besides, the guy who said the unexamined life is not worth living needs to be educated to the pleasures of ignorance is bliss,” Tammias said.

“You wish you were ignorant?” Troi asked.

“I think people who know less tend to be happier people,” Tammias said.

“A generalization that I don’t agree with, but go on,” Troi said.

“I really don’t see the need to argue definitions with you. So, I haven’t had any long term relationships. My whole life has been an exercise in keeping people out of here,” Tammias said, touching his head, and then his heart. “And you’re surprised being close to people isn’t my forte? You helped make me this way, Deanna. You may not have put me on this path, but you certainly didn’t encourage deviation...”

“Tam, there’s a difference between being socially dependant on others and socially interdependent,” Deanna explained. “You may have difficulty making the distinction of where and when that line should be drawn. Part of that seems to be coming from your inability to take risks when it comes to relationships. You’re pushing people away.”

“I am not,” Tammias said.

“You’re pushing me away,” Deanna said. “I can feel it. You’re shields are up, you’re body is so tense it’s ready to snap...”

“What’s the point of this?” Tammias asked. “Why am I in here? You know, I’m not the only survivor from the Chance. There are more people with greater needs than I have. Why don’t you harass them?”

“So, you think I’m harassing you?” Deanna said.

“Oh god, you’re questions are so irritating,” Tammias said. “I never did like it when you answered a question with a question.”

“Fine, you’re here because you and I have a relationship. A friendship that stretches over time, and yet, you’ve closed yourself off to me,” Troi said. She noted something in his face. “Are you accessing your neural implant?”

“Why do you ask?” Tammias asked.

“Because I’ve noticed when you’re checking your email, your eyes go up and to the left. You can’t even give me your full attention? There was a time when you couldn’t take your eyes off me,” Troi said.

“Yeah,” Tammias remembered, singing the tune, “I only have eyes for you.” He snapped himself out of the trance. “Oh, how I wish we could go back there, too. Stay there. It was simpler then.”

“It was never simpler for you,” Deanna pointed out.

Tammias tried to smile, nodding. “I would love to start this game over, knowing what I know now. Anyway, you were right about me checking my mail. The Enterprise just received a mail package from Star Fleet, and I had a priority mail jump to the head of my mail cue. It’s from Sarek. I’d like to open it, if you don’t mind. It’s a small file size, so I suspect it will be a quick read.”

“Go ahead,” Troi said, her voice sounding patient, but her mannerisms suggesting the opposite. She crossed her arms.

The email was straight to the point. Sparky had died. Old age. In his sleep. Tears began to run down Tam’s face. He began to openly sob. He pushed himself off of the couch and slid to the floor. He kicked the coffee table back, knocking things over. The candle went out. Then he drew his knees up, hugged them, and just fell over, resting his head on the floor, crying. Troi went and sat down on the floor beside him. She rubbed the back of his neck.

“I’m still with you,” she said. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“Sparky died,” Tammias said. “I’m crying over a Vulcan sehlat, the equivalent of a dog.”

“It’s okay to cry over a beloved pet,” Troi said.

“Is it?” Tammias asked. “I didn’t cry when I lost Persis from my life. I didn’t cry when Torres quit the Academy and walked out of my life. I didn’t cry all those times McCoy and Spock abandoned me. I didn’t cry when they killed my parents. I didn’t cry over any of the deaths from the Chance. How inhuman is that? One of the crew was my sister. Her parents adopted me back when I was five. I was with them two years. I didn’t cry over her. She died comforting someone who was trapped and afraid. She stayed behind to comfort a person as good as dead, no doubt to make up for how badly she believed she treated me when I came into her home, and I didn’t cry for her. I was the adopted one, and I should have died, not her. What am I supposed to tell my adopted parents? Oh, hell, what I am supposed to tell McCoy? Yeah, she died, and I didn’t cry about that, not me, the monster. I cried because a stupid, over grown, lazy sehlat died of old age, without me present to comfort him because I had to run off to join Star Fleet and dumped him off on my second foster parents. And I still love you, and I know its wrong, and you still treat me like a friend. Oh, god, this sucks.”

“I love you, too. It’s not wrong,” Troi said. “And you may not have cried because of your sister at that time, but you have certainly cried for her now, and its okay. Sparky was just the trigger you needed to let your guard down long enough so that you could be vulnerable with me. This is healthy.”

“How can anything that hurts so badly be healthy?” Tammias demanded. “How can appearing weak in front of you be healthy? And why does my chest have to hurt so. The emotion of a breaking heart is just an analogy, right?”

“No. It’s not just an analogy, or a metaphor. It is what it is, because that’s how most humans experience heart ache,” Troi said. “Another reason your heart no doubt feels so heavy is because you’re haven’t let yourself become completely vulnerable with anyone, or allowed yourself to cry. You have a lot of filter action going on, and you’re

trying to suppress anything that leaks through, forgetting that more than three quarters of you is human. Suppression isn't always the healthiest choice. I also highly suspect that you're drawing subconsciously on psychic bonds to help sustain yourself. If I concentrate real hard, I can almost hear you calling for my help. Tam? You don't have to covertly draw on support. I'm here for you. Hell, most of the people on this ship are here for you. Even Riker. You're not alone. All you need to do is use your voice."

He leaned against her and sobbed. "Oh, Deanna. I'm so broken I can't see ever being whole."

"You're not broken," Deanna said. "This is normal."

"Do you realize, had I not been on the Bridge, but in the communications department as I had wanted to be, I would be dead," Tammas said. "That whole section was destroyed right off the bat. I'm only alive due to chance."

"I don't believe in chance," Deanna said. "I believe in dedication, working smart, and choices."

"And what does that say about the people that didn't make it?" Tammas demanded. "Were they less dedicated? Were they not smart workers? How do you explain it?"

"Shhh," Deanna said. "We'll talk philosophies some other day. Now is a time for mourning."

## CHAPTER TWENTYSIX

Deanna allowed Tammias access to her lavatory to wash his face before he departed. Someone was outside her door, waiting their turn for Deanna. He walked on without acknowledging the person. He walked aimlessly, for awhile. Members of the Chance that were also walking, perhaps trying to take the edge off, stopped to thank him. Most of them just stopped to shake his hand, and if he didn't know their name before, he knew them now, and like countless other faces in his brain, they would never be forgotten. Nor the emotions he was feeling when he first met them. Nor the smell in the air, the temperature, how his head hurt, and how the pressure behind his eyes had built back up, like he wanted to burst into tears again. He would remember them, and now remember he was thinking of Deanna. Having a perfect memory was not the most wonderful thing in the world. Remembering an event called up such a flood of details that it was sometimes incapacitating. But, he managed to cover it well. One of the crew members that stopped him was Olivia Johnson.

"Thank you for saving my daughter," Olivia said. Her tears started flowing, but she didn't openly sob, embracing him. "She's sleeping right now. She found a cat, and is insisting on calling it Lucky. That's not its name. It belonged to a guy named Ken. Kenny Walker. He didn't make it."

In his mind, Tammias was back on the Bridge of Chance, Janeway whispering in his ear. "Tim Johnson would have been in engineering." Janeway had informed him. He could feel the heat of Janeway's breath as she gave him the information. He could hear the chatter of all the voices over the comm. both from his station and Tuvoc's station, and the voices in his right ear from his headset. The smell of computer elements burning drifted in the air. He could see Shelby pacing, extremely agitated, perhaps due to the fact that there was nothing left for her to do but get the Captain to safety, and the Captain was not having it. The helm's station was radiating heat, so his right side was hot to the point of sweating, but a breach in the floor on his left side was allowing cold air to drift up on his left. And it was colder than it should have been. He couldn't account for it being so cold, except for the possibility that his other side was so hot that it just felt cold. He focused on Olivia before his imagination took him down to the Engineering section where most of the occupants had been exposed to vacuum and killed instantly. Tim would have been there, unless he had been running an errand or was just plain absent.

"Tim?" he asked.

Olivia shook her head, and then hugged Tam so tight he almost couldn't breathe. He felt the warmth of her tear stained face against his, and the warmth of her breath on his neck. He couldn't help but also note the warmth of her bosom as she held him tight, and he wanted to scold himself for having such keen awareness that nothing ever escaped him, because it was often more information than he could ever use. As she left the embrace she kissed his cheek.

"Thank you," she said again, completely disengaging from him. Then she walked away.

Tammias watched her go, and then turned, not sure of what to do next. Doctor Crusher no doubt had assigned him quarters, probably sharing with someone, but he wasn't ready to retire. And he really didn't want to talk with anyone else. Retiring meant the possibility of having to chat with someone, at least of sufficient length to decide who got the couch or the bed. An Enterprise Security Officer approached him.

“Can I help you?” she asked.

“Um, no, thank you,” Tammas said.

“It’s just that you look lost,” she said.

“I am, a little,” Tammas agreed. “But not spatially disoriented.”

She chuckled. “Sorry. It’s just that you sounded like Data.”

“I’m just trying to sort through it all,” Tammas explained, using gestures to try and capture something that he still couldn’t articulate.

“You’re Tammas Garcia, aren’t you,” she said. “I’m Jenna D’Sora.”

“Jenna,” Tammas repeated, shaking her hand. Just another name of another face in his head forever. What part would she play? Romance? A passing ship in the night, a bad cliché sort of affair? Would they become friends? No. There was something about her he didn’t like, and he was too tired to figure it out, or to press for information until he discovered her nature, or what sort of issues she might have. One would have to have issues to be attracted to me, he figured. We all attract what we need in our lives was his counter explanation.

“I wish the circumstances of our meeting were better,” Jenna said. “I would love to visit with you. Maybe talk about music?”

“Perhaps another time,” Tammas said. “I really feel, well, out of sorts.”

“Of course,” she said. “If there’s anything I can do, please feel free to call on me.”

“Thank you,” Tammas said, and excused himself. She was cute, for a human, he mused, and then he pushed on. Why his thoughts always went there was beyond him. Perhaps he needed to check with the Doctor to make sure his obsessive compulsive disorder was not getting out of whack again.

He wandered aimlessly for a bit longer. He thought to himself, “I haven’t seen Jaxa,” but even with all of that, he didn’t bother to page her. Of course, he figured, if she really wanted to see him, she could page him just as easy as he could find her. Perhaps she didn’t want to see him. Maybe Deanna was right. Maybe there was something wrong with him. Not that she had actually said that there was something wrong with him. What had she said, exactly? Before long he found himself in Ten Forward, sitting by a window, looking out at the expanse of space, wondering again about how the number of stars that seemed to be passing didn’t quite seem to fit his mental model of the galaxy. If that many stars had actually zipped by, wouldn’t they be at the other side of the galaxy by now? And what is at the other side of the galaxy? The Delta Quadrant by name, but who lived there? Had he ever met anyone from the Delta Quadrant?

Tammas was surprised by a shadow that fell over him. Considering how dimly lit the place was, how could a shadow come over him? he wondered. He looked up to see what had befallen him now, also wondering how long the person had been there. With his empathy level, he was usually a hard person to sneak up on, but then, he had been pretty focused on space. What did this person want? An autograph? A kind word, or an apology because he didn’t do enough to save everyone on Chance? What, did your husband or wife get left behind?

His eyes focused and his heart leapt into his throat. She was beautiful, and didn’t appear a day older than the last time he had been with her. Her hat was different, but it was still the same kind of hat, and the same billowy sleeves, and the same flowing robes, and the knowing eyes. She hadn’t said anything because she was listening. She was

waiting. He almost couldn't find her name in his head. She was from the Delta Quadrant. Her home world destroyed by a Borg encounter that scattered her race to the stars, like so many seeds to the wind.

"Guinan?" he asked.

She smiled and sat down next to him. He spun his chair to face her. He felt awed to be sitting with her, and was stunned into a silence so deep he couldn't even hear his own heart beating. She was like a celebrity to him, and all of his previous concerns were suddenly gone. He felt tears swelling in his eyes, only this time they were tears of joy. How could he be so emotional and remain functioning? he wondered.

"Guinan," he whispered, drying his eyes on his sleeve.

"You've done quite well for yourself," Guinan finally said.

Tammas frowned. He wanted to say something, but he couldn't.

"How much do you remember?" Guinan asked.

"Everything," Tammas said, looking down. "I can see it perfectly. I can see it from different angles. I can slow it down, I can run it backwards, but I can't ever change it."

Guinan nodded and looked out to the stars. She turned back to him and took something out of her pocket. It was a flat box and when she opened it, it presented pictures. They were pictures of him with his family. It was his biological family, or as close of a biological family he would ever have, considering the amount of gene splicing that had gone into making him. It was his birth mother. She was that, even if they only shared one gene, she was the birth mother, and there had been a connection. One that was gone now, except for the memories. Why couldn't telepathy work across time the way it did across space? he wondered. Why couldn't he communicate telepathically with his younger self? If ever there was a strong connection, wouldn't it be with himself, for isn't time just one giant weave of a person? Maybe he could send information back to his younger self through his dreams. Maybe that's where his stories came from? If I could connect to a younger self, a younger self where Jovet was still alive, maybe I could change what happened. Jovet, can you hear me? I'm sorry. Mother? Are you there?

Only silence greeted him.

"Is that how you remember it?" Guinan asked, aware of how absorbed in the picture he was. She just didn't know how absorbed he was. She imagined he was calling to the image of his mother, as if the captured photons had also captured the residue of the person who she once was. "Do you remember me finding you?"

Tammas took the item from her and began to look through the pictures. "No," he said. "I don't remember being in the pictures. I don't remember anything past you and K 7..." He stared harder at the image. "Who is that?"

"Um, let's see, that's your grandmother," Guinan said.

"No, I know her. I remember her, but this guy, behind her. Who is that?"

Tammas asked.

"Oh, that was your mother's body guard," Guinan said.

"I've seen him," Tammas said. His eyes suddenly grew bigger. "Oh my god. He was Eugene, the guy on the boat! He saved me. Wait a minute. That means they must know about me."

"They know," Guinan said.

“The Chance, that wasn’t chance. That was a hit,” Tammias said. “Shelby was right.”

“Possibly,” Guinan said.

“The Kelvans are behind the kidnappings,” Tammias said.

“I believe so,” Guinan said.

Tammias wanted to be completely hysterical, waving his arms wildly in the air, but there was something too damn calming about her. He couldn’t even muster up a healthy panic in her presence. “So, why haven’t you said anything?”

“I just put it all together the moment you walked in,” Guinan said. “But it’s all based on intuition. I could be wrong.”

“Your intuition is never wrong,” Tammias stated matter of fact.

“Rarely wrong,” Guinan corrected. “That’s why I also listen to my friends and include their perspectives in my decision making process.”

“Do you know a blind Tai Chi master named Depak?” Tammias asked, comparing Guinan’s calming affect that radiated from her like star light, the same as Depak.

“Yes. He’s a Listener,” Guinan said.

“I think I should speak to the Captain,” Tammias said.

“About Listeners?” Guinan asked.

“No,” Tammias said, trying to figure it all out.

“You know, I think you frown too much,” Guinan remarked.

“I do? Oh, well, only when I’m thinking,” Tammias assured her. “And I probably do that too much, as well. It’s just...”

Tam’s communicator chimed, and, due to the level of urgency, it opened a channel automatically. “Garcia, please report to the Captain’s ready room.” It was the voice of Commander Riker.

Tammias looked to Guinan. She smiled at him.

“I’m afraid,” Tammias told her. “Suddenly everything, over a whole life time, seems to be coming into play. Like De-Ja Vu, but I can’t see the end. I’m afraid. This has to be coincidence.”

“I don’t believe in coincidence,” Guinan said.

“You’ve reduced me to babbling,” Tammias said. “If this were a book, you started my life, and now you are back, bigger than life. I’ve gone full circle! I’m about to die, aren’t I? Is this the end? I hate De-Ja-Vu! Is this how it is all supposed to end?”

“Maybe it’s the beginning,” Guinan said. “Sometimes the two are the same thing. It’s hard to tell until you’ve actually crossed the threshold.”

“You know,” Tammias said, standing up. “I don’t like cryptic answers. I don’t like them from Deanna and I don’t like them from you.” Then he softened. He just couldn’t hold any anger towards her. “I mean that respectfully, of course. I wasn’t yelling at you. It’s just... I didn’t like them when I was young, and I don’t like them now.”

“You want something non cryptic?” Guinan asked.

“Yes,” Tammias said, hopeful. “Please.”

“Captain Picard doesn’t like to be kept waiting,” Guinan said.

Tammias frowned and hurried off.





Riker met Tammias at the turbo lift as he stepped onto the Bridge. Worf glared at him from his station at tactical as Riker guided Tam to the ready room, "Right this way, cadet." Based on the look Worf was giving him, he was glad that Riker was between them. Maybe he should apologize to Worf. No, that would only cause more resentment. The door closed behind him and he was suddenly alone with Captain Picard. Here was another celebrity, as far as Tammias was concerned, and he was alone with him.

Captain Picard looked up from his work. "Oh, Cadet Garcia. Have a seat. I had a long chat with McCoy about you, and I have discovered you have quite a fascinating story."

"Doctor McCoy has been very kind to me," Tammias said, his voice subdued. Picard almost had the same calming affect that Guinan had. "I'm really sorry..."

"Sorry?" Picard asked.

"I'm not feeling as confident as I usually feel. I don't know what it is. I've lost some friends, some family. But, there's something else. I believe the Kelvan are behind the kidnappings. It's the only thing that makes sense. Their technology was way ahead of the Federation's and quite capable of doing the things we've seen," Tammias said, and quickly related to him what he and Guinan had just shared, which was more his feelings rather than anything Guinan had done, said, or even confirmed.

"She's a remarkable person," Picard agreed with him. "An enigma."

"And even that's not saying it all," Tammias said.

Picard nodded. "As for your theories on the Kelvan, McCoy shares your suspicions. If this is the prelude to a war, you would be quite a valuable asset to the Federation. That would be ample explanation as to why the Chance was taken out."

"It doesn't explain their failure in trying to kill me," Tammias said.

"Maybe there are more players involved than just those out for your blood," Picard said. "After all, there was this Eugene fellow who saved you on Earth."

"I almost started to believe in ghosts," Tammias said.

"Captain to the Bridge." It was Riker's voice, and Tam noted the change in it. It was very business, "there is work to be done, and it needed to be done yesterday," kind of business.

Picard stood and motioned Tammias to follow. Riker met them as they stepped onto the Bridge.

"We're receiving an automated distress signal from the Toronto. The signal is planet bound, suggesting it crashed. It's twelve hours away at maximum warp, and we're the closest ship," Riker said.

Tammias looked to Picard, and, anticipating a question, said: "The odds of getting so many distress calls in such a short period of time seems unlikely. It smells like a trap."

Riker looked to Tam and then back to Picard.

Picard agreed by nodding. "Indeed. So, Cadet Garcia, what would you do?"

Without skipping a beat, Tammias said, "I'd answer the distress call."

There was never any doubt that that was what Picard had intended to do. He nodded to Riker, who in turn relayed the information to the helm. "Brooks, set in a course for the Toronto. Maximum warp. Engage. I'll inform Crusher to prepare for more casualties."

"Thank you, Cadet. That'll be all for now," Picard said. "Worf, take us to yellow alert, and scan for hostile..."

Tammas stepped into the turbo lift and left the Bridge to those more capable. He queried the computer via his implant to get the cabin number of the quarters he had been assigned to. He was surprised to find the quarters belonged to Doctor Selar. He rang before entering. The door opened and he entered, tentatively. The lights were dim, and he found Selar sitting in a meditative pose in front of a candle. He waited, knowing full well he had already interrupted her and so, logically, he might as well make himself comfortable, as opposed to standing there waiting for her to respond to his presence. Indeed, his standing there was more disruptive to her meditative state than his bustling about in a normal fashion would have been. She opened one eye, spied him, and then opened them both. She tilted her head slightly, continuing to look at him.

“Are you hungry?” Selar asked.

He shook his head, “No,” changed his mind, “Yes,” and then reconsidered. “I don’t know,” he said, indecisively. “How’s your leg?”

“Better,” she said with no trace of bitterness.

He nodded. Naturally, there would be no more a trace of bitterness than there was a trace of the fracture that Doctor Crusher had mended. The only thing remaining was the memory, and Selar would have no feelings attached to the event at all. She was merely doing her job. Even being a Doctor carried certain risks.

“You’re surprised I agreed to let you stay here,” Selar said, stating his fact as if she could read his mind. As if there were any doubt that she could, he reminded himself. “But, I assure you, it was logical. Most of the Enterprise crew are doubling up to accommodate the Chance’s crew, and you were the most compatible to a Vulcan life style. You would respect my peace easier than anyone else.”

“The fact we’re married had nothing to do with it, I suppose,” Tammas said.

“It had an influence,” Selar said. “You’ve experienced a great deal of stress. I recommend you sleep. Feel free to use my bed.”

“Thank you,” Tammas said. He decided to sit down next to her. He wanted to talk with her, though he felt he had done nothing but talk ever since he arrived on the Enterprise. That and slept. He sighed. “Life is not unfolding the way I had planned.”

“If you are using the word life to be synonymous with Universe, I am compelled to ask, do you really think life revolves around you?” Selar asked.

He chuckled. “Don’t you believe in cosmic fate and a life plan?”

“As opposed to free will?” Selar asked. “You can’t have them both.”

“Didn’t they use to say that about particle physics? It’s either a wave or a particle, but not both simultaneously?” Tammas chided her.

“You do not really want to discuss philosophy with me, do you?” Selar asked.

“No,” Tammas said, staring at the candle. “I haven’t been a very good second husband to you.”

“By Vulcan standards, given our ages and our particular histories, you’ve been satisfactory,” Selar said. “I readily admit, I was not expecting to see you for another two year, but it is not unpleasant.”

Could he have asked for a better compliment from a Vulcan? Well, he could always ask, but he understood well enough to know that she had just given him a huge compliment. “I suppose I could have written more,” Tammas offered.

“To what ends?” Selar asked. “If you are examining the dynamics of our relationship from a human paradigm, you are only going to cause yourself frustration. You must keep it in context.”

Tammas nodded. He really didn’t know what else to say. “So, how is Voltak? You two still on schedule?” he asked, babbling, and then realized what he had asked and felt beyond stupid. And I’m supposed to be the social genius, he chided himself, using Torres’ words, not his.

“He is well,” Selar said, masking her annoyance. She noticed her anxiety levels rising, which was odd enough, and in her search for an explanation, she decided to blame it on Tam’s presence. She hadn’t realized just how unsettling he would be, considering the nature of their bond, and the fact that his emotions were all over the place. Even more so now, after this crisis.

Tammas reached over and put his hand in the candle flame to verify that it was indeed a holographic candle and not a live open flame. It burned none the less, and he pulled his hand back, satisfied with his answer. He shifted to get up, but stopped when Selar grabbed his arm.

“Open your fist,” Selar said.

“It’s nothing,” Tammas said.

“Open,” Selar said again.

Her voice resonated through him. Tammas opened his fist part way. With her free hand, she began to examine his hand, aware that he was trembling. She unfolded his fingers and caressed them, not like a doctor, but, like a friend, looking for a splinter. With two fingers, she began to trace the lines in his palm, and then his whole hand. Her mind came to his mind so softly that they had merged into one consciousness before he had even realized a mind meld was in progress.

♪♪▶

Tammas stirred to the sounds of Selar dressing. “Where are you going?” he asked.

“I’ve been summoned to join an Away Team. Sleep,” Selar said.

He didn’t need much prodding. He felt like he was floating, very warm, very safe. He had been having a pleasant, non lucid, dream and he wanted to get back to it. He was asleep before she even put her boots on. He didn’t feel her touch him goodbye, putting a hand to his forehead. Nor did he hear the words she uttered, as they went straight to his subconscious.

Tammas dreamed he was Selar, stepping into the transporter alcove. She and Deanna took the aft positions, while La Forge, Worf, and Riker stood forward. Shelby entered and started to step up.

“Shelby, I don’t have time for this,” Riker said.

“Just trying to be helpful,” Shelby insisted.

“More like, you just don’t want to be left out of all the fun,” Riker said. “Very well, come on. At this rate, you’ll never be Captain. You’ve come to enjoy Away Teams too much.”

Shelby stepped up next to him. “I’ll be in good company, then.”

“Energize, O’Brien,” Riker said, biting back on his next response. He knew well enough not to glance back at Deanna, who was grinning at him.

The transporter sensation was much more pleasant in his dreams. It was like standing under a water fall of pure energy. It poured through their entire being, illuminating their chakras, starting from the crown and ending at the root, seven bright points of light, each reflecting one of the colors from the rainbow's spectrum. They became silhouettes of pure energy and were whisked away in a river of light, like a drop of water joining a river to eventually be deposited into the ocean. The ocean shifted and changed into a grassy plain. The grassy plain had a large section missing due to a fire that had recently swept across it. We are beings of light, he thought, wanting to fly away on a cloud, wanting to return to the energy beam, but the dream was now manifest, and it held his attention like a bird in a cage. There was a smell of ashes in the air, and he could hear the burnt brush crunch beneath the Away Team's boots. He experienced this not only from Doctor Selar's perspective, but also from Deanna's, Shelby's and even Riker's perspective. But there was something else, gnawing at him. He felt the dream taking on a nightmare quality to it, an edge like that of a grunge rock song that he was unable to break free from. He could only watch from his various vantage points, listening to the sadistic rhythm of the song in his head. "Run away," Tammis whimpered.

"Over this way," Riker called. He paused. "Deanna? What is it?"

"There's someone here," Deanna said. "Someone, or something, not human."

"Riker to Enterprise," Riker said, opening a channel as he witnessed Selar scanning for life forms. He heard Worf drawing his phaser.

"Go ahead Number One," Picard's answered Riker's hail.

"Commander!" La Forge yelled, going for his weapon.

Commander Shelby pushed at Riker, drawing her weapon. She was suddenly frozen in space, inclined at such a strange angle that she should have fallen over on her face. She could still see, though. She could see the floating jelly fish like creature that had almost completely engulfed Lt. Worf. Its tentacles were drawing Worf up. Worf was firing a phaser up into the creature, his finger having pulled back on the trigger before he had been immobilized. Shelby had also managed to get off one shot before being frozen and had hit the creature dead center.

Her phaser fire had burned a whole straight through the creature, igniting the hydrogen in an internal bladder that had enabled it to defy gravity. The resulting explosion sent fragments of jelly and goo flying in all directions. Worf fell to the ground. The only reason he had not been burnt to a crisp was that he was immersed in all the jelly like goo that had spilled out of the creature as he fired up into it from beneath.

Worf found himself frozen, as well. None of the Away team were able to move, nor answer Picard who could be heard clearly over each of their badges.

Out of nowhere, two humans appeared. They stepped up to the Away Team, confident to the point of arrogance. "The Klingon/pet killed Markus," the first said. "Markus was a fool," the other returned. "Take those two. They can be used." "But that's not who we're suppose to get." The first looked up. "It's too late for that now. I told Markus we needed the larger ship. It's his failure. Not mine." "We should hurry, then. Others are coming." "Take these two back to our ship. I'll join you directly." "What about them?" "I'll clean up." "No evidence, remember!" "I said I'll clean up. Now get back to the ship!"

The second disappeared in a transporter like manner. The energy exchange happened so much quicker that there wasn't even a visible show of lights, which meant

no noticeable energy waste. Peoples were just there and then not there. Selar and Troi vanished, as if cut from the frame of a movie. The remaining man, who looked very much like Codswell, turned to the four frozen crew members from the Enterprise, and shook his head. He walked over to Markus and kicked at the dead body. There were few discernable parts left, but he did feel compelled to make sure Markus was indeed dead. Everything had to be just perfect if this was going to work. He turned to the Enterprise crew members again. With a push of a button on his wrist band, the four disappeared. In their place were these cute, inanimate, geodesic shapes, like big, twenty sided die. Polyhedra. Each polyhedron die was a compact structure consisting of all that remained of their essence. This was what remained of the human body after every drop of H<sub>2</sub>O had been conveniently removed and the remaining compounds had been crystallized for convenient storage. The storage method would leave them in even better condition than freeze-dried fruit.

Tammas bolted out of bed, his breath rapid and shallow. He dressed hurriedly. He had to save her.



“I’m not detecting any life signs, Captain,” Data said.

“Riker, take an away team down to investigate,” Picard said.

“Deanna, Worf,” Riker said, heading for the turbo lift. “La Forge and Doctor Selar, report to transporter room four.”

“Data, give me a visual of the crash site,” Picard said. As the crash site zoomed in, Picard nodded. “It certainly resembled the Toronto. I’d be surprised if there are any survivors. Any other ships in the area?”

“Not that I am able to detect,” Data said, noticing his choice of words were not lost on the Captain. “And there are no signs of debris in orbit that might indicate a battle forced the Toronto down.”

Picard had been looking for those signs as well. He needed to know why the Captain of the Toronto would purposely crash land his Starship on a planet’s surface. Crash landings were things of last resort.

“The Away Team has just arrived on the planet’s surface,” Data said.

“Riker to Enterprise,” Riker’s voice came over the comm.

“Go ahead, Number One,” Picard said.

There was the sound of Worf growling and the sound of a phaser going off. Maybe two phasers. The sound of an explosion echoed on the Bridge.

“Number One?” Picard said, standing up. “Away Team, respond.”

“Sir, there is an unidentified ship leaving the planet’s surface,” Data announced.

“Helm, intercept orbit,” Picard said.

“Data, tractor beam. I don’t want it leaving,” Picard said.

The ship came into orbit and angled away from the Enterprise. Data announced that he had caught it with the tractor beam. Suddenly the ship they were chasing divided into six separate pieces, each of which was capable of independent flight. Two fell towards the Enterprise, unable to escape the tractor beam, while the other four sped off in four separate directions.

“Shields up!” Picard ordered.

Of the two ships still caught in the tractor beam, one powered up its engines and shot towards the Enterprise and exploded against the shields. The other remained firmly caught in place.

“Interesting,” Data said. “I have never seen this tactic before.”

“Can you track those ships?” Picard asked.

“Negative,” Data said. “The only reason I found it in the first place was the displacement of air as it took off from the planet’s surface. It was impervious to scans, just as the ships in the mass abductions were reported to be.”

“Data, take another away Team down to the planet. I want clues to what’s going on. And find Riker,” Picard said.

“Aye, Captain,” Data said, and headed for the Lift.

Tammas stepped onto the Bridge and strode purposefully towards the helm.

“Garcia, now is not the time,” Picard began.

But Tammas brushed right past the Captain, headed for the helm. Data paused out of curiosity. He thought it interesting that Garcia was capable of doing the Vulcan nerve pinch. Ensign Janet Brooks, the helmsman on duty, didn’t find it so interesting, as she slumped to the floor as soon as he touched her. Tammas was at the helm before Data could get there. Tam began to enter access codes and the ship began to turn from its orbit.

“Security to the Bridge,” Picard ordered. “Garcia, stop this behavior at once.”

Data pulled Tammas away from the helm, struggling with him, not because he couldn’t apply more force, but because he was trying to avoid injuring his friend. Data found it curious that the displays on the helm still showed inputs being made, but then he remembered that Tam had an implant. Though technically the Enterprise could be piloted using a PADD from anywhere on the ship, he had never witnessed anyone using a direct connection from a brain implant to do so. The only thing that had kept the Enterprise from going to warp was that engineering was on the ball. Lt. Barclay had managed to take the warp engines off line. Instead of warp nine, which was the input that was scrolling on the helm display followed by a failure notice as the entry was repeated, the ship was now heading away from the planet at full impulse. Two Security officers arrived on the Bridge. Lt. Jenna D’Sora, backed up by a fiery, red head, Ensign Kellogg. They didn’t so much as hesitate, but they did wait for orders, as it appeared to them that Data had the suspect well under control.

“You’ll have to stun him, Captain,” Data said. “He has transferred primary helm control to his neural implant.”

“Data,” Tammas resisted. “I can save her. Deanna!”

Picard nodded to Lt D’Sora, who in turned motioned for Kellogg to comply. Kellogg retrieved her weapon, confirmed the settings were set for stun, stepped forward and fired a controlled burst at point blank range. Tammas slumped in Data’s arms, dead weight.

“Data, the helm,” Picard ordered.

Data surrendered Tammas to the guards, and immediately took the helm. He rerouted helm control back to the helm, and then headed the Enterprise back to its previous orbit.

“Take him to the brig and notify Crusher,” Picard instructed the security detachment. He turned to Data. “How did he get control? He doesn’t know the access codes for our ship.”

“Apparently he does. He used Riker’s access code,” Data said. “And then he routed helm control to his neural implant. Had he been thinking more clearly, I suspect he would have erected a security field around him to prevent us from interfering.”

“To what ends?” Picard asked.

“I can only speculate that he believes Counselor Troi was taken hostage, and he was going to pursue her captors,” Data said. “She shared with me that she and Garcia have a telepathic bond. It would also seem that he shares one with Riker, for I do not believe Riker would have given his access codes to Garcia. Further, I speculate that by rendering him unconscious, we have lost the opportunity to pursue the kidnappers.”

Picard frowned as he got the last glimpse of Garcia in the turbo lift before the doors closed on him and the security officers. He didn’t like the fact that Tammas had access to such critical information about his ship.

“As soon as we’re back in orbit, I want you planet side. I want to know what happened to my Away Team, and I want to know who’s behind all of this,” Picard said. He activated his comm. badge. “Lt. Tuvok, I would like to see you in my ready room.”

Captain Picard went to his ready room, ordered tea, and then stared out the window as he held the cup. He was still contemplating Tam’s condition when Tuvok entered.

“Captain?” Tuvok asked.

“Thank you for coming,” Picard said. “How well do you know Garcia?”

“I know more of his Star Fleet records than I have experience with him directly,” Tuvok answered. “Is there something specific I might help you with?”

“If he has a telepathic bond with someone, like my ship’s counselor,” Picard said. “How does that work, exactly? Can I use him to track her down?”

“My first response would be no,” Tuvok said. “Garcia shares Vulcan genes, and therefore is a telepath by nature, but his telepathy would be limited to touch, or extremely close proximity to the subject, and it usually involves some sort of trance state for a real time exchange of information to occur. There are occasions when information exchange happens spontaneously, but those times are rare, and the situations tend to be serious.”

“If my suspicions are correct, Counselor Troi was abducted,” Picard said. “I believe he wants to go to her, to save her. Currently, he’s sedated. I need to know if he will attempt to go after her again when revived. I need to know if he is going to continue to act irrationally.”

“He is mostly human,” Tuvok said. “From the Vulcan perspective, he is heir to irrationality and emotionalism. However, I understand what you are asking me, and I feel I am unable to answer you satisfactorily. Garcia has proven to be unpredictable at best. If he does indeed have a bond with your Counselor, then it is remotely possible that he will be drawn towards her, especially if her need is great enough. The most common drawing together comes with Ponn Farr, however, and I don’t believe this is the sort of relationship that he and the Counselor share.”

“How do you know this?” Picard asked.

Tuvok paused as he considered how much of what he knew he should reveal. It wasn’t his place. “Garcia is married to a Vulcan. A friend of mine was witness to the

event, so I know that he is bonded with her, as all Vulcans are paired. Now, if she were kidnapped, and it was their time of drawing near in order to engage in the Ponn Farr rituals, then I would say it is very likely that Garcia will do everything in his power to unite himself with his partner. He may even do so while not being aware of his own actions.”

“And what’s the remedy?” Picard asked.

“Those sorts of things are usually worked out through the rituals,” Tuvok said. “Or death. Which ever comes first.”

“Will you accompany me to the Brig to assess Garcia situation?” Picard asked.

“There will be little I can do for him if he is indeed under the influence of Ponn Farr,” Tuvok said. “However, I will endeavor to be of service to you.”

“Data to Captain Picard,” Data’s voice came over Picard’s desk comm.

Picard pushed the button. “I believe I have the evidence you were looking for to verify your theory.”

“And the Away Team?” Picard asked.

“I’m not certain, Sir,” Data said. “I think you should beam down to see this. And, as per our earlier conversation, I recommend you bring Garcia.”



Tammas awoke to the smiling face of Doctor Crusher once again. “How do you feel?” Crusher asked.

“I’m beginning to see a trend here that I don’t like,” Tammas said. He blinked and thought about what he had said. “Not that I mind waking up to see your face. I mean, not that I’m suggesting I want to wake up and see you. I mean... Have I told you I know Wesley?” He closed his eyes, disgusted with himself. Of all the things he wanted to say, he had to babble about Wes?

“Do you know where you are?” Doctor Crusher asked, suppressing a knowing smile. She was understanding and compassionate to a fault.

“In sickbay?” he asked, not opening his eyes. There was that damn sound that aggravated his headache. Really bad harmonics. “No. That sound is familiar. Am I in the Brig?”

“Do you know why?” Crusher asked.

“I was having this dream. Selar and Deana were...” Tammas sat up suddenly.

“Easy,” Doctor Crusher said, taking him by the arm as he sat up. “What about Selar and Deanna?”

“I don’t know. It’s gone now,” Tammas said.

The force field to the cell went off and they both looked up to see Picard entering. Ensign Kellogg stood akimbo just outside the cell door. Picard did not look happy. Tuvok was with him and he also seemed unhappy, even more so than usual. Doctor Crusher and Tammas both stood to greet them.

“Captain,” Crusher said. “I believe Data was right. My scans show that his brain waves matched those of people we know to be in telepathic contact with another individual. Except for elevated counts of certain neurotransmitters, he seems to be okay.”

“What do you remember?” Picard asked.

“Nothing tangible,” Tammas admitted. “I just knew Deanna needed my help. And Selar, but I felt like I was Selar. It was a dream.”



“Were you and Selar together before she went on the Away Mission?” Tuvok asked.

“Is it relevant?” Tammias asked.

“Were you and Selar engaged in a mind meld in the last four hours?” Tuvok asked, trying to be more direct without having to ask the big questions: “were you having sex?”

“Again, is it relevant?” Tammias asked.

“You just tried to take my ship, and I want to know what was going on. Is this about Deanna, or Selar, or both?” Picard asked.

“Doctor Selar is my wife,” Tammias said. “I’m her second husband, by circumstance. Voltak is still her primary husband, and that bond and commitment takes priority to what we share, but still, she and I are... It’s complicated. And I guess I must have influenced her, or perhaps she was trying to calm me, or... Well, she and I had... She and I were romantically engaged prior to her being called for an Away Mission, and a mind meld of a sort was involved. I must have still been connected to her, because in my dream, I was her. Of course, in the dream I was also Riker. And Shelby, which doesn’t quite make sense to me. Well, you know how dreams are. It was just random sequences, I’m sure.”

Tuvok appeared more uncomfortable than even Tammias was, but his friend’s story about Garcia was finally confirmed. Crusher seemed surprised to learn that Garcia was married, but even more surprised that his wife was Selar. The fact that she had a spouse at all, much less two, was probably the bigger shock to her, as Selar was often reticent to speak of her life outside of Fleet. Crusher didn’t like the feeling that she didn’t know her own staff better, but it was by Selar’s choice.

“You’re Sarek’s foster son. Of course. I was there for that,” Picard said. “I brought McCoy in a shuttle and I met Sarek, and I met you, but I didn’t know the ceremony was for you and Selar.”

“It was a private affair,” Tammias said. “It’s a complicated scenario, and I’m not at liberty to discuss it.”

“We’ll keep your confidence. Next question. Are you saying you’re telepathically linked to Commander Riker?” Picard asked. “And Shelby?”

“Well, Riker, yes. And Deanna, certainly,” Tammias admitted, rather embarrassed. “I don’t know about Shelby. I don’t remember. Riker, well, I was a child then. Why? Is he alright?”

“You can’t sense him?” Picard asked.

“It doesn’t quite work like that for me,” Tammias said.

“Are they still alive?” Picard asked.

“Deanna is alive, of that much I’m certain,” Tammias said.

“With you being married to Selar, is your life at risk?” Crusher asked. “Like the other Vulcans who had their spouses abducted?”

“These things are not certain,” Tuvok said. “The fact that Selar has two husbands may complicate things even further. None the less, Voltak should be contacted and apprised of the situation.”

“You know Voltak?” Tammias asked, surprised.

“I am acquainted with his brother,” Tuvok admitted.

“Voltak the archaeologist?” Picard asked.

“That would be him” Tammas said, amazed at how small the Universe was getting. This was a great example of six degrees of separation theory. “I’ll send him a message. He doesn’t like to hear from me, but we are on civil terms.”

“Later. Right now, I would like you to see something on the planet’s surface. Are you up to an Away Mission?” Picard asked.

“Sure,” Tammas said. “I feel fine.”

“It appears that my presence is no longer required,” Tuvok said. “You seem to have recovered from his episode without requiring assistance.”

Picard dismissed Tuvok with a nod, but asked Doctor Crusher to join them on the Away Team. Picard, Crusher and Tammas went to the transporter room, where O’Brien beamed them down to the planet. Data stepped up to greet them. “Captain. If you will follow me, Cadet Garcia. I need to know if you recognize certain objects.”

Tammas followed Data over to a place that was taped off like a crime scene investigation where he saw the familiar geometric shapes, the polyhedra, like toy Styrofoam balls on the ground. There were four of them, scattered carelessly. The last time he had seen such toys was when he was a child and his home was under attack. There was a fire and people running, mostly servants. The people disappeared and these toys replaced them, rolling awkwardly to a stop on the floor, like so many die in a game of chance.

Tammas turned and heaved his lunch. Doctor Crusher opened her med kit and handed him a towel and opened a bottle of water for him.

“That was not the response I was hoping to get,” Data said.

Tammas rinsed his mouth out. He remembered the feel of the heat from the fire consuming his house. He watched as some the toys were reanimated, and the people slaughtered. Slaughtered with no more concern than someone might kill a goat or a chicken. The soldiers threw one of the toys at him, but he failed to catch it. It rolled a little way from him. Pick it up, one demanded. He stumbled towards it, but just as he was to reach the polyhedron, a soldier kicked it a little ways further from him. Pick it up, the man said again. He went towards it, but a soldier tripped him. Tam fell on top of it. It disintegrated beneath him. They would never be able to reanimate the person, his dad. Some of the remains had been crushed and scattered to the wind, most left on the ground, but some stuck to the moisture on his shirt, arms, and face. Moisture that was his tears and the blood of the slaughtered.

“Are you okay?” Crusher asked.

Tammas forced himself to look away from the memory and focused on the present. He used her face as an anchor and nodded. The present here and now, the memories were simply distractions. Memories he wished he could forget.

“That’s Riker, Worf, and La Forge,” Tammas said. “And Shelby. They’re dead.”

“Are you saying that’s the Away Team?” Doctor Crusher asked, scanning the items with her tricorder.

“That is what is left of people who have had all their H<sub>2</sub>O removed,” Tammas said. “It’s a specialty of the Kelvan. It’s better than death, because they can be restored if the need arises.”

“So, they can be restored to full health?” Picard asked, obvious hope in his voice.

“Yes, if you find an agreeable Kelvan,” Tammas said.

“We found this on the body of one of the attackers. Are you familiar with it?” Data asked.

Tammas nodded. “For lack of a better word, it’s a terminal to access a Kelvan computer. All a Kelvan has to do is touch the plate, interface his or her mind directly with the computer, and, on activating the unit, his thoughts are instantly manifested. It can do just about anything.”

“We have one of their ships in orbit,” Picard said. “Can we use their technology to restore my people?”

“No,” Tammas said, shaking his head. “Only a Kelvan can use this technology. Maybe a Vulcan, but only if the intellect is extremely superior, otherwise it would fry the brain of any who attempted to access it. Pure over load phenomenon. A human can touch it safely, but only because a human simply doesn’t have enough mental capacity to even spark a connection.”

“But you can use it,” Picard said. “You’re of Kelvan descent.”

Crusher was suddenly very interested in this bit of information. She even went as far as scanning Tammas for any signs of his Kelvan nature.

“I am a human Vulcan hybrid,” Tammas said. But he had to agree. “You won’t find any evidence that I am Kelvan, though I am of Kelvan descent. McCoy told you, did he? Well, it can’t stay secret forever. Only those who are biologically Kelvan can use the technology. A modified Kelvan can use the technology, because he carries with him the original psychic map of the Kelvan intellect. There’s no loss of intellect in the process, though other factors can come into play, like the human emotions and such.”

“McCoy told me that though you were born human you had the Kelvan mindset imprinted on you. I ask you again, can you use this technology?” Picard asked.

Tammas thought about it. He was Kelvan. He was the monster Jovet always saw in her dreams. He could do it, right? That was what the war was all about. Wasn’t it? Breeding Kelvans in human form that could access and use the technology without having been born and raised Kelvan? If he could use it, then their procedure would be proven effective. They could increase their population three times as fast in their human form than they could in their original Kelvan form. He took the device from Data, carefully, as if it might bite him.

“Is there any risk to you?” Doctor Crusher asked.

Tammas shrugged. He didn’t have clue, but before any further debate about the matter could ensue, he clipped the device to his arm and touched one finger to the only button. It was like touching an electric fence, only mildly more pleasant, and the sensation was constant, not cyclic. He found himself accessing information, just as he would have through his neural implant, only much faster, and on a much larger visual, olfactory, tactile and auditory field. A virtual whirlwind surrounded him, a direct link to his brain offering him a computer interface in the Kelvan language that he hadn’t used since he was probably four. Somehow he felt very comfortable with it. It was like slipping into an old pair of tennis shoes. The outside world around him seemed frozen, with identifier tags on every object around him. Even the people had labels and numbers. Not only could he see their personal names, but their scientific names, genus and species. It was all available to him. He discovered it was possible to magnify his vision to the sub atomic level, and for the curiosity of it, he did so, his vision passing through the millimeter and micron levels of measurement, passing bacteria and viruses. Every atom

in his near vicinity was labeled and numbered, every proton and neutron. The electrons were merely clouds and seemed to be all over the place. They moved and mixed in such a way that it was easy to believe that there might be only one electron in the entire universe. The quantum level information was disturbingly difficult to grasp. It was like a thin membrane, a single sheet of liquid that he might pass through if he weren't very careful. It was like a sheet with a wind behind it, or a bubbling ocean surface. He had to force himself to look away.

Tammas panned back to normal vision, passing through earth, water and plant. Every cell and each grain of sand was numbered, and as he increased the magnification level and panned away from the planet, he could see the Enterprise and the Kelvan ship. Soon, his vision included the sun, labeled, numbered and cataloged. So were all the stars. He was unable to tell what was real vision and what was simulation, for surely it couldn't all be "true" vision. Some of it had to be computer animation, or artificially rendered. Surely there was no way for the Kelvan ship to be giving him real time information concerning everything in the solar system.

The Enterprise wasn't even a dot, but he could see the label. Two Romulan vessels were outside the system, but would arrive shortly. The computer making it all possible was on the Kelvan ship, trapped in the Enterprise's tractor beam. Only, it wasn't stuck. A Kelvan could have easily gotten out of this trap. What was going on? Was this a test? Was it a trap?

Tammas brought his focus back to the Away Team. Returning them to human form was possible, since the geodesic forms had not been crushed. He hesitated, waiting for some kind of security program to present itself. Surely he needed access codes. Were the Kelvan so confident that no one could use their technology that they hadn't felt security codes were necessary? There was so much power here it seemed crazy not to have some form of security. All he had to do was think a command and then press down on the safety release to make it happen. If it wasn't for the safety measure of that one button, his thoughts would have been manifested immediately. He now had the same control over reality that he had over his fiction in the holodeck. Complete control over the environment. He knew what he wanted. He wanted to restore the Away Team to their previous form. He saw them whole: Riker, Worf, La Forge, and Shelby. They were virtually complete, and his vision panned around them as if he were the wind caressing them.

Tammas lingered on the image of Shelby, entertaining unprofessional thoughts. Images of her in different outfits outside of Star Fleet regulation, and with different hair styles. All of this information made itself readily available to him, virtually. He didn't know if it was an image projected on his retina, or directly into the visual centers of his brain, but it was there. All the virtual images of Shelby lined up around him as he spun at vertigo causing speeds. Or, was he still, and the images orbited him? He could easily bring her back with her hair down and wearing a cosmic cheerleader outfit if he so wanted. He had always liked the old Fleet uniforms style. The red skirt and black boots from days gone by were his favorite, but the new ones, like the one Deanna was wearing in the picture she had sent him was okay, too. Deanna had just been assigned to the Enterprise, and had been very excited, and it showed in that photo. He had edited out Riker's image. Tammas still had the picture of her in the outfit that she had coined "the cosmic cheerleader" outfit, and he wondered why she didn't wear it more often. She had

nice legs. It occurred to him that perhaps he liked legs because as a child that had been the most accessible part of an adult. Of course, it didn't matter with Deanna. He loved her no matter what she was wearing.

The various virtual images of Shelby were suddenly replaced by those of the Counselor. He could also make the real Shelby look like the real Deanna, for that matter, and it would be just as easy as morphing the image of Shelby into Deanna had been. He could make Shelby look like anything he wanted. Reconstituting the Away Team to their natural functioning selves would be a piece of cake, he thought, but why stop there? He could make them better than they were before, stronger, faster...

Tammias realized his tangent was carrying him too far a field, and he was finding it harder to stay focused. Still, what would be wrong with wanting to improve their health? He began simulations to watch how they would age under normal environmental conditions, looking for what sort of errors would crop up in their DNA. He watched the simulations grow old and die, multiple simulations started popping up as he looked for the optimum life scenario, changing small variables such as diet, exercise, and social arrangements. Tammias wasn't surprised by how much personality and social network affected longevity. Sociologists have been writing about such for hundreds of years. A married man tended to live longer than a single man. Both sexes tended to live longer if they were regular participants in some sort of community, like a church, or an organization where communal ties could be established and maintained. Biologically speaking, though, there was no reason for death. He could easily extend their lives seven, eight times normal expectancy, maybe even indefinitely. He had had this conversation with McCoy, though. People would be opposed to immortality, to some extent. There were quite a number of social barriers that interfered with the longevity projects. It was almost like people have been dying for so long, the entire history of people for that matter, that it was almost a ritual expectation that everyone should continue to follow along, like lemmings off a cliff.

But scientifically, death didn't have to be. The atoms in a cell didn't age, and even the organelles in the cell didn't age. As long as the organelles were in the right environment with the proper flow of nutrients, they would 'live' or function indefinitely, doing what ever it was that organelles did. That being true, why shouldn't the cell or the organism itself live indefinitely? There was an answer. The reason cells died was because they were programmed to die. It wasn't always a bad thing that cells died. For example, if cells didn't die, humans would be born with webbed feet and hands, and probably a tail, throw backs to earlier genetic paths. So, it was okay that some cells died, as long as he could keep the important ones intact. All he had to do was keep the current cells healthy, and replace the faulty genes. As for everything else, that was just cosmetic, for the most part. With Kelvin technology, there was nothing that he couldn't fix. And in a worse case scenario, like an accident, he could just transfer the brain into a new body. He could produce new bodies by the dozen through cloning technology. Or better, why even use the body? He could just transfer the consciousness to a machine. Why not? Why limit himself or humanity? There were scores of options available to them.

This was so easy, he thought. When I'm done, Riker might even out live McCoy, who was now 138 years old. Hell, when I get back to Earth, I'll fix McCoy, too. Euphoria rushed through his entire body. "I am a god!" he thought

"Tam? Can you hear me?"

Who was that? Data? No, it was Doctor Crusher. She was so beautiful. Using the computer, he examined her from the whole person all the way down to the genetic level. Was it her genes that had contributed to Wesley being a genius? No, it was good nutrition and lots of information. The fact that Beverly was a doctor didn't hurt any, because a parent's work tended to invade home conversations. She definitely contributed to Wesley's success. But who was the father? What was his role? A vicious rumor had suggested Picard might have been the father. This was no doubt an attempt by someone to explain how Wesley Crusher was shown such tolerance from a man who admittedly had no patience for children. Who else, in the entire universe, would allow a mere boy to pilot a starship, except for maybe, his dad?! Kill Wesley Crusher, was a stray thought that ran through Tam's head. Check that! He told himself. Killing would cross the line. He still had some control over his impulses, even though he was watching the possibilities play out in the virtual interface that still blew around him like a storm, forming and dissipating. The death of Wesley Crusher by his own hands faded into the remote virtual distance. He looked at Picard's genes and began running computations to see if the combination of Beverly and his genes would indeed produce a Wesley. He could have grabbed the genetic records off the Enterprise and resolved any conflict, but the game of genetic combinations was too much fun.

It was such fun that he forgot his tangent about the Picard Crusher connection, and began running new computations on what a Garcia-Crusher combination might produce. He could make it all happen with just a touch of a button, too. No need for messy sex, just push a button. He could choose the "right" egg and the "right" sperm for a winning combination. After that, he could whisk the fetus away to a suitable environment, providing it with all the proper nutrition and all the proper stimulus in order to create a genius. Before his eyes hundreds of simulations of viable combinations began to take shape, starting from single cells that began to evolve into a complete human. Bad options fell away as they were discarded in favor of the better offspring still unfolding. This was so easy, he thought. There were combinations that would have died off under normal circumstances, but using available technology, not only would they flourish, many would ultimately lead to a new evolutionary branch of humanity.

Was this how he had come about? He wasn't only the best combination of genes, but a product of technological manipulation. A product of control freaks for grandparents. Was this where the entire universe was heading? Could it be that in a few thousand years, or ten thousand years that races would be so genetically mixed that species identification would be impossible? They had predicted that about Earth, that races would become so blended that they would all be the same. One race. One species. That could be good, couldn't it? Until a virus came along and wiped everyone out because everyone was the same!

But this was how the Kelvans were doing it, and they would keep breeding and mixing species for their own perverse pleasure. It was no different than how man created the plethora of variety in dogs and cats. It started out with one genetic line, like the wolf, and through selective breeding, suddenly you had hundreds of different types of canine. Was this evil? No, but the Kelvans would do it to keep control, breeding not just for specific species, but would mix species to have a variety creatures for specific traits and functions, and would instill in them a perverse cognitive belief system. A belief system that made it easier to disregard other species and races. There was you and every one

else. Divide and conquer your enemy by making them believe that the visible differences they saw in each other defined who they were. Complete rubbish, but often effective.

Tammias understood. Had it not been for their ability to master other races, they would not have developed technology. They had no hands, only tentacles. They were larger than the largest species of whales on Earth, and they evolved not on land, or in the light of day, but deep under the oceans. They evolved around organisms that thrived around volcanic vents in the ocean floors, in pure darkness. This explained, to some degree, their monstrous dealings with other creatures. They didn't see any thing that evolved on the land as having intelligence, any more than man once believed dolphins or whales could be sentient. To the Kelvan, land animals were just biological tools to be exploited. And in this way, they had nearly conquered the entire Andromeda Galaxy.

"Garcia?!" It was Picard's voice.

"Stay focus," Tammias told himself. "This is not time for your fantasies. No more tangents. Lives are at stake."

The Styrofoam looking, geodesic forms were on the ground in front of him. They were clearly labeled and numbered: Riker, Shelby, Worf, and La Forge. He had to make them whole. The virtual Crusher-Garcia prodigy fell away as once again he returned his focus to the funny shapes. He didn't like Riker. Riker was an obstacle blocking access to Deanna. He loved Deanna. They both did. Where was Deanna? For a brief moment, he saw the image of a star system, labeled, numbered, and with coordinates. Riker wasn't necessary. He could so take the Enterprise this very instant and go to Deanna's rescue. He didn't need them. He didn't need anyone. Not with this power at his hands.

No. Riker was necessary. Deanna would never forgive him if anything happened to Riker. She needed them both.

No, that wasn't true, either. Deanna only needed Riker, not Tam. She didn't even want Tam. But he wanted her! And he could recreate her. Again, he fancied turning Shelby or Crusher into Deanna. Physically, anyway. Shelby would still be Shelby, and Crusher would still be Crusher, but they would look like Deanna. There would be no way for him to recreate all the neural connections that would make a true "Deanna" any more than he could reassemble all the atoms in a crushed toy, like his father. His father was gone and it was his fault. No, he was only the tool, not the cause. He realized he didn't want Shelby, or Crusher, to be Deanna. He liked them for their unique qualities. If he was going to have them, why not have them all. It wasn't like they could stop him. He could do whatever he wanted to whoever he wanted, and with impunity. He could reduce them down to their essential elements, store them on a shelf, and reanimate them when he wanted their company, and then put them back on the shelf when he tired of them.

How could I be this evil, Tammias asked himself. Would he turn his friends into the tools and toys he wanted to satisfy his perverse needs just as the Kelvan have consistently done to other species? Where am I going with this? These are people who trust me. Why would I do this? For love? Stay focused. Jaxa loves you. At the thought of Jaxa, his mind leapt to where she was, on the Enterprise. She was visiting with Kellogg, and they were actually discussing him. Hearing about his self was a turn off, and he tried to look away. As he tried to focus, though, part of his attention was still back on the Enterprise, randomly selecting females for appraisal, starting with Kellogg since she had been right there in his line of sight. He was very partial to red heads, but the idea

that she had stunned him was aggravating him. She had prevented him from pursuing after Deanna and her captors. Before long he had narrowed his interests to a few dozen crew members, such as Miss Gladstone who worked in the nursery school, a transporter tech B. G. Robinson whose quarters were “806”, an Ensign Sonya Gomez, Lt Larson, from engineering, Ensign Anaya, an Asian that was scheduled for helm control next hour, Ensign Gibson, or Christy Henshaw...

Tammas realized suddenly that he needed to save the Away Team now or it wasn't going to get done. Absolute power corrupted absolutely. And he so wanted to be absolutely corrupt. Jovet was right, he thought. I am a monster. I am evil. No, not evil, but not good. Some good. Aristotle's Golden Mean. I am who I am. Different. Human, Vulcan, Kelvan. I'm a new species! I am ambivalence at its best. I just want to be loved, but with this power, I would go about it in all the wrong ways.

Tammas now understood the danger of playing virtual and holodeck games. It separated you from others. What the Kelvan computer was offering him would be worse than an affair on the holodeck because using this power would rob real people of their free will. Sure, he could have what he wanted, but it would be empty. It would be solitaire. It would be just another empty computer program, another fantasy. He would still be alone.

“Ambivalence is why most sentient species die out.” The voice in his head sounded like Deanna's voice. “They talk themselves into a corner, into a conundrum, and then they don't act. Make a choice. Don't stay here.”

Even while looking at potential outcomes of what would happen if he choose certain paths, watching how each road with misuse of power would ultimately end up, he would still make poor choices. You need to save the Away Team and disengage from this damn computer, he told himself. But letting go of such power was hard. He hadn't realized just how much of a control freak he had become. It was time to act. Just running through all the options available to him was nothing more than fantasy controlling his life, for the options were infinite, making decisions more and more difficult. This decision would define who he was and would help shape his future decisions. Once a path was started the trail would be easier to follow. Good decision made it easier to make good decisions, where poor choices tended to lead towards more poor choices. He had to commit. Or, he could do nothing. Just give up. Giving up was just another choice with equally devastating consequences.

His evil side seemed so bad to himself that he contemplated separating his good side from his bad side, but then, he saw that that too had been done before. His thoughts were just another variation on a theme, and none of the paths had been any more viable than they had been had Kirk remained divided in two. He would just have to decide, and live with the consequences, whatever those consequences were.

What seemed liked days to Tammas was only a matter of minutes in real time. Tammas pushed the button on the Kelvan device and then his world went black. From the Away Team's perspective, his finger had only been on the alien device for less than a minute. He appeared to be dazed. Crusher took readings and stepped in front of him. For just a moment he seemed to be smiling at her, but then his focused changed and he was looking right through her. Picard called to him. They witnessed him depressing the button, causing the box to light up with acknowledgement of his request. They watched him collapse. Picard caught him and eased him to the ground.



The geodesic shapes disappeared and in their place, three members of the Enterprise crew, and one stray Shelby, returned to living status. Crusher turned her attention away from Tammias to verify the health of her people.

“Data?” Riker asked. “Captain Picard!”

Worf had crashed to the ground. “That makes two Kelvans I’ve killed,” Worf said proudly, slinging the goo off his hands with a shake.

“Excuse me?” Shelby asked Worf. “I think it was my shot that killed it.”

“What happened?” Riker asked. “Where’s Deanna?! And what happened to Garcia? And why is Shelby out of uniform?”

Shelby looked down at herself. She also wanted to know why she was out of uniform and why her hair was down. She tried to adjust her skirt to be less revealing but there was simply insufficient material to satisfy her. She was also uncomfortably aware of how tight her uniform was.

“They appear to be in good health,” Doctor Crusher said. She turned and knelt next to Tammias, taking another reading. She retrieved an item from her kit, inserted it into a hypospray and administered it into Tam’s arm.

Tam’s eyes fluttered and he reached for his head. He hadn’t had such a bad headache since waking from the Persis incident. The sun was behind Crusher’s head, giving the illusion that she had a halo. “You know, you’re becoming a habit.” Then he remembered his tangent about her, blushed and looked away. Diverting his eyes from Crusher brought Shelby into his line of sight. She was wearing the classic red uniform, mini skirt and Go-go style boots. His breath caught in his throat as she knelt down beside him. He looked up to avoid staring at her legs, nearly lingered too long at her cleavage, then forced himself to catch her eyes, but found he couldn’t look her in the eye. He looked back to Doctor Crusher.

“Breathe,” Crusher said.

He realized he was holding his breath. It hadn’t escaped his notice that Shelby’s hair was down. He remembered everything from his session, including his last thoughts of her.

“You okay?” Shelby asked, extending a hand to help him up.

Tammias nodded, trying to limit his eye contact with her, which only brought more of her body parts into his line of sight. Once he was on his feet, he let go of her hand. His eyes met Captain Picard’s eyes.

“Is there something you want to tell me?” Picard asked, no doubt referring to Shelby’s change of uniform.

Deanna was standing by Picard. “Tam, we got to get back to the ship. The Romulans are coming.”

Tam blinked. No one else seemed to be responding to Deanna. “We need to get back to the ship. Now!” Deanna insisted.

♪♪▶

Captain Janeway was sitting in for Captain Picard, feeling quite comfortable in the big chair on the Bridge of the Enterprise, right up until the Romulan War-bird de-cloaked directly in front of them. Lt. Gomez at Ops announced that there was a second War-bird de-cloaking off the port bow, and that both War-birds were arming their weapon systems.

“Raise shields,” Janeway said, standing. “Red alert.”

“But the Captain’s on the planet!” Jenna De Soto said from behind the Captain. She was working the tactical station in Worf’s absence.

“Raise the shields,” Janeway said again. “So there’s still a ship for him to return to!”

“Shields up,” Jenna said. “The Romulan War-bird Shin-Tau is hailing us.”

“On screen,” Janeway said. “I am Captain Janeway. Why have you violated the Federation Romulan treaty? I demand you return to the neutral zone this instant.”

“Where is Captain Picard?” the Romulan asked.

“Right here,” Picard said, stepping up center stage in order to speak. “Captain Janeway asked you an important question.”

Janeway turned to see the entire Away Team was on the bridge. Tammias was leaning against the railing that spanned the length of the command chairs, shrugging off Crusher gesture to follow her to sickbay. Jenna seemed pleased to see Tammias, but was even happier to let Worf take over tactical. Tam again waved Crusher off as she expressed concern for his well being. Data took over ops. That’s when Janeway did a double take off Shelby. As Janeway took in Shelby the second time, she thought about asking where the old style uniform had come from. Fortunately, Janeway was an astute reader of people, and judging by Shelby’s expression, she knew not to ask at this time. She turned her attention back to the Romulan commander.

“Captain Picard,” the Romulan Captain said. “You will release the ship in your tractor beam and surrender all knowledge about its operator.”

“I will be glad to share information with you,” Picard said. “As I escort you back to the Neutral Zone. As for the ship itself, I’m not releasing it to you.”

“Then I will consider you a co-conspirator with these aliens and open fire on you,” said the Romulan.

“If you fire on my ship in Federation space, it will lead our two nations down a path to war,” Picard said. “Now, before this escalates any further, allow me to escort you back...”

“We’re already at war!” the Romulan shouted, coming out of his seat, arms waving erratically. “It is obvious you’re in league with this alien, for we caught you red handed. Now, surrender this ship or we will destroy you. You have till the count of five. No more negotiating for your surrender.”

“Their weapons are at ready, Captain,” Worf announced.

“Prepare to return fire,” Picard said.

“Battle stations!” Riker yelled into the comm. “All hands...”

“They are firing torpedoes,” Data announced, noticing the Romulan didn’t wait for his five count.

“Evasive action,” Picard ordered. “Return fire!”

“Torpedoes away,” Worf announced.

“Brace for impact,” Riker ordered.

The impact didn’t come. On the screen, they could see the torpedoes frozen in space. In addition to breaking all the rules of physics by coming to a complete stop in relationship to the ship, but maintaining orbital speed to the planet so that it hovered just shy of shield contact. The torpedoes were also suddenly disarmed. And like the torpedoes, the crews of all three ships found themselves equally frozen, unable to move, but still quite aware of their surroundings. Tammias stepped up towards the view screen,

his finger still on the button to the Kelvan device. He was finding it very hard not to rely on this technology even though he had never used it before today. It was like finding the cheat codes to a game. A game he wanted desperately to win.

"I'm sorry Captain Picard," Tammias said. "But I can't allow you two to destroy yourselves because of what my race is trying to do."

"Why are you apologizing to him?" Deanna asked him. She kissed him on the lips. "I provided you with the coordinates to come save me. Tam, aren't you coming to save me?"

Tammias smiled, his eyes closing as he surrendered to Deanna's embrace, and after the kiss he felt weak. He sat down in the captain's chair. "I know where to find Deanna and Selar. I have to go rescue them. But, what do I do with you?"

"Just let them be," Deanna said, sitting in her usual chair. "They can handle themselves."

"I can't just leave them here, Deanna! They'll kill each other," Tammias argued with her.

"Well, you can't take them with you," Deanna argued. "They'll just get in the way. They'll try and stop you."

"No, they'll help me. You told me they would help me," Tammias said. "You said all I had to do was ask them."

"That was before," Deanna said.

"Okay, so what do I do with them?" Tam asked, sliding to the floor. He sighed. "Riker, tell me what to do? I'm so tired I can't think straight."

Deanna moved over to the Captain's chair and started massaging Tam's back with her bare feet. He settled into it, closing his eyes. "You know what you have to do," she cooed.

"I'm tired. So many options. Who would have thought having so many options would be so debilitating. A sociologist! I should have seen this. I'm so tired. And miles to go before I sleep," Tammias said.

"Alright, stop alluding to crappy, old poetry, and come save me," Deanna begged. She ran her fingers across his cheek, moved in front of him and sat on his lap. "I'll make it worth your while this time. You remember how I rewarded Riker, don't you?"

Tammias pushed her, and she fell to her back, but she pulled him with her so that he was now on top. "Not now," Tammias said, almost a whisper. "Everyone's watching."

"I thought you liked an audience," Deanna said. "Oh, I get it. You're playing hard to get. A little role reversal here?"

"I'm not playing hard to get," Garcia argued.

"Perhaps you would rather wait until Selar can join in," Deanna asked.

"Oh, Selar wouldn't be interested in..." Garcia closed his eyes and stood up. "Would she? No. You're trying to confuse me."

"Either way, it's your job to come and save me," Deanna said. "No one else can do it. Just you. So, make up your mind as to what you're going to do with these Romulans," Deanna said. "And slap some bacon on those biscuits. We're burning daylight."

John Wayne, he thought back to Deanna and his role playing days. "I could kill the Romulans now. Then I could leave."

“Or, you could just take the Kelvan ship and come now,” Deanna said, drawing her knees to her chest and hugging her legs.

“No. I can’t do that,” Tammias snapped. “They will see their own technology coming at them. Plus, these two will continue their feud. Ah, yes. I’ll take a shuttle. No, I can’t take a shuttle. I have to hire a ship.”

“Mercenaries?” Deanna asked.

“Why not?” Tammias asked, tilting his head back to look at her.

Deanna stood and offered her hand. Tammias took it and spun her into him as if they were dance partners, only, as he leaned into kiss her, she dramatically turned her head away, playful like, coy like an actress in an Indian movie. “Well, let’s go, Tiger,” Deanna said, leading him towards the turbolift. Before reaching half way, Tammias pulled free of her and spun suddenly as if someone was behind him. “If you do this, Garcia, your career in Star Fleet is over!” he said, pointing at Shelby as though he was talking to himself.

“I’m impressed,” Deanna said. “You do Riker impersonation so well.”

Tammias spun back around and pointed at her. “Riker? I’m the Captain!” he said. He stormed over to the Captain’s chair and sat down defiantly. “We go when I say we go.” His demeanor changed as soon as he sat down. He slid out of the chair, back to the floor, and rested his head in Picard’s chair. “I’m the Captain,” he said, a little less sure of himself.

“Yes,” Deanna agreed. “And such a cute little Captain you are. The chewing gum captain.”

Tammias began to sing a little song, “Bitter Dregs.” Deanna sat down in her chair, impatient, sighing. “Anytime now,” she sang. The two songs clashed. After his chorus he stood up, facing Riker full on. “You never did listen to me, you creep. I saved Deanna. I lead you right to her. Me! You got that? I did it. You couldn’t have tracked an elephant crossing a kilometer of bubble wrap. I’m going after her and that’s final. You can’t stop me. Luxwana can’t stop me. Her servant can’t stop me. Neither can Wendy, that stinking little ho. Yeah, you thought I forgot about Wendy, didn’t you. How dare you do that to Deanna?”

Tammias staggered to his knees again, breathing hard. “Oh, god, I’m so sorry. Talk about calling the kettle black. Why am I like this? My genes? My up bringing? Is this normal? I have to go. I can’t take you. It’s for your own good. But I can’t let you kill yourselves either. I will leave the Kelvan ship here, and program its computer to release you after I depart. I will program it to give you an hour head start before it releases the Romulans.”

Deanna laughed. “You’re so cute when you’re working through a problem.”

Tammias laughed with her. He laughed so hard his chest hurt, and he rested his hands on his chest. “Shut up, Deanna. I’m thinking. Oh, Romulan Commander, Ne Alin. Yes, I know your name. I recommend you go home, and tell your people the Federation has nothing to do with this.”

Tammias crawled over to Riker and pulled himself up. “Who put this tree here? Damn, Riker, you’re just too tall. No wonder Barclay dropped you a dozen centimeters in his holo-game. He’s kinder than I would have been.”

Certain he could now walk away, Tammias turned only to find Janeway impeding his progress. He held onto her as well, literally hugging her to keep from falling.

“What?” Deanna said. “Are you going to say farewell to everyone before you leave? Do you have to go through the entire crew?”

“Sorry, Captain,” Tammias said. “Next time, I’ll fill you in on how I did it. Provided I live long enough for there to be a next time. Deanna wants me dead.”

“Did I tell you that time is of the essence?” Deanna asked.

Tammias staggered away from Janeway and towards the exit, grabbing onto Picard for support before pushing over to the bulkhead. He used the wall for support as he headed towards the lift. He paused, again. “I’m sorry, I didn’t say good bye, did I? I have to do this. You know that, don’t you? I have to face the Kelvan leader. If I fail, what’s coming will make the Borg seem like a mild case of the flu.” He put his forehead against the wall and rocked his head. “Wait. I’m forgetting something.”

“You’re forgetting it’s time to go,” Deanna said.

“Deanna, I have to tell them what they’re up against,” Tammias said. “The Kelvan have found a means of using technology they have pieced together in this quadrant, coupled with theirs, to punch a whole in space/time. They also have found a solar system that meets their requirements for doing this. Something about space time harmonics and music of the spheres. I love music. Did I tell you I love music? Jovet hated me because of my music ability, but it wasn’t my fault. Of course, no more complaints from her. She’s dead now. It wasn’t my fault, really. The music thing. Not her death. Maybe her death, too. I should have figured that one out. But music, I was just good at it, you know. Naturally.”

“Oh, bloody hell,” Deanna said. “Do you want me to haunt Riker to come save me, or are you going to stop crying and get to work?”

“I’m sorry mother, I’m coming,” Tammias answered the call.

“Mother?” Deanna asked. “That’s interesting. An Oedipus complex? Kind of kinky. Did you ever have dreams about me and my mother naked in a mud bath hot tub?”

Tammias shivered at the thought. “Options. Too many options. Rambling, variations on a theme.”

He turned, putting his back against the wall. Shelby was in front of him, a good profile shot. “I can’t stop this feeling,” Tammias sang. “Deep inside of me.”

Deanna sang along with him.

He stopped and slid to the floor, cupped his ears, squeezing his head with both hands. “I can’t get that song out of my head!”

“You’re crazy!” Deanna shouted at him.

Tammias nodded. “You may be right,” Tam agreed, in song. “I may be crazy. But it may just be a lunatic you’re looking for.”

“Turn out the lights, the party’s over,” Deanna said.

“Ehhh, wrong song,” Tammias corrected. “But thanks a lot. Now I’m going to have that stuck in my head all night. Always going off on some tangent, you know. That’s what the critics say about my writing. Too many tangents. Chasing rabbits. Rabbits and multiplication tables. Shelby, did I tell you that you sure are cute in that outfit. Great legs. If it weren’t for that Mackenzy guy...”

“You know, that Mackenzie guy can kick your butt,” Deanna said.

Tammias considered Mackenzie Calhoun and swallowed. “You’re not going to tell him about this, are you?” he asked, looking back and forth between Deanna and Shelby.

“Please, you’re not going to tell him, are you? Oh, man, is he ever going to kick my ass. But you do look good with your hair down. You should let it down more often.”

Tam stood up and got right in Shelby’s face, smelling her, touching her hair. “Oh, what the hell,” he said, and kissed Shelby hard on the mouth. “It’s worth the ass kicking I’m about to get.”

Tammas backed up, shook his head as if to clear it. Janeway appeared to be looking right at him. “Tangents. Variations. Time travel. Paradox. Oh god, Katherine, I have a headache big enough for both of us. Where was I? Oh, yeah. The Kelvan intend to open a stable worm hole that will connect our Milky Way Galaxy with their home galaxy, Andromeda. What would normally take the Kelvan three to four hundred years of travel time through normal space will now only take twenty five years. All aboard, the express train to the Andromeda Galaxy is on the way. Starlight Express, Starlight Express, are you real, are you near?”

Tammas came back around in order to stand before Janeway. He looked in her eyes for a while, and then turned to the screen. A Romulan ship and a frozen torpedo.

“Twenty five years,” Tammas said. “I know music pretty well. I bet I could open a dozen more express routes to a dozen or so close galaxies. There’s got to be a faster way. Traveler? Who’s this Traveler, Riker? Wesley mentioned him, too. I’d rather ride a Q.”

Tammas nearly fell to sleep right there, his eyes closing, and his head nodding off, but then he jerked up suddenly. “The Kelvan must be stupid. They’ve been disconnected so long from their own species that they will be considered alien. Don’t they see that? They’ll be made slaves just like the rest of us. Well, we have fifty years of freedom. Maybe we could hide, take to the stars now, before it’s too late. Guinan will understand.”

“Are you telling me you’re going to run from a straight up fight?” Deanna asked.

“No!” Tammas stood tall, putting his foot down. “I’m not going to run. By god, if I have to destroy this galaxy just like that Amiantre race destroyed the Andromeda Galaxy, then that’s what I’ll do. I won’t let them make you their slaves. I could replicate the Amiantre bomb. Yeah. I’ll do that, and then every star will explode sending out radiation making this galaxy just as inhospitable to the Kelvan as Andromeda is becoming. Child’s play. Like knocking over dominoes, one star at a time. You didn’t think that the Andromeda Galaxy’s radiation was a naturally occurring event, did you? You always believed everything aliens tell you? Did you believe everything Kirk’s told you?”

“This is not new information,” Deanna said. “Why are you stalling?”

“You already knew that. I wrote a book about that, didn’t I,” Tammas said. He staggered. “No. Wait. That was fiction. This is just too much. And I’m rambling. Why am I hesitating? I know what needs to be done. All the pretty females. No! I’m just as evil as they are. I got to stop them. In stopping them, I can stop myself.”

He stumbled forward and held onto Janeway for support. It was as if he were drunk. “I guess I’ll take your shuttle. Atlantis. You don’t mind, do you? Didn’t think so. And don’t bring Tuvok on any more game sessions. He’s no fun. No. I will take the Kelvan ship. No, you’ll destroy yourselves if I do. Stay focused. So much power. Absolutely. Deanna told me something. Vocalize it. Katherine, you got to help me.”

Tammas hugged Janeway farewell and stumbled up towards the turbo lift. “Oh, never mind. Thank you for saving me earlier. Crusher, Beverly. Oh, how smart our children would be. Almost as smart as a Picard Crusher combination. Focus. Why isn’t the lift working? Damn it! I’m a doctor not a bellhop. Oh, yeah. I forgot. He he. Drunk. Riker, tell Deanna I love her. And stop being so stupid! Everyone knows you two belong together. Come on lift. Ha! What am I thinking? I don’t need a lift. I need a shuttle. No, I need something a little bigger than shuttle. Where does one get a Klingon Marauder? Oh yes. Where I started this adventure. Guinan’s place.”

Tammas pushed a button, trying to hurry the lift. He looked at his sleeve as if he was wearing a watch. “Gee, who would have thought I was prone to such long winded, impromptu speeches, like the first Captain of the Enterprise. Not Kirk, not Pike. What was his name?” Tammas asked, and bumped into turbo lift door again. Damn, “Catcher in the Rye” influence!

“Pike?” Deanna asked him.

“No, not him I said. The first one.” Tammas said.

“The idealistic one?” Deanna asked.

“Yeah, I am not a dreamer, though, am I? Maybe a little idealistic. But did you ever notice that his stories just don’t seem to fit? Like he’s from an alternative time line or universe or something. Something really odd about the whole affair. Guinan would know. She knows about stuff like that. I should talk to her. I’ve got to let go. Focus. Selar needs me. Um, Voltak needs me. Irony? Chance? Had I not met Selar would Voltak be dead or dying already? Would the Enterprise be battling it out to the death right here? The last gambit. If I don’t hurry, Voltak might still die of a sudden heart attack. Um, I wonder if I will die of a heart attack, too? No, only the good die young. I was born evil, imprinted with evil.”

“You are evil, aren’t you?” Deanna said more than asked.

“Yes, I can feel the taint,” Tammas agreed. “Just ask Jovet. She’ll tell you. I’ve got to destroy the Kelvan. It’s the only way to save her.”

He looked around one last time. “I’m going to miss this place. You’ve all been so kind to me. This could have been home. I really love you all. You’ve all touched me profoundly. Who would I have been if not for you? Wow. So many possibilities. Just another Kelvan thug, no doubt. Well, here goes nothing. Or something. And miles to go before I sleep. Sleep, per chance to dream.”

Tammas pushed the button on the Kelvan device and it made his wish come true. He was transported instantly to shuttlecraft Atlantis, a long range shuttle. Almost simultaneously, Atlantis was transported, with him in it, almost to the edge of the solar system. The coordinates were preset, to conform to his wishes, and it went instantly into warp. As soon as Atlantis went into warp, the Kelvan device on Tam’s wrist went dead, for it was no longer in range of the computer it was linked to. Deanna faded, like a ghost in an old movie. And just like someone who had had one too many drinks, Tammas fell instantly into a deep sleep.



One hour later, the Enterprise Crew found that they were no longer immobilized. Some of them had still been struggling against their paralysis, and when they were finally free some of them exploded forwards, fell backwards, or simply collapsed. Picard and Janeway caught each other, and sort of nodded as they let go, both turning quickly to

whatever business there was at hand as if to cover for any embarrassment they felt for invading each other's personal space.

"Status report?" Picard said, turning to Data.

"The War-birds, and their crews, appear to still be under the influence of the Kelvan stasis," Data answered. "All hands have reported in, no ill affects. You have a priority one message from Star Fleet, and they are curious as to why you have not responded. It is Admiral McCoy and he is on the Sutherland."

"Answer that hail," Picard said. "I'll take it in my ready room. Captain Janeway, if you'll join me. Riker, I would like to leave here before the Romulan's are released from their paralysis. But I don't want to leave that Kelvan ship here. Figure it out."

Janeway and Picard disappeared into the Captain's Ready room. Riker turned to La Forge who was sizing up the Kelvan ship.

"What do you think?" Riker asked him.

"Oh, it will fit in hangar bay six alright," La Forge said. "Except for the fact that the tail end of it is bigger than the shuttle bay doors."

"If we could remove its vertical stabilizers?" Riker asked.

"It would take me several hours to cut through that," La Forge said.

"Why don't we just fly it somewhere," Shelby said. "Surely there are standard controls on the inside."

"Even if there were, how would you get in it?" La Forge asked. "It has no seems, no hatches, no windows. We can't penetrate it with scans, so we can't beam you over into it. And, to cut a hatch into that material, I will need several hours."

"It would appear the only way to enter a Kelvan ship is with the Kelvan transporter," Data said. "And Garcia took the control interface with him."

"Okay, if we can't take it with us, let's blow it up," Shelby said. "At least the Romulans won't have it."

"If it's anything like the ships that abducted people, it will be impervious to phasers and photon torpedoes, so I doubt we'll destroy it so easily," La Forge said. "Not in less than an hour."

"We're not destroying it," Riker said. "We're going to put it in the hangar bay. We may have to twist it around, and push it at extreme angles, but we're going to put it in the hangar bay even if we have to cut slots into the Enterprise to let those winglets in. Let's get going."

♪♪▶

Picard had no sooner sat down in his chair when the monitor on his desk came to life and the image of Admiral McCoy came up. McCoy was in a dimly lit room, which suggested he was in private quarters aboard a Starship. Janeway stood behind Picard, with her left hand resting on his chair.

"Captain Picard. And Captain Janeway," McCoy said. "It's good to see for myself that you're well, Katherine."

"Thank you, Admiral," Janeway said, leaning in closer to the monitor. "It's been a trying couple of days."

"Indeed," McCoy said. "But they say it builds character."

"Character's over rated," Janeway jested, quoting something she had read somewhere.



“Admiral McCoy,” Picard said. “Sorry for the delay, but we’ve had a bit of a situation. Two Romulan ships have crossed the neutral zone and are in orbit with us here.”

“It’s more than two,” McCoy said. “I want you to rendezvous with the Sutherland at the following coordinates and bring me Garcia.”

Picard exchanged a quick look with Janeway. He sat forward even more serious than before. Picard’s seriousness, and Janeway’s frown, wasn’t too hard for McCoy to read. He was beginning to guess at things before Picard even started speaking.

“I’m afraid that’s not going to be possible,” Picard said. “Garcia has run off on some fool’s errand to stop the Kelvan and rescue my counselor. He took a shuttle craft. I intend to catch up with him as soon as we’re finished here.”

McCoy shook his head. “This is not good. I have a source that suggests one of the Kelvan factions intends to use him as a pawn in their war. He hasn’t had access to any Kelvan technology, has he?”

“Yes, he has,” Picard said, adjusting his uniform unconsciously. “Under my instructions he accessed a Kelvan computer in order to re-animate an Away Team that had been dehydrated and reduced to geodesic shapes.”

McCoy visibly shuddered at the thought, flooded with his own memories of such things.

“I will find Garcia, Admiral,” Picard assured him. “And I’ll bring him to you.”

“I’m afraid we don’t have the time,” McCoy said. “Your orders are to rendezvous with me ASAP. If my source is right, we know where the Kelvan base of operation has moved to, and you’re going to be my flag ship to take me there. Interestingly enough, the Romulans have just acquired the same information. They are assembling an Armada even as we speak and I suspect they will get there before we do. It looks like this war is finally going to come to a head.”

“I think we’re all being played,” Janeway said.

“I would have to agree with you,” McCoy said. “And, that’s one reason I was hoping to speak with Garcia.”

“Admiral,” Janeway interrupted. “If you like, I could take a shuttle and try to catch up with him and bring him back.”

McCoy nodded, considering the possibilities. “I’d hate not having you in a ship if... Ha, if! when... this comes to war but then one more ship isn’t going to make a difference against the Kelvan. Even if we had all the ships back from before the Borg encounter, we would still be outgunned. Yes. Katherine, try and stop Garcia. Consider this a personal favor for me. I’d like you to keep him as far from this as possible. If this goes badly, which I believe it will, he might be the last hope the Federation has for defeating the Kelvan.”

“You’re not becoming a pessimist in your old age, are you, Admiral?” Janeway asked. “Putting all our hopes in one person?”

“No,” he said, trying to smile. “Just old and tired. Do what you can. Jean Luc, I’ll be waiting for you. McCoy out.”

The screen went blank and Picard leaned back in his chair, spinning it to face Janeway. She returned his gaze.

“I’ll suppose you’ll let me borrow a shuttle?” she said.

“I’ll give you one better. You can take the Captain’s yacht. It’s faster, and you might have a chance to catch up with him,” Picard said.

“He said something about going to Guinan’s place,” Janeway mused.

“Indeed,” Picard said, hitting his communicator. “Captain Picard to Guinan.”

Guinan was staring out the window at Ten Forward. She was not surprised by the call. “Yes, Jean Luc.”

“Garcia said something about going to your place,” Picard said.

“I see,” Guinan said. “My place is here, but I suspect he is referring to Deep Space Station K-7, near Sherman’s planet.”

“Thank you,” Picard said.

“Can I be of any help?” Guinan asked.

“Not unless you have friends on DS-K7 that can discreetly intercept Garcia and perhaps delay him so that Janeway can catch up to him,” Picard said.

“I might,” Guinan said. “I’ll look into it and let you know.”

The Enterprise shuddered and Picard immediately got up and went to the Bridge. Riker smiled at him.

“We have the Kelvan ship secured in hangar bay six, as per your request, Captain,” Riker said, evidently pleased with himself.

“You better not have scratched my ship,” Picard said, observant of Riker smile fading. “Helm, retrieve the coordinates from my recent transmission and set course and speed, maximum warp. Captain Janeway, good luck.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Janeway said. “Shelby, you’re with me.” Janeway tapped her communicator pin. “Tuvok, report to the Captain’s Yacht.”

## CHAPTER TWENTYSEVEN

“Tam? Tammias Parkin, you need to get up now.”

Tammias stirred. His head hurt something fierce, but it wasn't bad enough that he would seek medical assistance. A face was staring curiously at him, almost concerned, and this distracted him from his head ache. The world seemed blurry, all but her face. The purple and blue hues in her hair drew his attention, reminding him of the rich colors found in a peacock's feathers, or the delicate wings of a butterfly. He admired the way it framed her face. It was short, squared off, and the cut reminded him of an Egyptian Queen. A medallion hung from a necklace, a swirling blue and pink liquid display which was almost as hypnotic as her eyes. Her eyes were out lined with a dark blue fading to black, mixed with glitter. Her lips, painted grey, pursed as she studied him. She wore clothing that conformed to her figure, accentuating every curve, leaving nothing to imagination, and as she leaned over closer to his face he could see that she was not shy about what she had, nor did she lack the confidence to use it. She smiled when she realized he was indeed awake and acknowledging her presence. Her outfit was comprised of dark shades of grey and black.

“You slept the entire way,” she said, patting him on the cheek. Even her fingernails were painted black. “We're at K7.”

There was a song in his head that he had picked up from re-enacting a movie. “I see a red door and I want it painted black...” He closed his eyes for a moment to resist the song. When he opened them, she was still there, but the world was less blurry. “Who are you?” Tammias asked.

“Duana,” she said, seeming shocked. “You don't remember me? Star Fleet special, ops? McCoy assigned me to be your body guard. Are you feeling alright?”

“Pa Pa is here?” Tammias asked.

“No,” Duana said. “And if he heard you call him that, you'd lose your commission.”

“Deanna? She was here with me,” Tammias said, sitting up. He sat up too fast and braced himself on the shuttle's bed. He didn't remember pulling it out of the hidden recess, much less climbing into it for a nap.

“No, I'm the only one here with you,” Duana said, shifting her weight from one leg to the other. “You must have been dreaming.”

He shook his head and stood. When he had left the Enterprise, he had thought everyone had been immobilized by the Kelvan stasis. Perhaps he had been mistaken. It seemed to make sense that McCoy would have assigned him a body guard. He picked up his back pack and slipped his arms into the straps. He then pulled a poncho over his head.

“You remember the plan, right?” she asked, adjusting his poncho and brushing off some lint.

“Where is my uniform?” Tammias asked.

“Please, Tam,” Duana said, grasping both his arms. “We're not going through that again, are we? You can't hire a Klingon Mercenary ship wearing Star Fleet uniforms. Now, I packed everything you told me to, so if you're ready to transport over, let's do it. We're running out of time to save Counselor Troi.”

Tammias nodded. “Of course,” he said. He noticed he was wearing the Kelvan wrist band and started to remove it.

“No, you’ll want to leave that on,” Duana said. “You can’t afford to misplace it. You might need it when you arrive at your destination.”

Tammas agreed. It might be his only weapon against the Kelvan should he have a close encounter. He set the coordinates and together they used the shuttle’s emergency transporter to beam over to K7. Tammas and Duana appeared outside a popular bar slash restaurant. He looked around to make sure no one had notice their arrival.

“Our transport will have registered on the station’s security sensors,” Duana said. “I’ll go take care of that, while you go get us a ship.”

“Alright,” Tammas said. “I’m sorry for being a little out of it.”

Duana kissed him. “Don’t worry. You’re under a lot of stress.”

“Thank you,” Tammas said. He watched her just long enough to realize he was admiring her maybe too closely. Too closely for work associates and he had to assume that they were indeed associates. Then again, he thought while glancing back, that wasn’t just a peck on the cheek she had just given him. He steeled himself up and headed towards the bar, for regardless of what she was, Deanna and Selar needed him to complete his mission. He needed to save them. To enter the bar, one had to pass through an anular force field, and under a sensor arch, that checked incoming patrons for weapons. The force field prevented the bar’s air from mixing and contaminating the regular station’s air. It was no doubt a safety feature to protect non-patrons from the second hand smoke that filled the air in the bar. It was “cliché” thick, enough to cut with a knife, and Tammas felt his eyes watering and his lungs tightening up. He had to use his biofeedback to stop a potential allergic response. In addition to smoke, the air was being saturated with water from a moisturizer. A thin veil of fog crept along the floor. As he walked, his boots stirred a small wake allowing him to get brief glimpses of the floor, which was covered with saw dust. He had never known a place to use such an archaic technique, and imagined it was only good for ambiance. It made a curious sensation under his feet that he hadn’t expected.

In addition to preventing the contaminated air from leaking out into the rest of the station, the force field also contained the noise of the bar to the bar. There was a band playing at full volume. There was the sound of customers laughing, quarreling, and dining. One of the patrons ate a live rat like creature that squealed, and Tammas had to constrain himself against going to the aid of the remaining little creatures. He sucked it up and pushed on, resisting the entertainment lasers and lights that danced around the room from lulling him into a daze. It was hypnotic and he was willing to surrender to it, but he needed to function for just a while longer.

A Catian headed for the door paused by Tammas and sniffed. “I know you.” Its voice was hardly audible over the din of the bar.

Tammas remembered the large cat like creature, not by face, but by smell and the quality of its voice. Its fur coat was grayer than he remembered, and it was shedding, but he was definitely the cat whose tail Tammas had stepped on when last here. The large cat was much less frightening now that Tam had some height and experience with aliens.

Tammas bowed to the Catian, folding his hands together out of respect. “I was a child and you taught me proper etiquette.”

The Catian nodded, sniffing, his memory of the event coming back to him. “Ah, yes. I remember you as a child. You appear to have learned manners as well as the ability to speak. Good. It fills my heart with gladness that I had a part in this. I’d stay

away from the keetle, here. They say they're fresh, but I think they grow them out of a Petri dish in the back room. Farewell, child."

The Catian pushed through the anular field and moved on down the corridor. Tammias was relieved the old cat didn't want to talk, because he was feeling ever more anxious about time. He was running out of time. Everybody was. Things were going to change and these poor people were just going about their lives as if nothing was coming. Couldn't they sense the inevitable slipping up behind them?

It was the kind of bar normally associated with low lifes and scum and it had a reputation that went back as far as the feud for Sherman's planet. Bar fights were so common that weapons had been banned, hence all the security screen arches he had had to walk under to enter. It was a good thing Tammias had decided not to bring a weapon, because getting caught with one could get you sent straight to the Brig, no "special" immunity allowed. And with his luck, he would have ended up on the "Other" Klingon side, where treatment of prisoners was considered harsh even by the "biological" Klingons standards.

K7 was jointly owned and operated by the "Other" Klingons and Earth colonists that had settled here nearly one hundred and fifty years ago. The "Others" and humans were physically indistinguishable from each other. As for their cultures, one hundred and fifty years of blending had made the "Other's" less harsh and the humans more so. As Tammias had noted in his research for his fictional book, "The Others" lacked the prominent ridge formation on the head that the "biological" Klingons were heir to. Both human and "Others" had co-colonized Sherman's planet, competing to see who could best develop the planet for their respected paternal nation state. Both the Federation and the Klingon Empire had invested great amounts of energy into "the project" as this planet was well suited for a Starbase, making this solar system a critical defensive point between their two nations. So critical that neither could afford to loose it, but to openly fight for it meant an all out war, something neither side could afford at the time. That was how "the Arrangement" had come into being. The Federation and the Klingons actually sat down at a legitimate conference and decided to make a game of it: the side that could best demonstrate their ability to adapt Sherman's planet could call it their own.

Tammias had always wondered what happened to Sherman in the process. One would think that, as the first settler, he would have some rights to it. None the less, the agreement was made and the New Cold War was started. The whole situation could have easily escalated into a full fledged war, had the curator at the time, a Baris Nilz, failed to convince Captain Kirk of the necessity of protecting his station, and a valuable shipment of quadrotriticale. Of course, some would say that just bringing Kirk into the mix could have started a full fledged war between the Federation and the Klingons, and Tammias found himself hard pressed to dispute some of those arguments. After all, was it not Kirk who had transported an undisclosed number of Tribbles onto a Klingon ship, which consequently "infected" the Klingon outpost that was only one parsec away from Sherman's planet, and consequently "infected" several other Klingon ships, which infected several other outposts? Of course, no one ever pinned that one on Kirk. The Klingons certainly blamed him, for it took much of their resources to contain the "epidemic" and eliminate the Tribbles. So, if it was Kirk, some still argue it was Kirk's cleverness that lessened the threat of the Klingon Empire by giving them something other than the Federation to worry about: Tribbles.

“Some would say,” Tammias mumbled. “Some would say Kirk walked on water.” And though Kirk did save the quadrotriticale, he didn’t help the Federation win Sherman’s planet. After all that fuss, the colonist, both human and “Others,” up and joined forces and ran both the Federation and Klingon Empires out, in favor of self rule. They were simply sick of all the hostilities, threats of war, but most importantly, none wanted to see their homes lost should the other side win. Both the Federation and the Klingon Empire had been so caught off guard by the event that they were both left scrambling for ways to recover their lost property through legal loopholes, all the while accusing each other for having secretly undermined “the project” out of poor sportsmanship like behavior. Probably the only thing saving Sherman’s planet from a straight out bombardment from either the Federation or the Klingon was that both sides had colonist there, and neither side could really afford to go to war.

A platter of food floated by, distracting Tammias. He was starving, but when his stomach turned, just like the food on the platter, he decided he wasn’t as hungry as he thought. The food was still alive and the waitress, who was smoking a cigarette, didn’t seem to be concerned that her ashes were falling onto the platter as she maneuvered around the tables, slapping the wandering hands of several patrons. The waitress was greasy, and not in a sexy way. Either her species was just naturally oily, or she had put on a self protective lotion barrier to protect her from germs. Or worse. Not that the oily skin was unattractive, Tammias thought as he reconsidered its nature further. The longer he looked, the more he admired the rich skin colors, no doubt enhanced by the moistness. The colors reminded him of the color of poison dart frogs of Earth. She had bright red and dark purple splotches, more alluring and deeper tones than even an artificial tattoo could reproduce. He took a second look, his eyes lingering longer than he knew he should allow them. But damn, he thought, she was interesting. How could he not be expected to stare?

“Hey, don’t you think you should stay focus?”

Tammias turned to the girl on his right. She almost looked like the compulsory blond bimbo type that would be in one of those old, B movies. The blond hair, long and straight, and the baby blue eyes were not her only prominent features, but instead of focusing on the hour glass figure highlighted by the tight clothing, he managed to maintain eye contact. She was dressed in shades of white. White boots, white hose, white skirt, white blouse, and a white sweater. The whiteness of her dress seemed to accentuate the freckles on her face, and the red of her lips, painted glossy with sparkles.

“I beg your pardon?” Tammias asked.

“You don’t have to beg, Tam,” she said.

“I know you?” he asked, his head tilting as he sought the information in his head. He never forgot a face, so, why was it that here was the second person today that he had not at least recognized by looks alone? After all, she was certainly unforgettable in appearance.

“Ilona? Hello?! Did the frog girl just totally wipe your hard drive clean? Do you need to reboot?” Ilona asked. “Now wipe the drool off your mouth and let’s get back to work.”

Tammias repressed an anger response.

“The group you’re looking for is over there,” Ilona said, pointing. “You better get going, too. You’re standing around is starting to draw unnecessary attention. I got your back. Good luck.”

It was obvious to him, and everyone else, that Tammias looked out of place in the bar. He wore an earthy, gray poncho, and his trousers were black with the legs stuffed into his boots. His whole outfit suggested he might be a ranger, or a priest, or a ranger priest from one of his games. He drew the hood back and down to reveal his humanity. Though it was a hazard to be human and on this side of the bar, he wanted complete use of his periphery vision. His ears didn’t carry enough of the Vulcan signature points to make him readily recognizable as a hybrid, which no doubt saved him from a few fights. The only thing less tolerated on this side of the station than humans were Vulcans. Any peace loving creature that stumbled over here was going to have to fight or run for its life because these folks just weren’t having it. He surveyed the room. The waitress went by him again, winking as she did so. Her uniform barely contained her.

“Today?” Ilona said more than asked.

Sufficiently motivated by Ilona’s impatient tone, Tammias headed towards the Klingons. They were biological Klingons. The non biological Klingons, the “Others,” gave their table a wide berth. Tammias crossed his arms, his hands nicely concealed beneath the poncho. To say Tammias got a few stares from the patrons would be an understatement, but if there was a lull in the conversations, he didn’t hear it until he got within a meter of the Klingons. He heard the dull roar of the bar drop a notch, which revealed some subtleties in the pounding beat of the music he had previously missed. There was still the sound of cutlery against plates, the clattering of glasses, and, as always, the music that played over and over in his head. The song in his head was a dangerous, punk rock mix, playing like a funeral march, and it sort of fit, in an odd kind of way, to the popular Klingon song the band was playing.

Tammias made a quick study of the group he intended to meet. They were Klingon, old school judging by their dress. They would have made a perfect research study group if he were in a more sociological frame of mind. It didn’t take too long of a study for him to figure out the hierarchy of their little gang, as he circled and made his final approach to their table.

If there had been any laughter or challenges directed at him from his entrance, there were none now. There was a definite, and sudden, reduction of noise as Tammias approached the table where the seven Klingons sat huddled in a private conversation. That, or his heart just doubled in volume. Two of the Klingons were female. Tammias had made it his purpose to approach opposite to their leader, Captain by virtue of owning a ship, not by military rank. Tammias had wanted to make sure the Klingon Captain could see him coming from a kilometer away, and he had been successful in that, at least. He stopped an arm’s length away from the table, wondering if Ilona really had his back, because he wasn’t sure where she had run off to. If she were still present, she might as well have been invisible.

The two Klingons with their backs to him put their drinks down and snarled at his proximity, watching their Captain’s eyes for the command. None of the Klingons approved of his presence, their disgust indicated by their nose actions. They were in no subtle way telling Tammias that they didn’t care for his odor.

"Back off, Human," the Klingon Captain said.

"You're mercenaries for hire," Tammias stated. "I wish to conduct business with you."

"We don't conduct business with humans, Human!" the Captain stated, not hiding his contempt for Tammias. When he said "Human," he meant it as an insult.

Most humans would have taken this as a cue to leave the immediate area, but Tammias was not most humans. Tammias had handled Klingons, so how bad could this get? he wondered. He disconnected a small bag of coins from his belt and tossed it to the table.

"I will pay you to listen to me," Tammias offered.

Perhaps he had made a mistake offering money after the deal was already closed. The tension around the table escalated, but the Captain still had a reign on his people. They chose not to act, but he was aware that their grips tightened on their mugs.

"Perhaps you didn't hear me, Human," the Captain said. "Turn around and walk away from my table, or die."

The Klingon directly in front of Tammias leaned back in his chair, balancing it on two legs, and smugly added, "puj qoH!" His friends laughed and the Captain smiled.

Tammias smiled, too, briefly, and then kicked the chair out from under the Klingon comedian, landing him neatly on his back, legs up in the air, with a resounding thud. His mug and drink went flying. Before the Klingon could move, much less recover from the surprise and indignity of it all, Tam's foot pinned the comedian's neck to the ground, effectively cutting off the Klingon's air supply.

The Klingon's companions stood, except for the Captain. Every conversation in the bar stopped, even the band quit playing, as the patrons assessed the situation. Some found excuses to be else where, paid for their drinks and left. That included all the patrons nearest the Klingon table.

Tammias pointed a hand held unit at the downed Klingon, warning the others off. "I wouldn't," Tammias said, his voice echoing in the strange quiet of the bar. They hesitated long enough for the Captain to tell them to hold, using sign language. The Captain's curiosity was piqued. Tammias looked down to the Klingon beneath his foot.

"If you wanted to fight, you should have insulted me in standard," Tammias said. "Since you didn't know I spoke some Klingon, I suppose that makes you a coward."

His friends growled, but they held their ground, waiting for their Captain to give the word. The Captain only watched, intrigued by the turn of events.

"You must be a weak coward, since all of your friends stood to help you against one weak, fool of a human!" Tammias continued.

The Klingon's friends ceased their growling. More people relocated to new tables, or left the bar completely. Perhaps Tammias had somehow managed to complement the Klingon's companion by insulting the downed Klingon, for they were much more amused by the situation than before, and not as eager to help their compadre. The Captain began to laugh. This was going along much easier than Tammias had hoped.

"muv maH, Human," the Captain invited.

Tammias removed his foot from the Klingon's neck, kicked him over, stood the downed chair up, spun it so its back was to the table, and sat on it backwards. The Klingon got slowly to his knees, choking, massaging his neck, and finally stood. The Klingon Captain pushed a mug over to Tammias and he drank from the cup, ignoring the officer who was upset about losing his drink. The band, a little less timid now that



Tammas had taken a seat, began to play. They played a peaceful song. At least, as peaceful as a punk rock band could muster and still be considered punk. It made Tammas think of a Punk Rock Christmas special he had performed on a holodeck.

"Agasht blood wine," Tammas noted, very much like the Klingon's regulan Blood wine. He wiped his chin on his sleeve.

"You are strong, for a Human," the Captain said, again impressed.

"What I did didn't take strength," Tammas said. And that was the truth.

"Physically, I am not strong at all, and, compared to you, physically, spiritually, as a warrior, I am merely a child. I hope that you can teach me bravery on our journey."

"And what makes you think I won't just kill you now, Human?" the Captain asked.

"Either kill me now or listen to me, but stop wasting our time," Tammas offered.

The Captain considered this for a moment, not showing his approval of Tam's show of strength, and then asked, "How did you get the weapon in here, Human?"

Tammas smiled and rolled the assumed weapon across the table. The Captain examined the small cylindrical device with some confusion.

"It's an extension to a medical tricorder, not a weapon," Tammas explained.

The Klingon Captain howled with delight. The offended Klingon tried to tackle Tammas, but two of his friends held him back, amused beyond no end. Their friend's time for attack had passed him. There had been nothing to have prevented him from doing so earlier, had he only chosen to act. Tammas ignored the commotion, keeping his focus intently on the Captain. Had he even flinched, the offended one's companions would have turned him loose to finish what he should have done earlier, while still on the floor.

"soH yoH," the captain said. "What need could you have that would require mercenaries, Human?"

"You honor me," Tammas said. "I need you. I need your ship."

"You know of my ship, Human?" the Captain asked, skeptical.

"Who hasn't heard of your ship, or of your conquests?" Tammas asked. "The Pa Nun, a Klingon battle cruiser, K't'inga class. If it were a Federation ship, I'd call her out dated, but I expect you don't have any trouble keeping her running."

"Of course not," he said. Flattery could only go so far with a Klingon, and Tammas was now at the ends of that rope. Still, calling it an old, piece of junk would not have gotten him any favors, either. "Our price is steep, Human."

"That bag is three pounds of trilitium-cobalt chips," Tammas explained. "Which is yours for allowing this conversation to take place. I'll give you three times that once I board your ship, and fifty times that on successful completion of our task. Here's my credit and pay authorization. You may verify it now if you have a portable."

The Captain took the disk and handed it to the girl on his right. It only took a moment for her portable to translate the codes into Klingon, access the information by remote processing, and get back to her with the answer. She gave her approval to her Captain.

"I'd rather have Gowr kill you than conduct business with you, Human!" the Captain stated clearly.

"I'm ready to die," Tammas informed the Captain simply. "Only, I don't think Gowr can kill me alone."

The Captain's laughter veiled Gowr's cry of rage, but still his friends held him back. "You can talk the talk, human. I doubt, seriously, you can back it up. However, I do believe you would die trying. And that's the only criteria I have for choosing my clients. Meet us at air lock seven in one hour. And don't be late. Human. Ha!"

The Klingon party departed, Gowr hanging back just long enough to glare menacingly at Tammas. It was the kind of glare that said "this is not over between us." Tammas hoped that as long as he was a client, he was protected, but then again, he would lose favor with them if he were to back down from a threat, cowering under the Captain's protection. The moment they left the bar, Tammas sighed in deep relief. "I should have been a god-damned actor," Tammas thought, holding his hands up to see if they were shaking as badly as he imagined. Then he wondered how much of that had been an act. It was more like his brain had just shut off. What did the sociologist call it? Identity Salience? Maybe he had just found another aspect of himself that needed to be entertained and explored. The Klingon warrior personality has emerged! Just another role to play.

Tammas had to laugh at that. He was becoming a true chameleon. It was the one problem with being an in-field sociologist, as opposed to being a strict theorist, and having a natural propensity for empathy didn't help much. On some level, even normal humans took on attributes of those they studied, but his added empathy took it to a whole new level. In some respects, buried deep within his psyche were the actual personalities of those he had come in contact with. All humans did this to some degree, for the human brain was able to model the personalities of others to such a degree that it was possible to predict that personality's future behavior. This was the best scientific explanation on how these "other" personalities could be so readily used in the dream state by the dreamer. The dreamer could utilize character details and personality traits so well defined that many people often thought of these characters as the real McCoy. It also explained the popular myth held by so many cultures that dream characters are the actual ghosts or spirits of your deceased family, or the spirits of live people "astral" traveling to visit with you.

Tammas tended to dismiss the mythic versions, accepting that dream characters were really aspects of himself, modeling what he had observed. Everything in a dream was oneself, even the table and chairs were merely self acting as table and chairs. Unfortunately, he couldn't completely dismiss the myth explanations, for it was true that he had psychic connection to others. Because of these connections, there was more going on with him than simply acting like others in his dream. What was him and what was arch-other had been a problem since conception. He had spent years building appropriate boundaries, training that first started with Deanna, and in doing so he had chosen to favor the scientific explanations for dream characters as opposed to the myths. He understood the myths, and they could be psychologically appealing at times, but the science made it a little easier to deal with the variety of perplexities that came with the subject.

Tammas unconsciously downed one of the drinks that had been left unfinished, grimaced, and then pushed back from the table. God, that was awful stuff! He was about to get up, but Ilona and Duana sat down at the table with him.

"I thought you were dead when you floored that Klingon," Ilona said.

"You floored a Klingon?" Duana asked. "And I missed it?"

“Did you arrange everything?” Ilona asked.

“Yeah,” Tammias said, frowning. He hadn’t booked travel for three.

“That waitress over there keeps staring at you,” Duana noted.

Tammias turned to look.

“Don’t encourage him,” Ilona chastised her. “We don’t have time for this.”

Tammias studied the two girls sitting across from him and took another sip of wine. He shivered. He had forgotten just how bad this was, and since the Klingons were no longer here to judge his reactions to the drink, he was less concerned about revealing them.

“You should really go easy on that stuff,” Ilona said. “You haven’t eaten in a while.”

The purple and red waitress hesitantly approached the table. Duana got up, pulling on Ilona’s arm. “Come on, give the man some privacy.”

“We don’t have time for every tramp that comes along...” Ilona protested.

“That’s not necessary,” Tammias corrected Ilona.

“What’s not necessary?” the waitress asked.

“Oh, I was just talking to my friends,” Tammias said.

“Someone on your personal communication device?” she asked.

“UH? Oh, no, um,” Tammias stuttered, turning to point to his new friends from Star Fleet Ops, only to find that they had departed. He shook his head, amazed at how quickly they could make themselves scarce. He made a mental note to ask them to teach him that trick.

“You’re Tam Garcia, aren’t you?” she asked.

“You know me?” Tammias asked.

“Oh my, like, who doesn’t know you?” she said. “May I sit with you a moment?”

“Sure,” Tammias said, indicating the chair next to him.

“Of all the bars in the universe, I just can’t believe you walked into mine,” she said.

Tammias chuckled, wondering if she knew where that line had originated. “What’s your name?”

“Karsat,” she said, the red in her face flushing even redder. “I’m off duty, but I would consider it a privilege to fetch you a better drink.”

“Well, I shouldn’t have any more drink,” Tammias said and scanned the bar.

“What I really need is something to eat, but I don’t think I’d like to eat here.”

“Oh!” Karsat said. “I would find it the greatest honor if you would allow me to prepare you a meal. I have fresh foods and I’ve heard that humans find our foods very palatable. I even have peanut butter should my foods prove unpalatable.”

“Thank you,” Tammias said, bowing slightly. “But I don’t want to be an inconvenience.”

“Please, please,” Karsat said, the brightness of the red fading so that the purple now seemed more prominent. “I’m sorry, I sound like a babbling fool, I’m sure, but it would mean a great deal to me. There’s no hiding the fact that I’m a fan of yours, and I would love the opportunity to chat with you. If it’s because I winked at you earlier, it’s because I didn’t know who you were, or I would have treated you more respectfully.”

Tammias took Karsat’s hand, using both his hands, and bowed. He nearly lost what he was about to say as he noted the qualities of her hand. It was smooth and

rubbery, like dolphin skin, and he felt the slightest hint of suction at several point along her fingers. “You have not dishonored me, and I would gladly accept your offer under normal circumstances. However, my time is short. I must be at airlock seven in about fifty two minutes, and it’s an appointment I can not be late for.”

“My flat is on peer seven, right down the corridor from that airlock!” Karsat said, bringing her free hand over to place on top of his hands.

Tammas chewed on his lower lip. “Either it’s the wine, or I really like you. I accept. But I can’t be late,” Tammas said.

“I promise, you won’t be late,” Karsat said, standing and dragging Tammas to his feet. She was much stronger than he had imagined. She practically led him out of the bar. “This is so great. None of my family or friends will ever believe I got to entertain you? Have you been on K7 long? Why have you come here? Where are you going? Do you remember that musical score you did for the holographic novel, the Warrior Code is Broken... Sorry, of course you do! That is my all time favorite piece.”

## CHAPTER TWENTYEIGHT

Deep Space K-7 was a fairly large space station, much larger than it had started out. It now consisted of a center hub, with five arms branching off. Looking down from above it, or, above the section most commonly treated as the upper deck, it resembled the Star of Sherman. The star was Sherman's adopted symbol which vaguely resembled a star, or better, if you were in touch with the days of the American old west, of Earth, it resembled a Sheriff's badge. Each of the end points of the star flared out into a reasonable sized sphere, allowing multiple ships to dock on each branch. The Pa Nun was connected to one of these arms at a right angle. This was not unusual for a ship to connect this way, but very often when this happened certain people would experience vertigo as they made the cross over and readjusted to the ship's own artificial gravity. The entry port leading to the Pa Nun was a hatch in the floor. A Person descending down the ladder into the Pa Nun would find themselves in the prone position on the floor. From there, you simply stood up, and tried not to look back into the station. Tammas wasn't usually one of those people who suffered from vertigo, so he was surprised when he experienced a moment of dizziness as he stood, looking back up the bridge to the airlock in K7's floor.

Tammas shrugged it off, squinting, wondering if he was ill or perhaps still suffering from the affects of using the Kelvan technology. Or perhaps he and Karsat had had way too much fun. Gowr appraised him, but Tammas felt confident that he had hid the vertigo well, so no one should suspect his weakness.

"Captain Glor is waiting for you on the Bridge," Gowr said, gruffly. "Follow me."

Tammas was surprised by how dark the ship was kept. There were shadows everywhere, and the lights that were used to illuminate the corridors were dim and red. A Klingon female stepped out of the shadow, nearly scaring him bad enough to jump. She smiled at him while handing Gowr a data PADD.

They made it to the Bridge in time to see the mooring lines clear. The Pa Nun eased away from the docking bridge that had made a seal around their forward hatch. It was retracting back into the station. As it moved further away, the Pa Nun began an easy slip over as it righted itself in the "Universal Up," oriented towards Galactic North, as recognized by the Federation. It was now up right in relationship to DS K7. It turned slowly, and then accelerated away.

"And what course do I set, Human?" Captain Glor asked.

Tammas didn't know how to translate the course. It had been a dream symbol in the whirlwind of information hurled at him during the interface with the Kelvan technology. He casually looked at the navigation console and felt the urge to reach out and touch it. A ghost of someone seemed to be guiding him. Without touching anything, the console burst into activity, humming with sequence activations. Tammas reconstructed the event in his mind and his explanation for the event was that he had transmitted the codes via his neural implant.

The Klingons did not interpret the event in the same manner. One drew a knife and another drew a phaser as they assumed their human was obviously an elemental. Weapon or not, they all stood and prepared themselves for battle.

"How did you that, Human?" the Captain demanded.

"I have a guardian angel," Tammas jested, realizing suddenly that humor was not the wise thing to do at this particular juncture. All he wanted to do was get out of here. "I have a neural implant which allows me to interface with your ships systems through your wireless network."

"I'll have no more of that witchery aboard my ship," Glor informed him. "State your name, Human."

The Human bit was getting old, but he was in no place to correct the Captain. After all, it was his ship, and he was hired to do a job, not to be civil. "Tammas Parkin Arblaster-Garcia."

"Welcome aboard, Human. I'll inform you when we've arrived at these coordinates," Captain Glor said. "Show him how to find his way to his quarters and the galley."

"luq lu', HoD," the officer answered.

"And the next one of you that speaks Klingon in front of our client will answer to me, is that understood?" Glor yelled.

It was very understood. Tammas was escorted to his quarters first, where he decided to take off his poncho, since he was feeling a bit warm. He hung it over a chair, and set his back pack on the floor next to it. Of course, after removing the poncho and back pack, he felt his utility belt was too awkward to be carrying around, as well as fashionably wrong in this new group. He took this off, thinking he wasn't going to need any items off of it, such as the emergency medical kit. The Klingon guide was patient. After showing him how to use the lavatory and toilet, they proceeded to the galley.

"And this is where we eat," Jo' LaH said, leading Tammas into the galley. There were several officers Tammas had met earlier present and eating, but he still didn't know their names. "We ordered some nourishment that should be eatable, even for humans."

Tammas heard the revulsion in Jo' LaH's tone.

"I will eat what you eat," Tammas said. "I expect to be treated no differently than any of you, and hope you will advise me if I do something wrong."

He said this last bit loudly enough to be over heard by those eating.

"Very well. You will know when you do something wrong," Jo' LaH promised, directing Tammas to sit at the table. "Let's eat."

Tammas sat down, shutting off the part of his brain that was rebelling at the thought of eating Klingon food. Jo' LaH introduced him to the others that hadn't been at the bar. He watched as Taging, N 'elent, and Jo' LaH helped themselves to a portion of the communal bowl. They merely grunted as they continued their meal. Tammas forced himself to follow suit, digging in to the mass of living food. He chose not to look at the food, hoping it would go down easier that way. Instead, he locked eyes with N 'elent who was watching him with more than a curious eye. She had the face only a Klingon could love, with a jagged tooth smile. The upper part of her armor accentuated her feminine attributes, in a strange Nordic sort of way. Enormous, out of proportion to the rest of her body, attributes.

"Be certain that you chew until they stop moving," Taging said. "Or they'll eat you from the inside out."

Tam's eyes grew a little in anticipation and the three Klingons at his table burst out laughing. Tammas didn't join them in their laughter. He was too busy chewing, as well as refraining from retching. Once he got past the movement, and the taste, and the

actual swallowing, it wasn't so bad. He smiled at their joke, and, feeling a bit of debris stuck between his teeth, he worked it free with his tongue and then put more in his mouth. As he chewed, he pretended he was enjoying it, and doubly hoped it was indeed a joke Tajor had made. Surely nothing would get past the stomach acid alive. They poured him a drink and set it before him. His bowl cleaned, he reached for a second helping from the communal bowl, taking a larger portion now that he knew he could tolerate it well enough. Jo' LaH laughed, and hit Tammas on the arm, nearly knocking him from his seat.

"I'll make a Klingon of you yet," Jo' LaH said.

"Or I will," N' elent offered.

Again the Klingons laughed. Tammas smiled. He heard a voice in his head say: "What the devil have you gotten yourself into, now?"

Tammas was just beginning to fool himself into believing they were all warming up to him when Gowr entered and sat opposite of him, pushing himself between Tajor and N' elent. He glowered at Tammas and took a handful from the communal bowl. Tammas wondered how he could end the hostilities between the two of them. Offering a truce would be as insulting to Gowr as offering a duel would be deadly. Showing any signs of weakness would also be dangerous. Tammas matched Gowr stare for stare, and continued to eat. He and Gowr both reached for their drink at the same time, and drank as if on cue, both looking over their cups at the other. They held their cups suspended in air for a moment, and then slammed them down simultaneously.

"You mock me, Human," Gowr challenged.

Tammas stood, leaning on the table and pushing his chair, slash stool, back. "I would rather fight beside you than with you, Gowr. Your choice."

The other three Klingons took their drinks and bowls and moved out of the way. Apparently, Tammas had just opened himself up for his first lesson in Klingon etiquette. When it comes to fighting and Klingons, never let it be "their choice," or, at least, back away from the table when you say it. The words were no sooner out of his mouth than the lesson was learned. Gowr reached over, picked Tammas up, and tossed him to the far bulkhead. Tammas had just found his legs when Gowr was suddenly on top of him. The pain forced Tammas into an altered state, adrenaline boosted his system, and he fought back hard, bringing his knee up into Gowr's groin. The tactic would have crippled any human male, but it had only given Tammas room to extricate himself from Gowr's hold. That, and it pissed Gowr off royally. Gowr recovered too quickly, and threw a clenched fist at Tam's face. Time seemed to stop, and Tammas reached up and blocked the oncoming blow, not with real strength, but with some sort of force he had never acknowledged having before. It had to have been one of the gifts, either from one of his subconscious telepathic connections, or maybe a residue of the Kelvan technology. He twisted, and pulled and tumbled Gowr over his shoulder, landing him flat on his back.

Tammas tried the foot to the neck again, but Gowr caught his foot and pushed. Tammas did a somersault in the air, one of his specialties that he had trained years on a holodeck to perfect. It was an entertainment move. It looked good in video. Only, it didn't look good this time because he landed flat on his back instead of on his feet.

Gowr recovered first, jumping and landing hard on Tammas, practically crushing him. Gowr got two blows in to Tam's head, before Tammas decided to use his head as a weapon instead of a defensive block. Tammas slammed his forehead into Gowr's nose.

Gowr rolled, and Tammas followed at first, and then twisted away just barely avoiding a fist to his face as Gowr followed him, coming up on his knees and reaching. Tammas came up standing by the table, grabbed a tray and slammed it into Gowr's head. Gowr fell, and Tammas retreated, hoping that that was that. It wasn't. Tammas had chosen the first weapon: the tray, escalating the fight. Gowr pulled out his blade. Tam's second lesson was now learned.

Tam's eyes focused on the blade and he blanked out for a moment. When he came to, he noticed the blade lodged neatly in the tray. The point of the blade was maybe a centimeter from his right eye. Tammas dropped the tray with the knife lodged in it. Gowr roared with rage and charged. Tammas ran at Gowr, only, at the last second, instead of tackling Gowr, he dived between Gowr's legs, and pulled at each ankle, causing Gowr to fly into the nearby table, breaking the table legs and collapsing it. The dinner scattered, crawling aimlessly on the walls and floor, basically where it landed it stuck and crawled off looking for its natural environment. Tammas hesitated, watching Gowr for movement. After a moment of nothing, Tammas forced himself to his feet, winded, and then went over to Gowr to check his vitals. Gowr had been faking. He elbowed Tammas in the gut. As Tammas went down to his knees, Gowr delivered another blow to Tam's face with the back of his fist. Tammas went down, flat on his back, his knees bent awkwardly. Gowr got his knife, extracting it from the tray, and crawled over to where Tammas lay.

Tammas managed to open his eyes and all he saw was the blade, maybe half an arm's length away. He focused beyond that and his eyes locked with Gowr's. Gowr's eyes were wild and opened wide. Gowr brought the knife down hard, diverting it at the last second, sparking it against the floor, and breaking the knife in two. Tammas didn't even blink.

"I will fight beside you, Tammas Garcia," Gowr said, spitting blood in Tam's face. He stood, slowly. And then limped out of the galley.

Vile filled Tam's mouth, and he forced himself to swallow his lunch again, noticing the new taste, that of his own blood. And maybe Klingon blood, too. He hoped he had the strength to at least limp out, as Gowr had done. All he had to say was, "I am not Klingon," and the others would come to his aid. As soon as the fight had been concluded, the others had returned to the tables and resumed eating.

With some effort, Tammas managed to roll over. Some moments later, he was able to push himself up to his knees. There was a pool of blood on the floor. No doubt his own. He took hold of the table top and pulled himself to his feet. From there he staggered to the door. Others had come. Possibly to verify Gowr's report that there had been a fight with the Human. They seemed disappointed to have missed it all.

Tammas could see his quarters at the end of the hall, but doubted he could make it with out using the wall as support. The corridor seemed to stretch, and rotate, and again he fought his stomach. One step at a time, he coached himself. Just one step. After what seemed like hours, he found himself in front of his door, swaying with effort to stand. The door opened and he went inside. Two more steps and the door would close. Just two more steps... He heard the door close behind him. He could collapse now. But the bed was not far, he thought, altering course slightly, hoping to make it. If you could even call it a bed. An examination table was more comfortable than these Klingon beds. He took



another step forward, and surrendered to gravity. The floor was comfortable enough, for now.



The Captain's Yacht hadn't taken the time to dock. Captain Janeway simply transported Shelby and Tuvok over to K7, while she arranged shuttle recovery for the Atlantis. It had been abandoned ten kilometers from the space station. She was tempted to simply leave it, but she knew if they left it here it would probably disappear for good, given the type of patrons that frequented the place. Her job was made easier by the fact that there was a Star Fleet Officer vacationing on K7. It took her a while to get him on line, but she got her message to him, and he agreed to take the shuttle back to the nearest Fleet base, when he was through with his recreation.

Tuvok reported in shortly after. "The station logs show that someone transported onto the station about two hours ago. This person did not go through customs. I suspect it was Garcia, for the time matches the shuttle's record of an emergency beam out."

"Did they search the station for an intruder?" Janeway asked.

"They claim so, but I am not impressed with their efficiency," Tuvok reported.

"I understand," Janeway said.

Meanwhile, Shelby was in the rougher section of the station, thinking this is where Mackenzie would go if he wanted to hire mercenary types. She couldn't understand how there could be so much smoke in one section. Either the patrons were creating it faster than the air filters could take it out, or the air filters were simply not up to par with health codes. Or perhaps they had turned the air system off. In addition to smoke, the air was stale, and thick with the smells of assorted non human creatures, enough to make anyone's eyes water. Of course, she liked the smoke least of all. The bio-odors she could forgive, but the obvious abuses to health being committed to self and others were less tolerable. The smoke gave her flashbacks to the final moments of the Chance.

Still, Shelby had a job to do. To make sure Garcia wasn't in the bar, she was going to have to walk from one side to the other and in between the tables. A hand reached out to pinch her and the patron immediately regretted his action. He lay on the floor with a broken arm. She continued on, unimpeded.

A waitress approached her. She was having a good day, and felt rather sociable. "Hey, I don't suppose you could teach me that, could you?"

"Teach you what?" Shelby asked, continuing to scan the faces around her.

"What you just did," she said, indicating the man with the broken arm that was being escorted out by his friends.

"I really don't have the time," Shelby said. "I'm looking for someone."

"Oh," the waitress said. "Well, there's not much to choose from out of this lot, but to each their own."

"No," Shelby said. "I'm looking for someone specific. A human."

"Oh, we don't get many humans in here," she said. "You're only the second one today."

"Tell me about him," Shelby said. "Was he wearing a Star Fleet uniform?"

"No, he wasn't that type," the waitress said.

"What do you mean by that type?" Shelby said.

“Nothing personal, Star Fleet, but he just didn’t fit the profile,” the waitress said. “For starters, he talked to himself.”

“You mean, he was using a communicator?” Shelby asked.

“No, I think he was carrying on a full fledge conversation with someone who wasn’t there,” the waitress said. “Crazy as a loon. He actually went up to a Klingon and started a fight.”

“He started a fight with a Klingon?” Shelby repeated, wondering if they were indeed speaking of the same person.

“I told you he was crazy,” the waitress said.

“Do you know where he went?” Shelby asked.

The waitress snorted. “Yeah.”

Shelby waited to be filled in, and after a moment of no info, she prompted the waitress. “Tell me where he went?”

“What’s it to you? Are you this guy’s wife? Did he break the law?” the waitress asked.

“It’s important. He requires medical attention,” Shelby said.

“He left with Karsat, another waitress that works here. She seemed to think he was someone famous. I told her no one famous would ever come in here,” the waitress said. “She’s one of those girls that actually believes Kirk came in here once and started a fist fight with a whole squad of Klingon Honor guards.”

“Where did she take him?” Shelby interrupted her.

“Knowing Karsat, probably back to her place,” the waitress said, sneering.

“Where does she live?” Shelby asked, the level of frustration beginning to show.

“You know, I’m starting not to like you,” the waitress said. “She’s a fellow employee, I can’t just give out the addresses. But, you look like a smart kid, I suppose you know how to use the public registry. She’ll be the only Karsat on the station.”

Shelby turned and left. Once outside the bar, she found the nearest computer access and looked up Karsat. As soon as she had the information, she tapped her com. Badge. “Tuvok. Meet me at peer seven, section four. Room, seven three three. I’m on my way there now.”

“Understood,” Tuvok acknowledged her call.

It just so happened that Tuvok intercepted her at the Tubrolift and they rode up to peer seven together. He did not look pleased.

“The station’s security leaves a lot to be desired,” Tuvok said.

“Yeah, and there are flagrant health code violations,” Shelby said. “The waitress said he was talking to himself. Is this one of those symptoms of Pon Farr?”

“Symptoms vary from person to person, and situation to situation,” Tuvok said.

The lift opened and they proceeded down the corridor, checking numbers as they went. In order to keep pace with Tuvok, Shelby had to keep slowing down. This was not lost on Tuvok.

“Are you anxious?” Tuvok asked.

“I just want to make sure we get to him,” Shelby said.

Tuvok stopped. Shelby kept going, stopped, and came back. “What?” she asked. He pointed to the door.

“Right,” Shelby said. She pounded on the door. “Open up. Star Fleet.”

Tuvok raised an eyebrow. “We don’t have authority here,” Tuvok pointed out.

“She might not know that,” Shelby said, pushing the button beside the door several times in a row.

“Who is she?” Tuvok asked.

“Some waitress flu-zee, I don’t know,” Shelby said, pounding the door.

“Just a moment,” came a response from a side speaker.

Shelby waited a moment and then pushed the button several more times.

The door slid open to reveal a young lady wearing only an over sized t-shirt. She yawned, covering her mouth. “I said just a moment. I was sleeping and I had to put something on.”

“Are you Karsat?” Shelby asked. “A waitress at Nilz bar?”

“Yeah,” she said, totally uninterested. She hummed a little song to herself as she pulled a self igniting cigarette from her pack beside the door.

“Is Tam here?” Shelby demanded, waving the smoke out of her face.

Karsat came full awake. One hand went to her hip, and the other to the door frame, as if she were preventing them from peering past her into her one room flat. The cigarette seemed like a dangerous weapon in the hands of a child, ashes falling to the floor. “Are you his wife?”

“No, I’m not his wife,” Shelby snapped. “Why is everyone asking me that?”

“Well, we know how protective human females are over their males,” Karsat said, blowing smoke rings above her head. “It’s usually just polite to ask before a fight ensues, so we at least know why we’re fighting.”

“I’m not here to fight you,” Shelby said.

“You sound rather adversarial to me,” Karsat pointed out.

Shelby sighed. “Look, we’re looking for Tammias Garcia, is he here?”

“No,” Karsat said.

“Was he here?” Tuvok asked, taking over for Shelby who seemed to be too busy dealing with her emotions. “We’re concerned about his health status.”

Karsat chuckled. “He seemed pretty healthy to me,” she said. “He’s the first human who I ever met who can out endure me.”

“Where did he go?” Shelby said, taking over for Tuvok who suddenly seemed unwilling to ask any further questions.

“Well, here’s the thing, I didn’t ask,” Karsat answered, blowing smoke.

“You didn’t ask?” Shelby was amazed. “You invite a perfectly, complete stranger over to your flat for who knows what, but you don’t ask where’s he going when he suddenly leaves?”

“First of all, though Tammias is indeed perfect, he is not a complete stranger,” Karsat argued. “I’ve been listening to his music since I was a kid. Second, I knew he had a time constraint before he came over, so I didn’t expect him to stay. And third, well, he is an adult and a rather busy one at that...”

“I’d say,” Shelby interrupted. “He didn’t give you a clue?”

Karsat sighed. “I do know he was leaving on a ship that was docked at airlock seven. Does that help you any?”

Shelby and Tuvok turned and headed down the corridor.

“His ship departed half an hour ago,” Karsat yelled after them.

Shelby and Tuvok stopped. Shelby’s head dropped. Tuvok tapped his communicator pin. “Tuvok to Janeway. Beam us out.”

“Hey, if you catch up to him, tell Tam...” Karsat called after them. But they were gone and didn’t hear the remainder of the message. Karsat closed her door, extinguished the cigarette in a tray, and went back to bed, singing a little song.



On the bridge of the Pa Nun, things were quiet. The crew worked, and Captain Glor stared out into space, his eyes drifting as if he might fall asleep. Though his ship was more orderly than most mercenary ships for hire, it was not the well disciplined ship one might find flying for the Klingon Empire. Glor was pushing the envelope in age and would soon have to face the reality that his authority would be challenged. He would be replaced, just like the Captain before him. Death was simply a fact of life. He preferred it that way, as opposed to retiring and becoming increasingly more dependant on others and technology to care for him. Sure, he could sit around telling war stories, but the kids these days would rather be off making their own stories, and most of those in the fiction played out through holographic games, than sit around listening to real live adventures.

"Captain," H'llot broke the silence. "We're being followed."

Captain Glor sat up suddenly and looked around, full alert. He felt his adrenalin levels rising as he enjoyed the thrill of a potential conflict. "Is the cloaking device engaged?" Glor asked.

"Affirmative, Captain." H'llot verified.

"Then it is chance," Glor said.

"It is too coincidental for chance," H'llot said, and wished he had phrased it differently.

Glor refrained from his usual rebuke and scratched his chin. "What type of ship?"

"Federation signature. I don’t recognize the class. It’s small," H'llot informed him. "It would be no match for us."

"If it is chance, we will know soon enough," Glor said. "How far are we from the neutral zone?"

"Ten minutes away, Captain," H'llot said.

"Very good. Stray a little. If they follow us into the neutral zone, then we will know for certain it is not coincidence," Glor said.

"And if they do?"

"Then we will destroy them!" Glor practically sang.

"Aye, Captain," H'llot agreed.



"Five minutes to the neutral zone, Captain," Tuvok announced.

"Well, are we going to pursue?" Shelby asked.

"Shelby, bring us out of warp," Janeway ordered. Though she suspected she had leeway to go after Garcia, straying into the neutral zone at this time was not a wise thing to do. Just being this close was risking a Romulan encounter. "Vector us along the neutral zone. Tuvok, try raising the Enterprise and let her know where we are. Shelby, scan the area for any signs of ships or other activity."

"Captain?" Tuvok said. "Deep Space K7 just put out a distress signal. They’re being attacked."

"Bring us around," Janeway ordered. "Best speed back to K 7."



Selar woke to the prodding of two young Vulcan girls. A third entered the room, carrying a tray with drinks on it. This last one was the eldest of the three. She sat down on the floor and began to pour tea in a ceremonial way.

Selar stood, bowed, and sat down on the floor. She had immediately recognized the eldest. Everyone on Vulcan knew her. She was Princess Simone, great grand daughter of T’Pau. It now seemed obvious to Selar why the Kelvan’s had kidnapped her. She was one of the strongest telepaths on Vulcan, with skills in telekinesis, healing, remote viewing, and, so some believed, the ability to predict the future. She would one day take over for T’Pau, carrier of T’Pau’s Katra, as T’Pau had done with her great grandmother and so on for as far back as there were written records. It was a line that could be traced back to the original Vulcan colonist that had settled on Vulcan. Simone’s loss to the community had been incredibly devastating since none of T’Pau’s other grand children were near as competent in the psionic arts as Simone. It would take decades to find a replacement, someone with talent that could be trained, and there was belief that T’Pau might not make it another decade. The loss of her line, both genetically speaking, as well as psychically would be tremendous.

"We're sorry for having woken you, but the Lord Emperor has demanded that we all be awake for the coming battle," Simone said. "He has access to more power if we're all awake. He will to succeed in conquering the Romulan Empire. I hear he has coordinated some diversionary attacks to be carried out on the Federation, to keep them from entering the fray before the appropriate time. I remember you. Selar, correct? I was witness to your second wedding."

"You honor me with your memory," Selar said. "How does our host tap our powers?"

"The bracelets," one of the others answered, simultaneously with the Princess. She was young, but she realized her mistake and looked down, an expression that demonstrated she recognized her own mistake. Simone continued, "Every new chosen increases his abilities exponentially. This wasn't explained to you?"

"Not really," Selar said.

"It doesn't matter," Simone said, comforting the closest Vulcan child by touching her head. The girl had been born here eight months after her mother had been abducted. She was now four and half years old. "It matters not what we know, or what we do. We are unable to prevent what is happening. We can come and go within the confines of the compound, but we can not leave. Can you give me news about my grand mother?"

"T’Pau is well, as far as I know," Selar said. "I'm afraid that your spouse died of a heart attack a week after you were abducted."

"I know," Simone said. "It is true for all the Vulcans present here. We were forced to sever the bonds to our mates and we watched helplessly as they died."

"I have not experienced this," Selar said.

Simone seemed genuinely surprised. "Leave us alone," she instructed her associates. They departed so quickly a human observer might have thought they were scared for their lives. Simone leaned into Selar. "I must have your thoughts."

To refuse the Princess this request, even in the best of situations, was tantamount to treason. For all intensive purposes, she was the living representative for T’Pau in this place, and would be considered the government. Selar leaned closer to Simone, bowing her head. Simone was such a strong telepath that it wasn't necessary to touch Selar, but

she did anyway, bringing their minds together so quickly that Selar didn't even feel the transition. Before she was Selar, and then, she was Simone, for Simone was obviously the dominant personality. Selar would never be quite the same again, for there would be merging attributes that both would share, but for now, she kept herself calm as she experienced a new perspective on life.

Simone could feel the flow of energies branching out away from Selar. There were four paths, which was about average for a Vulcan unless they were in a mental health care capacity, or another field which required heavy use of mind melds. Selar's two secondary paths led Simone to Selar's parents, who in turned branched to other family members. Family bonds were the most common of bonds, followed next by friends, and the fewest bonds were of acquaintances. It was a dynamic network of living family and friends with connection waxing and waning through time. For every Vulcan, though, there was one primary connection, the one that connected them to their spouse. At seven years old, at the earliest stage before the onset of puberty, they would be bonded. It was extremely rare for there not to be a primary Bond, and even rarer for there to be two Primary Bonds, but for Selar, there were indeed two.

Simone's awareness was passive, an observer drifting along the currents of thought, for to actively transfer thoughts might draw undue attention to the fact that Selar's had not been purged of her links. Ultimately, if you followed enough of the telepathic links, not only could you make a circle and come back to where you started, but you could account for every living Vulcan. It was one reason why deaths affected Vulcans so strongly. Just losing one member could tear a large enough whole in the web of their consciousness that it felt like a gaping wound in the physical body. The more bonds the individual was privy to at the moment of death, the greater the sense of loss. One death could sever a dozen connections, but a hundred deaths, like losing a starship manned completely by Vulcans, was like losing an arm, or a leg. The parental bond was formed at conception, but the bond between Selar and Voltak, Selar's spouse, was created at the age of seven in a marriage ceremony when two families agreed to come together through their children. The fourth bond connected Garcia and Selar. Simone knew of this bond, for she had been witness to the event. She felt ambivalence about Tammias. On the one hand, he lacked the mental disciplines that she believed all sentient beings should share. He was reckless, selfish, promiscuous, emotional, insatiable, loud, arrogant, flighty, obnoxious, and, well, she could go on with negative qualities, even to the point of seeing conflicting attributes. On the other hand, he had a good family line, friends of worthy praise, and a network of telepathic bonds that rivaled even hers. Could this explain some of his issues? Simone wondered. He was definitely an enigma.

Simone saw something she hadn't expected and nearly cried out. She could sense T'Pau, her grandmother. She knew Tam had been in a ceremony guided by her grandmother, but she hadn't realized Tammias had a telepathic link to T'Pau. "How could her grand mother have allowed such a thing to happen?" she asked herself. As she relaxed and allowed her impulse to contact T'Pau fade, she began to see with more clarity. It wasn't a direct link, but rather, it was one person removed. But why was the link so strong? Oh, there it was. Two people directly linked to T'Pau were linked with Tammias. She followed the paths and discovered the connections were through McCoy

and Spock. She knew of McCoy, had seen him at the Selar Garcia marriage, but she hadn't given his importance in the scheme of things any attention.

McCoy had once carried Spock's Katra, and T'Pol had mind melded with him, at great risk to herself and McCoy, in an effort to separate Spock and McCoy's minds. Not only had T'Pol managed to separate the minds of McCoy and Spock, but she had managed to return Spock's mind back to his body. A body that had been somehow rejuvenated. It was a procedure that had not been done in several millennia, and there had been some ethical dilemmas for T'Pol. For example, the newly rejuvenated body of Spock had also developed a new mind. True, it was the mind of an infant in an adult's body, but there were questions about its right to live over the deceased's to its body. In this instance, that developing personality had been fused into the old Spock identity, so technically that consciousness wasn't lost, it was just subdued for the greater experience that was known as Spock. It was still there, but Spock was dominant. Simone wondered if it was that fusion of minds that had made it possible for the Spock katra to be reabsorbed back into its body at all.

Simone was suddenly aware of how much time she had allowed herself to dwell on these issues. It was unimportant. The only thing she needed to know was the manner of their relatedness. They were forever connected, and it was amazing to her, how delicate, but intricate this pattern was. The fact that all people are connected more closely than they would ever know rang more true to Simone in that instant than she had ever thought possible. She had heard mathematicians state that everyone is separated by only six degrees of separation from every other living being. Such was the network of life. How marvelous it was not just to believe that philosophically, but to experience it directly. How awesome. At the ceremony joining Garcia and Selar, Garcia had said something to the effect of having been touched by greatness. In truth, they all were all equally touched.

Simone realized again that she had just gone on a tangent, something she hadn't ever done before. She blamed it on the Garcia connection. "They may have over looked you by accident," Simone said, presently, using her voice. Selar's voice operated simultaneously and in unison with Simone. "I may be able to suppress it, to hide the bond you share with Voltak. It will be his best chance for survival should they notice you have not been purged of your bonds."

"Proceed," Selar agreed in thought, an echo that seemed miles away from where she was.

"If they probe your mind, though, I will not be able to hide Garcia's mind from them. He is like a lone actor spotlighted on a darkened stage. The Kelvan are looking for him," Simone said. "I will transfer his bond to me. You will no longer be obligated to carry this burden."

Not a burden, Selar tried. His permission...

"His permission is irrelevant. I do this to save him and to save us. He's coming for you," Simone said. "We must be ready. We may only have one shot at freedom."

When Simone finally let go, Selar immediately noticed the absence of Garcia from her mind. No, not quite an absence, for a telepathic touch could never be one hundred percent eradicated. There would always be something, but for now, it was a noticeable absence. She nearly had a "feeling" of loss, but she squashed it, as any true Vulcan would. What had transpired had been a logical course of action. It had been

logical for her to save Garcia and Persis by taking on the bond, and it was logical now in giving it up to Simone. It is logical, Selar assured herself.



## CHAPTER TWENTYNINE

Tammas woke, stirred by the throbbing pain in his head. A familiar smell haunted him. Tea with T’Pau. It didn’t make sense, but focusing on that seemed to make his head hurt less. He tried to get up, but found he hadn’t the strength. He could only see through one eye, but sight was impaired even with that one. From where he lay on the floor, he could barely see his poncho. On top of that he had placed his utility belt with the emergency medical pouch attached. He whimpered at how far away it seemed. He even reached out to it with his hand, like a child reaching for a toy, and willed it to fly to him. Nothing happened. Had this been a simulation on the holodeck, he could have made it come to him by using his neuro implant to direct the computer to move the object. Or if he had access to Kelvan technology, maybe then he could get it, but since this was real life, it would take more than thought to overcome inertia, he decided. There was nothing more to do about it. He had to go to it. He needed to be in perfect health for what was to come.

Tammas pushed all thoughts from his head but his goal. He pulled himself along the floor, his breath coming out in erratic rhythms. Again, his memory returned to his tea with T’Pau. The furniture was ornate and uncomfortable, the kind that you wouldn’t use to entertain common guest, or ever use if you had children. Her granddaughter Simone approached, whispered something to T’Pau, and then turned and slapped Garcia hard across the face.

That wasn’t a memory, he told himself. He must have started to fall off into a dream again. He looked up to see that he was still halfway to his goal compared to where he had started. He took a rest, still focused at the part of the belt hanging down off the chair. Again he reached for it, just barely beyond his grasp. It seemed to sway, as if it were being blown by an intermittent fan. Swaying. Maybe this was a dream, but then, it didn’t feel like a dream. “Am I dreaming?” he asked, doing a test for lucidity. He needed it to be a dream. Oh, how wonderful, he thought, it would be to wake up back home in his bed at the Academy. Tammas stretched a little further. The end of the belt went taught, pointing towards him. He pushed the questions from his head and focused. The belt came to his hand and he pulled it the rest of the way towards him, not with muscle strength, but with the weight of his arm gone limp. He toppled the chair in the process. The top rung on the back of the chair clobbered him on the back of the head. It didn’t do any serious damage, but it did make him aware of just how much pain he was in. The chair falling over and hitting him would never have happened in a dream, or even one of his games on the holodeck. It wouldn’t have happened to any of his heroes in the novels he wrote, or to the heroes he knew in real life, like McCoy, Riker, or Picard. This was obviously real life. His life.

The fact that it was real life, though, made it more difficult for him to understand what had happened. He had never experienced telekinesis before. What had changed? What was new in his life? He was in so much pain that he couldn’t focus on the question further. He knew he wouldn’t be able to figure anything out in his current condition. As it was, he had to struggle just to open the medical pouch and retrieve the tissue regenerator. He noticed the tremor in his hands, not a good sign.

Tammas found the instrument laid his head down on the floor. He could see it, his hand resting on top of it, but he just wanted to go back to sleep. Of course, that wouldn’t have been wise. The wisest course of action would be to call for help and

declare he wasn't Klingon. He activated the tissue regenerator and brought it closer to his head. The swelling in his eye began to recede. The dizziness went away, followed by most of the pain. He deactivated the unit as soon as he could see clearly with both eyes again.

Tammas rested for a moment while taking a mental inventory of his body. With some effort he took some deep breaths, relieved that he could think a little more clearly, but he was still distressed by the amount of pain just breathing caused him. He didn't remember having retrieved his medical kit and constructed a scenario to explain his current condition. Obviously he had had a fight with a Klingon, and he had come here to get his medical kit, and then he had passed out. Well, now that he was awake, it was a simple enough plan to simply go about healing his wounds.

He activated the medical device, healing the two broken, and one cracked, ribs. As soon as that had been accomplished, he could breathe without the stabbing pains in his chest. It had settled to a mild discomfort. He held the unit over his spleen, hoping the damage there hadn't been severe. He held it over his arm, and then sat up and healed his legs. He took inventory with the tricorder and fixed everything that he hadn't caught in his general sweep. He sighed with relief, his body shivering uncontrollably for a moment as if trying to shake off the memory of being injured.

He stood, uneasily, but he stood. There was still some residual pain, more memory than actual, and he would be stiff for a couple days while he stretched the new muscle tissue that had been generated. He passed the unit over his stomach, and the pain eased some there. After a moment of no substantial decrease in discomfort, he finally decided that the majority of his stomach pains were coming from his recent inhuman diet. That was something the tissue regenerator wouldn't be able to cure. He hoped none of those things were still alive... Could he have just regenerated them? No... Digestion would have already eliminated that possibility.

Tam's face was still bruised, and he could still taste blood on his lips. His nose felt out of place and extremely sensitive to the touch, but if he walked out there in front of the Klingons totally healed, they would think... What would they think? Who cares what they think? Physician, heal thyself! But Tammas resisted the urge to be perfectly healed. He reassembled the medical pouch, connected it back to his belt, stood the chair up, and sat down on the floor. There were no mirrors so that he might examine Gowr's handiwork. His hands were still shaking badly, but the tricorder assured him that it had nothing to do with his injuries.

The door opened and N' elent entered.

"What do you want?" Tammas demanded. He could get away with a greeting like that on a Klingon ship. Had it been Deanna, she would have boxed his ears. Selar would have... He clenched his fist in an attempt to control the shaking. What would Selar have done?

"I was just passing by and thought I would check on you..." N' elent began. "Are you well?"

"I'm fine," Tammas said, grouchy. "Get out."

"Perhaps it is too warm in here for you, human. You're sweating badly..."

"I said I'm fine..."

"You might be ill. Perhaps it was the dinner," N' elent pressed.

Tammas stood. Would he have to prove to her that he was not lying when he said he was fine, or that he wanted her out? "I am fine. Leave me to enjoy my pain in solitude."

"You fought well," N' elent added.

"Get out!" Tammas yelled, and at the same time struck her as hard as he had hit Gowr.

Her face turned with the blow. She slowly turned her head back to face him and flexed it suddenly, making a popping sound as if she had popped a knuckle. No, it was more like the sound of someone crushing a plastic cup in their hand. She reached up to touch the blood he had drawn from her lip. She examined it, a growl emanating first from her chest, rising to part her teeth, flaring her nose. Before Tammas could think twice about what he had done, she had picked him up and slammed him hard against the far wall, pinning him there, his feet dangling in the air. She lowered him down, and pushed herself against him, their lips meeting, their blood mixing. From the moment she touched him, it was all over but the crying. Some time later, Tammas woke beside her, horror rising into his throat along with the memory of the bad tasting lunch.

Tammas fell off the bed and went for his clothes. He had new hurts that he could only imagine how he got... and he didn't want to use that skill. He slipped on his shirt and it stuck to the wetness of his back, which he knew was his own blood. He slipped his pants on, and was tucking in his shirt when N' elent roused.

"I did not have to make you a Klingon," N' elent said. "You already were..."

"There seems to be a little bit of everyone inside me," Tammas complained more to himself than anyone else.

N'elent patted the bed, inviting him to sit by her. He swallowed, and did as she requested. At this point, there was no need to be rude, he thought. She was a remarkable... Klingon? Was woman appropriate, or was that restricted to human females? Her breath was bad, but only in comparison to human breath and expectations. Perhaps it was her biology, or her diet, or the natural flora that lived in her mouth, but it was certainly not what most humans would accept as healthy. Ferrets smelled good comparatively. The memory of her taste stirred a chill down his back. An acquired taste? Her nostril flared as she took in air, as if she were making a memory of her own. She kissed and bit his lip at the same time. He with-drew, and she laughed at his sudden reticence.

"Perhaps you are someone else this morning and not my lover..." N' elent asked.

My lover? Tam's heart skipped a beat.

"How do you know so much? Where did you learn Klingon? Who taught you our code of ethics?" N'elent asked.

"I have a friend... A Klingon a friend. She taught me some. Also I recently took a crash course in basic Klingoneese. There was a rumor that I was to be transferred to the Wolverine, a Klingon-Federation Starship, which is getting its commission. They were supposed to be a medical ship... Strange. Can you imagine a Klingon Doctor treating humans? 'Be still, human, while I set this joint. No, it won't hurt at all.' Their bedside manner alone would put most humans in shock."

"I'm glad you like my bedside manner," N'elent said, biting him on the arm...

The door chime sounded, saving him from having to respond to her advances. He didn't know how to respond to her this morning. Or, perhaps he just didn't want to. Not

again... Not so soon. I'm too tired, he thought. He was surprised to find that he would ever admit to being "too tired" for ritualized companionship, as Selar would put it.

"You didn't invite your friend, did you?" Tammias asked, suddenly grimacing at the thought. Were Klingons really that barbaric? And who am I to talk, he begged the question.

N' elent finished laughing, rolling so that she pinned Tammias back down to the bed in frivolous play, sitting on top of him, naked and unashamed. "You would like that, uh? You can dream, but she belongs to the Captain. She will not come here. Unless you kill him first..."

The door opened, and the Captain's female walked in, looked at N' elent with mirth in her eyes, and focused back on Tammias. N'elent seemed somewhat surprised by her friend's boldness, as well as for being proved wrong about who would and would not come to Tam's quarters.

"Captain Glor wants you on the Bridge, Tammias Garcia," she said, turned and left.

"You better hurry," N' elent said, allowing Tammias to get up.

Tammias put on his utility belt and then slipped on his poncho. N' elent rose from the bed to offer him one more pet before he left the room, goosing him over the threshold. She told him to run. He ran all the way, hitting the Bridge at full speed, sliding to a halt. The captain, who was pacing impatiently, spun, and landed his boot into Tam's chest, slamming him back into the instrument panel where he slid to a sitting position on the floor.

"When I send for you, I expect you to arrive before the messenger, Tammias Garcia!" Glor said.

Tammias remained seated on the floor, leaning against the instrument panel, eyes down cast. All the work he had done repairing himself had probably just been undone, but for once it didn't matter. He had just moved up in the world, accepted by his new Klingon family. He knew he was accepted because the Captain hadn't addressed him as "Human." In fact, they were all using his name. He sat there until the Captain ordered him to his feet. Tammias stood, every one watching what he'd do, but not being obvious about it. He saw the coordinates had changed.

"This isn't where we're supposed to be," Tammias protested, moving closer to confirm what he had just translated.

"We have made a slight detour," Glor said.

Tammias rounded on the Captain. "No, Sir. I'm paying for this expedition, and therefore I say where we go and when!"

No one questioned Tam's right to protest, but everyone suddenly found something new and interesting to do at their respective stations. Captain Glor growled and turned to Tammias. He needed a new tactic and approach, or there was going to be another fight.

"What is so important that you have taken me a thousand light years out of my way?" Tammias demanded.

"We intercepted an Emergency Romulan Communiqué," the Captain explained. "There is a Romulan Armada in Federation space and they're calling for back up! I wanted to investigate this threat."

Tammias turned to the main viewer. The Pa Nun was drifting amongst an asteroid field, pointed sun-wards, towards an average star. In addition to being cloaked, their

unlikely position would add to their chances of not being accidentally discovered. Sensors tracked over forty vessels of various sizes converging on the third planet. There was a small moon that seemed to be the center of their focus. If it was the Romulan Fleet, it was a rag tag fleet at best. They must have put every ounce of their resources together to get this many ships all in one place. That meant they were either vulnerable back at home, or this was just an excursionary force, a prelude of things to come.

"You're right," Tammias conceded. "If the threat is this big, then we should be ready to warn the Federation."

"If the threat is big enough, we will eliminate it, Tammias Garcia," Captain Glor said.

Tammias dazed out, his awareness drifting to some source of power near by. He could almost hear a voice, but it was only vaguely familiar. It was definitely not Selar's voice, but he knew it somehow. It was a voice expressing concern and warning.

"What's wrong?" Glor laughed. "Did I hit you too hard?"

Tammias came around as Gowr announced a new phenomena in the system.

"Detecting a magnetic anomaly," Gowr began. "Growing in intensity... Sir! A planetoid just appeared out of no-where."

"On screen," Glor ordered.

The planetoid was a huge asteroid cut smooth on two sides so that a city could rise from the top and bottom. It was a cluster of buildings, with the central building being the tallest. The bottom city was a mirror image of the upper city. An annular force field domed both sides of planetoid locking an atmosphere against the planetoids surface, but allowing objects such as ships and missiles to pass freely through from either direction. As Tammias took it in, though, he realized it wasn't just a city. That was the Kelvan mother ship, either by Kelvan design or by fortune, and it was the mother of all Kelvan ships in the Milky Way Galaxy.

"That's why we're here!" Tammias shouted, pointing at the object. "Magnify. Um, please."

"Breathable atmosphere," Gowr noted as he listed the attributes of the planetoid. He described it as well as he could with out performing an active scan, which would have alerted everyone in this sector to their presence.

The Romulan Fleet was making course adjustments to intercept. Arming their weapon systems, they dropped into attack formations, coming in at it from different angles. They didn't go very far, however, before suddenly, and dramatically against all known laws of physics, the entire forward section of the Romulan Armada came to an abrupt stand still in relationship to the planetoid they were preparing to attack. The second wave soon came to a halt as well, as they entered the same zone of influence. The third and fourth waves veered off to regroup. For the immobilized vessels, it was as if a giant hand had reached out and stopped the ships in mid flight. Every ship showed the tell-tale signs of having lost all power with the exception of life support.

"What hit them?" Glor demanded, standing. He had been looking forward to watching the display of force.

"Unknown, sir... They've just stopped, dead in space!" Gowr said. "Something new on the scanner... Yes. Tracking missiles from the remaining outer Romulan ships. They'll make contact with the planetoid in twenty seconds... Sir, they're gone!"

Tammas reached out and grabbed the Captain's arm and Glor nearly killed him for doing so, but Tammas had that dazed look on his face as before, when the planetoid had just made its appearance. The Commander was suddenly concerned for his clients well being. Tammas came around, looking up into the Captain's eyes, sorry for his transgression, but determined to save them.

"Shields up!" Tammas yelled. "Bring us around to heading four point one, and best speed out of here..."

"What?!" The Captain demanded, shoving Tammas away. "Run before even engaging the enemy? I give the orders here!"

"Sir! Missiles have returned. Sixteen kilometers off the starboard bow, matter, anti-matter detonation in ten seconds..."

"Shields up! Hard to port. Get us out of here, Gowr!" Glor yelled.

They had just cleared the asteroid field when the missiles started to detonate. Tammas grabbed hold of the railing as Glor took refuge in his command chair. The Captain's chair spun towards the tactical officer as if on purpose. The others fell over their stations, holding on for dear life. N'elent grabbed Tam's arm to steady him.

"Damage report!" Glor asked.

"Negligible," N'elent answered. "All systems functioning..."

"Bring us around to heading twelve point six," Glor said. "Load all torpedo bays..."

"We can't go back in there," Tammas said.

"Coward!" Glor yelled.

"No sir!" Tam argued. "Look, we're facing an enemy who can not only teleport missiles out of his way, but can move his entire base by teleportation. He's incapacitated more than half of the entire Romulan fleet. If you take us in now we'll be just as dead in space as they are and a warrior can't fight if he can't move!"

There was silence on the Bridge.

"What do you suggest?" Glor asked, almost too quiet, leaning a little closer to Tammas.

"Let the Romulans exhaust themselves first," Tammas said. "Then we'll bid our time, see what happens next, and plan our initiative. The enemy is bound to become over confident and careless. They won't expect us coming in from behind..."

Glor seemed impressed. Tam's thoughts seemed reasonable enough. And gauging by his crew's reactions, they seemed to be agreeing with Tam's assessment. Cohesion was the best part of any team, and since no one seemed to want to argue Tam's position, then it was probably best to examine it further.

"What is this teleportation?" N'elent asked.

"It's the ability to move objects from one point to another, instantaneously, without moving it through space-time, as we know it," Tammas said.

"Like the transporter?" Gowr asked.

"No," Tammas said. "The transporter turns your mass into energy and transmits that energy through space and then converts it back into matter. Teleportation is instantaneous site to site relocation without any movement through the space time continuum."

"This is impossible," Glor said, dismissing it with a wave of his hand.

"No. Theoretically, according to quantum mechanics, quite possible," Tammias argued. "And we've just witnessed it. And, I expect, if we don't stop these guys here, we aren't going to stop them at all, ever. The Federation will fall just as easy as that Romulan fleet."



Admiral McCoy appeared on the transporter pad. On the next pad over from him was a young lady wearing a simple jump suit, with a black belt. On her arm she wore a wrist band, with the most obvious feature being a single button, looking very much like the button on the Kelvan device that Tammias had used to immobilize the Enterprise crew. Worf put himself in front of the Captain, a defensive posture that would give him a chance to grab her arm and prevent activation of the device. Had she reached for it, he would have jerked her arm completely out its socket.

"At ease, Lt.," Picard said. "Admiral McCoy?"

"Jean Luc," McCoy said. "I would like to introduce you to Kelinda."

"The original Kelinda?" Picard asked, amazed.

She nodded, and even smiled pleasantly at Worf. "We haven't much time. The Romulan Fleet is headed into an ambush."

"What sort of ambush?" Picard asked.

"Must I go through this again?" Kelinda asked.

"I assure you, we are currently headed to the coordinates provided to us by the Admiral," Picard said. "Fifteen other starships will rendezvous with us before we reach those coordinates."

"Very well," Kelinda said. "This plan of Rojan has been eighty years in the making, and is just now coming to fruition. A planetary system had to be found and seeded. The technology had to be developed, pieced together, and the essential people brought in. The final piece will be the Romulan Fleet. As you know, the Romulan Warbird's power system is a Forced Quantum Singularity. When the ships are aligned in a particular pattern, the tetrayon emissions will harmonically resonate with the natural formations and specifically placed artifacts within the system. Rojan will then direct a concentrated psychic burst of energy through these formations and artifacts, which will then direct the energy into the focal point. The results are that he will literally punch a whole through the fabric of space time, connecting the Andromeda Galaxy to the Milky Way via a stable wormhole. This will facilitate the evacuation of the Kelvan race from their dying galaxy to this one."

"And what do you propose we do about it?" Picard asked.

"Take out a piece of the puzzle. Destroy the Romulan Fleet," Kelinda said.

"Why would Rojan do this?" Picard asked. "Kirk welcomed you in peace."

"Could you sit back on the eve of humanity and do nothing to prolong the night?" Kelinda asked.

"Perhaps not, but I know there are better ways. The Federation has offered you resources and friendship," Picard said. "If your people could be made to understand that we would welcome them as friends..."

"You still just don't get it," Kelinda said. "And perhaps I have stayed in this human form too long, because I find the Kelvan way so far removed from me, that I am certain I am alien. I am neither human, nor Kelvan, and my children are even further removed from what I once knew and held to be true that we can't even share meaningful

discourse on the nature of life. My descendants are evolving, and will never know what it is to be Kelvan. Rojan is dedicated to preserving our heritage. And the only way he can see doing that is by bringing our species here. There will be no peace between our peoples. Only conquest. Just as your species would have never negotiated a peace between yourselves and whales four hundred years ago, neither would my race negotiate with you. At best, they will treat you like pets. At worse, you'll be treated as cattle."

"Any word from Janeway?" McCoy asked.

Picard shook his head, not sure how much Kelinda knew about Garcia.

"So, my grandchild is in play," Kelinda said. "Perhaps we put too much hope in him. He could have been the link that united the Human Kelvan spirit."

"He's proven rather resourceful to date," McCoy offered.

"True," Kelinda said. "He does carry that certain attribute. What is it? Luck?"

"By any other name," McCoy said.

"Riker to Picard!" The First Officer's message sounded urgent, but it would have to have been for him to auto open Picard's comm. badge without him accepting the call by touch. "Sir, incoming message from Starfleet. Space stations K-7, the Ilaintance Outpost, and the Veneer space station are under attack by unknown forces. All available vessels are requested to respond to their closest theatre of operation. Additional message, Priority One. We're to consider ourselves in a state of war."

"We're closest to K-7, if I believe," Picard began, looking to McCoy to see if they could spare the time to render aid.

"Captain," McCoy said. "It is imperative that we stay on course. If we don't go now, we'll never get another opportunity."

"I understand, Admiral," Picard said. "Maintain course and speed, number one."

"Incoming message from Infinity," Riker informed. "They're curious as to why we've not changed direction."

"Pipe it down here," Picard said.

"Where the devil do you think you're going, Picard!" Captain Becky Thane demanded. "The Federation is under attack!"

"Captain Thane," Picard began, composing his words carefully. "We have reason to believe that the attacks on the Star bases are diversionary in nature. The real threat lies in sector Z-6. At the request of Admiral McCoy, I ask that you join me."

"McCoy?! He hasn't been on duty or given an actual command in years! I can't run off on some imaginary goose chase when we have a real life threat that I can deal with right now," Captain Thane said. "Or, are you telling me the mad ramblings of an old man give you more sway than an actual fire fight?"

"I may be old, Captain, but I'm not deaf, or senile," McCoy answered for him.

"No disrespect, Admiral," Captain Thane said, the voice subdued a bit. "But I have reports of real battles and real casualties. As a Doctor, I would think you could appreciate that."

"And as a Doctor, I still believe you treat the patient, not the symptoms!" McCoy snapped.

"Even if it's true, just let the Kelvan and the Romulans have it out, McCoy," Thane said. "It's not like they've ever helped us any. They didn't rally around us when the Borg nearly took us out."

"Do what you feel is best," McCoy said.



"Captain Thane. Becky, I implore you, come with me," Picard said.

"Not this time, Jean Luc," Thane said. "Infinity out."

"Picard," it was Riker's voice. "The fifteen ships that were supposed to be joining us, it looks like all but two are departing to the nearest star bases to render aid. The Sutherland is staying on course with us."

"Is it going to be enough?" Picard asked.

Kelinda shook her head, no.

"We'll have to make it so," McCoy said.



"Something's happening," Gowr broke the silence.

There had been no more military response from the Romulans in over an hour. All their ships were dead in space, even the new ones that had warped into the system, late to the battle. If it could be called a battle. Sensors tracked ten shuttles leaving the planetoid, each heading for a Romulan target. Their objective became clear when each shuttle came along side a Romulan vessel and connected to the air locks. Gowr gave his vocal disapproval to the tactics involved.

"They're capturing the war birds," N'elent said. "The planetoid is still refusing to answer any of Romulan hails. Apparently there will be no negotiations, or terms of surrender."

"How many people on the shuttles?" Captain Glor asked.

"Passive scans reveals forty per shuttle, captain," Gowr said.

"What's the minimum crew compliment of a Romulan Warbird?" Tammias asked.

"Ten," Gowr answered. "Three with good automation...."

"What are you thinking, Tammias Garcia?" Captain Glor asked, pivoting his chair to face him.

"Let's assume our enemy doesn't have a large military at this point in time. They're probably banking everything on their technological achievements. The boarding parties will somehow eliminate or incapacitate the Warbird crews. Once done, they would replace it with a minimum crew compliment of Kelvan, or take advantage of some form of automation. But for now, let's assume a Kelvan crew will stay on the Romulan ships. That would probably stretch the remaining man power on the planetoid to the limits, while giving them the illusion of having a fully functional space fleet at their disposal," Tammias said.

"So, you're telling me that the planetoid is now vulnerable to a surprise attack?" Glor asked.

"Yes," Tammias said.

"So, you think there won't be any guards left on the planetoid?" the Captain asked, verifying again what he believed Tammias to be saying.

"That's what I said, yes," Tammias said.

"So what?" Gowr asked. "The place is huge! We wouldn't have the man power to capture it."

"I don't want to capture it, just sabotage it," Tammias said.

"You're saying that I could beam you onto that planetoid and you could avoid being captured?" Glor asked.

"I'm going to bet my life on it," Tammias said. "This is why I'm here. I need to get on the surface of that planetoid and somehow disable their power source, or eliminate the guy running the show."

"A torpedo spread of ninety kilotons each..." Gowr began.

"No. You've seen what happens to bombs delivered by missiles," Tammias said, and then reconsidered. "Perhaps you could plant some bombs on me which I can detonate when I've found the power source."

"A suicide mission?" N'elent asked. "No!"

"Look, Captain," Tammias interrupted her protest. "Sabotage is a legitimate form of warfare. If an enemy can't repel a single saboteur, then they are unworthy as an opponent. We can't do anything until that starship immobilizing force is eliminated. Once I take care of that, you'd be free to take out all of these captured Romulan War Birds... That is, if you think you can take out over fifty enemy ships."

"Is that a challenge?" the Captain asked. "Or an insult?"

"A challenge," Tammias said quickly. "But the challenge is only good if you can get me on that planetoid..."

"Tell me something more about that planetoid," the Captain said, turning to Gowr.

Gowr responded immediately, having already been assessing the possibility of a task force assault. "Passive scan shows multiple surface structures, and a network of tunnels through the planetoid itself. Based on the symmetrical lay out of the base, I would assume the operations, or the control center, to be literally in the heart of the planetoid. However, this is only a guess. I can't be certain without running active scans, which would give our position away. There are at least seven hundred life forms with in this building, semi evenly distributed. There is a hundred life forms reading on the third level, here, but they're so close in proximity that there could be more. Passive scans also reveal three possible generators, perhaps the power sources that Tam is looking for. They appear to be close enough together for one Klingon to get to, but a single bomb would not take out all three. We would need three bombs and three carriers."

"Very well," Glor said. "Gowr, you will lead the task force down to the surface, and pull the plug on their power source."

"I should go alone... Their forces are spread out. They won't be expecting any resistance, especially from a one man team..." Tammias began.

"Right. Nor will they expect an assault from a Klingon task force," Captain Glor agreed, in principle.

"I am paying you to get me on that planetoid," Tammias pointed out.

"And I fully intend to make your wish come true," the Captain agreed. "Gowr, take Garcia to the armory and find him a suitable weapon..."

"All I need is a phaser..." Tammias bragged.

"Ha!" Glor barked. "You made us your teachers on this journey, remember? Now listen good, for a warrior you obviously aren't, or you wouldn't have hired us for our mercenary skills. Firing energy weapons can trigger alarms. The mission objectives can only be carried out if you're undetected. So, in addition to a disruptor, you will carry a knife and a sword... You can use a sword, can you not?"

"Like a toy," Tammias said, his experience with swords being just that. Toys. Games on the holodeck.

"The shuttles are disconnecting from the war birds. New trajectories computed... The shuttles are moving to their next assigned targets. They've commandeered ten war birds. The commandeered ships are taking up formations around the planetoid," N'elent reported. "Transporter beams have been engaged... tracing. The Romulan ships closest the planetoid are beaming their hostages to an encampment on the planetoid's surface."

"Yes! Luck is with us..." Glor cheered.

"That doesn't make sense. Why would they do that?" Tammias asked.

"Does it matter?" Glor asked. "We will coordinate your transport to coincide with the next prisoner delivery. And Gowr? Put a transponder on him. I haven't lost a client yet and he won't be the first. Even if he would try to hog all the glory."

"Aye, sir," Gowr saluted, and laughed as he hauled Tammias off the bridge.



"Captain," Worf called out from the tactical station. "There are at least sixty two Romulan vessels in the star system."

Riker whistled. "They must have dredged the bottom of the barrel to get that many ships with sufficient crew compliments."

"And Captain," Worf said, ominously. "There is one Borg ship."

Picard came out of his chair. "A Borg ship?"

"Is a battle in progress?" Riker asked.

"Negative, Sir," Worf said. He was puzzled. "All ships seem to be frozen in space. Including the Borg."

Picard looked to McCoy who was sitting in Counselor Troi's chair. "We proceed in," McCoy said. "Kelinda has assured me that she can prevent the Enterprise from being immobilized."

"It'll be like shooting fish in a barrel," Riker said, amused.

"Not sporting at all," Worf agreed, not amused.

"None the less, shields up, red alert," Picard instructed.

"This is not a drill," Riker said into the PA. He opened up a compartment and unfolded a computer interface monitor out of the armrest of his chair. "All hands, battle stations. Load all torpedo bays, and warm up the phaser banks."

"The Sutherland is battle ready, waiting on your orders, Admiral. Entering the star system in three, two, one," Data counted down.

They came out of warp at the exterior edge of the Romulan Fleet. War Birds, Birds of Prey, Battle Cruisers, and scout ships drifted silently, as if this star system were a starship grave yard. In addition to the Romulan ships, there were two Kelvan vessels. They were not on the scanners, but they were visible on the main screen, and they fit the visual records of the two ships that had blasted their way into Romulan and Vulcan space. They were perhaps a quarter of the size of the planetoid, but were easily six times the size of the Enterprise. In many ways they resembled dirigibles from Earth's past.

"Tracking movement... Shuttle craft coming un-docked from the War Bird, two kilometers away... Six War Birds have altered course, coming this way," Worf reported. "The lead ship is firing on us!"

"Evasive action!" Picard said. "Data, tell the Sutherland to ignore the immobilized ships and focus fire power on the ships taking up position around the planetoid."

"What about those Kelvan ships?" Worf said.

“Ignore them unless they fire on us,” Picard said, and aside to Riker added, “And hope they don’t fire on us.”

“I hear you,” Riker agreed, knowing full well they had nothing that could hurt those monster ships.

“Direct hit to Starboard deflector screen! Shields down to Ninety six percent,” Worf reported.

“Return fire” Riker ordered.

“Torpedoes away...” Worf announced.

The torpedoes disappeared, and all power systems suddenly went dead, except for life support. The Enterprise came to such an abrupt stop that it was as if they had collided with something. The crew was thrown forwards. Picard managed to roll as if he were practicing falls in a karate class. He came up instantly and went to McCoy’s side. McCoy had bumped his head pretty good on the railing, but the most troubling concern was that he had probably broken his hip. Picard hit his com badge. “Crusher, I need you on the bridge. Bring a med kit.”

“It’ll take me a while. The turbo lifts are off line,” Crusher said.

“Understood,” Picard said.

Kelinda appeared suddenly on the Bridge. Worf brought a phaser to bear on her in one smooth motion, but before he could fire he was incapacitated, frozen in place. Only his eyes could move.

“If anyone else attempts to attack, or otherwise threaten me, I will incapacitate the entire crew,” Kelinda said. “Thank you for bringing the Kelvan scout ship along. It made my job so much easier.”

“I thought you were going to help us,” Riker said.

“Did you really think I would side against my husband?” Kelinda asked. “I am disappointed that you didn’t provide us with more ships, but we’ll just have to make do with these two and the Romulan Fleet. Behold, the gateway opens.”

On the main viewer a worm hole was blossoming, like a rose bud turning to spread its petals towards the sun. It was currently too small to pass a ship through, but it was growing and creating short lived particles that fluoresced in the churning space/time flux, revealing the spiraling rotation of the energy vortex.

“At least allow the turbo lifts to work so Doctor Crusher can help McCoy,” Picard said.

“That is permissible,” Kelinda said, depressing the button on her bracelet.

“Contact your Doctor. The lifts will work for her.”

“Doctor Crusher, come straight to the Bridge. The lifts will work for you,” Picard said.

“On my way,” Crusher answered.

“Isn’t it beautiful,” Kelinda asked, referring to the growing spatial anomaly.

“I’m finally going to be able to go home.”

McCoy looked up to Kelinda. “It was never your home, Kelinda. You were born on an intergalactic ship.”

“I will be going home, McCoy,” Kelinda said, mesmerized by the light show on the screen. “And I will see it in my life time.”

“I trusted you,” McCoy said. “All of this was unnecessary.”

“On the contrary,” Kelinda said. “In the event that the wormhole proves to be too small to allow Kelvan ships to pass through, we will need your starships.”

“You will not be taking my ship,” Picard said.

“Oh?” Kelinda asked. “Kirk said something very much like that. Things are different, now. We are in charge of ourselves, our senses, and we won’t be so easily dissuaded from our goals.”

Doctor Crusher entered and went directly to McCoy. He seemed somehow more frail to her than she had imagined him being. She opened her kit on the floor, retrieved her tricorder, and began administering first aid.

“And Garcia,” Riker asked. “Was he in on this?”

“No, he was just an experiment,” Kelinda said. “That he’s lived this long is very impressive, and I am still hopeful to meet up with him and finish the experiment.”

“Finish the experiment?” Picard asked.

“Of course. The true test now is to turn him into a Kelvan and see if he survives the transformation,” Kelinda said. “If it works, we can increase our population much quicker.”

“How can you be so cruel?” Crusher asked. “To your own kin? He shares genetic information with you.”

“No, Doctor. He shares genetic information with this human body, not with me,” Kelinda corrected. “He is nothing more than the biological result of mixing genetic information, a simple exercise in organic chemistry. He is no more important than say an egg. Now, if he survives the transformation and can operate the Kelvan physiology without any issues, then he will have value. He will be a Kelvan. Until he passes that test, however, he has no more value than bacteria in a Petri dish.”

“His life is important to us,” McCoy said. “Let him be.”

“It’s not your concern,” Kelinda said.

“I need to get McCoy to sickbay,” Doctor Crusher said to Picard.

Kelinda nodded. “I’m not unsympathetic,” she said, pushing the button on her wrist.

McCoy and Crusher were suddenly gone. Picard’s concern was easily read.

“Relax, Picard,” Kelinda said. “I transported them to Sickbay. McCoy has about outlived his usefulness, but, as I said, I am not unsympathetic. Good behavior will be rewarded. Bad behavior will result in your deaths.”

“What’s with the Borg ship?” Picard asked.

“Technology. They have a shielding system that we may be able to adapt in order to protect us from the radiation in my home galaxy,” Kelinda said.

♪♪▶

The Warriors had laughed at Tam's selection in swords. It was technically a child's sword, called a Yan. Almost every Klingon had two of these hanging in their homes, blades crossed. This was a Klingon’s first training sword, and it had been the only one in the armory he could lift, with-in reason, and still be able to weld it in some semblance of form. The bat’leth interested him but he was not proficient at it. He also had chosen several Klingon daggers, one of them being a kut’luch, a weapon valued by Klingon assassins, hiding them about his person. The last weapon he selected was a Klingon disruptor. The task force consisted of himself, Gowr, and N'elent. He had nearly made the mistake of insulting her, as well as the Captain who chose her for the

assignment, by protesting. He didn't want her going into battle. He forced himself to consider carefully his bias before making his thoughts public. It wasn't that he was a sexist. He knew women who were great warriors, and Klingon women were some of the hardest warriors in the Milky Way Galaxy. After all, going by nature, there was nothing more fierce than a woman fighting to protect her home, offspring, or mate. Perhaps it was that he had feelings for her, or perhaps, deep down, he knew that this was a suicide mission and he didn't want her dead.

They had transported down to the planetoid's surface in sync with the transportation of Romulan prisoners. From their initial position, they could look down and over into a pit where the soldiers were being collected. Tammias was curious as to why they were being kept so, when they could just as easily have been dehydrated down to their essential elements. He wanted to explore this more, but he knew they didn't have time. He turned to Gowr who was in charge of orienteering them to their destination. Following as stealthily as possible, they made their approach towards one of the structures.

Gowr motioned for Tammias to stay put and signaled N'elent to cover him as he ran ahead to check out the situation. Tammias waited patiently, lying flat in a depression in the ground. Unlike the games he enjoyed playing, this carried with it an element of the unknown. He wanted to do something other than just lie here. Perhaps there was some hidden doubt about Gowr's ability that he hadn't identified. Or perhaps, like Riker, he was use to doing the work instead of sitting back and trusting in his men to do the work delegated out to them. He wondered if Picard ever grew anxious sitting in his command chair waiting for the results of some survey so that he could make a better decision. No, he thought. He couldn't ever see Picard being anxious. Was he engaging in myth making? Was he turning Picard into another Kirk? Did he, of all people, really need to create myth in order to establish a standard that he could aspire towards? Where was the confidence in his own abilities? If games were considered practice, then he was as well trained for an exercise like this as anybody. Maybe even more so. And if he were to accept the opinions of others, that he himself was a measure of standard that people should aspire towards, and maybe could never reach, then what did that say about the standards he set for himself and others? Was he too hard on himself? Were his expectations of others too demanding?

N'elent joined him, appearing out of nowhere, startling him. Gowr's sudden appearance on his other side didn't help. He cursed silently.

"No guards," Gowr said. "Their over conference will be their down fall."

"There's a balcony over on that side which provides an excellent entry point," N'elent said.

"Let's go," Gowr said.

Tammias couldn't see anything excellent about the entry point N'elent had selected. It was at least four stories up. When he turned to protest, he found that his companions had already prepared to scale the wall. Gowr shot a grappling hook, and it lodged itself into the balcony ledge. Gowr climbed the repelling rope first, followed by Tammias, and then N'elent. Tammias had left his tricorder on, in passive recording mode, and took a moment to read the scrolling information via his neural implant. There was a spike of radiation.

N'elent tapped him on the shoulder and pointed into the sky. He followed her gaze. The dome of energy that held in the atmosphere was invisible, and so it seemed as if only the thin bubble of air that surrounded them separated them from the phenomena in the sky. It was a brooding storm of lights, mostly in the higher frequencies of the spectrum, hence the variations of blue. It was what his tricorder had been observing at random and it explained the sudden energy spike. By this he judged that they were too late, but since they were here, they might as well finish their mission objective. It was better than surrendering.

"This way," Gowr pointed, stepping into the room through the balcony doors.

Tammas paused, touching Gowr's arm before he could run off again. The floor looked as if it were marble, but in-bedded in the marble were lines of luminescent rock, as if threaded with raw veins of molten ore, or frozen lightning.

"Avoid stepping on the crystal lines," Tammas warned. "I think its part of a psionic power system."

They agreed and went cautiously into the next room, like children playing the game, "Don't step on the crack, or you'll break your mother's back." The room was massive, and though there were obvious tell-tale signs of technology being employed, it was impressively hidden so that it might as well have been just an ancient, stone temple run by the power of gods or ghosts. Gowr commented he had never seen anything like it. N'elent agreed.

"This structure is ancient," Tammas offered, slightly dazed by the waves of force emanating from the crystal lines in the floor and walls. He waved his hands back and forth over a line, increasing and decreasing the distance between the two, as if he could measure the extent of a magnetic field without holding a magnet

Gowr felt nothing, but he believed Garcia was an elemental, someone that could see things that weren't there, and so he tolerated the odd behavior. Tammas was concerned that the enemy might already be aware of their presence, but so far, no one had attempted to stop them.

"How do you know?" Gowr asked.

"Know what?" Tammas asked

"That this place is old," Gowr said, mimicking Tammas.

"I didn't say that," Tammas said.

"I heard you," N'elent said. "You said it was ancient."

"Great, I'm babbling," Tammas babbled. "I agree, this technology is old, but I don't know how I know. It's a feeling, really. Intuition, I guess. I think it's ancient... And I think there are more of these cities, but not here. Not in this galaxy. I think it was meant to be a communication relay, for sending and retrieving information from galaxy to galaxy, telepathically. It's like a giant radio dish for telepathic energies. Perhaps there is one of these in every galaxy in the Universe..." Tammas said, his eyes taking on a far away look.

"You are a story teller," N'elent said, her understanding lighting her face. "That explains why your feelings are so impressive. What more do your feelings say?"

Tammas shook himself out of it. He was being drawn in and he couldn't allow that to happen right now. He only hoped he had not been discovered. The fate of the Federation would depend on his ability to stay focus and to complete this task. They must destroy this planetoid.

“We don’t have time for stories, now,” Tammias said, pointing in the direction he wanted them to go. “I’ll make something up for you later.”

♪♪▶

“He’s insane,” Princess Simone said.

Selar looked at her in a curious manner. “Who’s insane?”

“Garcia,” she said. “Who does he think he is, a Klingon?”

Selar thought about it. “As you are well aware, the thoughts that a person holds can affect them physiologically. Perhaps he is using a Klingon mindset to prepare himself for a battle.”

“I’ve got to help him,” Simone said, getting up to leave.

“You are not being rational,” Selar said, taking her by the arm. It was something she would not have done in normal circumstances, and apparently, judging by Simone’s reaction, it was something no one had ever done to her before. Selar let go. “Any attempt to actively send Tammias thoughts will alert our captors to his presence.”

“You are right, of course,” Simone said, pacing. “This is preposterous. This is insane. I don’t know why I agreed to this. I will give him back to you. Take him back.”

“Given your current state of anxiety, I doubt you could perform a mind meld,” Selar said.

“He is human. He can not be Klingon,” Simone said.

“Genetically, he is human, and therefore heir to human weaknesses,” Selar agreed. “However, humans have an innate ability to become more than what their genes might limit them to. Tammias has years of association with Vulcans, being intimately linked, both mentally, and spiritually, with us. He even has active Vulcan genes. But he has also been in contact with other species, including Klingons. This has added to his natural empathic abilities, and, consequently, made him more susceptible to a wide variety of thought patterns. In some aspects, he has evolved beyond certain human limitations. Belief and direct experience can alter most beings, Princess Simone, but none seemingly more so than humans.”

“True, we are all more than the sum of our parts,” Simone agreed, dismissing Selar’s comments with a wave of her hand. “And we all have more potential than we use, but Tam is just... Tam. He is an inferior being. Humans are inferior to Vulcans.”

Selar held back her response. She actually didn’t know how to respond to such an illogical statement. It demonstrated prejudice, ethnocentricity, and egocentricity... And these were all thoughts that she herself had held at one time or another, thinking that Vulcans were indeed superior, when in reality, they were just different.

“Oh, do not give me that look,” Simone protested.

“What look would that be?” Selar asked.

“That look! The one that says my bias is inconsistent with the philosophy of IDIC,” Simone said. “We are superior.”

“We are different,” Selar said. “Superior/inferior is not a valid criterion for comparing two organisms.”

“I am a Princess!” Simone yelled at her. “I am superior. He will have to learn to be more disciplined. He will have to obey me.”

Selar raised her eyebrow. “I believe you will find taming humans quite the challenge,” she said. “And taming Garcia an impossibility. It might be a better use of your time to befriend him.”



"I am a Princess!" Simone raged and then sat down. She began to weep. "I am a Princess. This can not be happening. It is over. We have lost. I have failed."

♪♪▶

Captain Glor of the Pa Nun suddenly had a grand thought, which caused even him to be overly pleased with himself, as if Klingons were never impressed with their own prowess and imagination. He felt more alive than he had in years and the prospects for war and glory abounded. He was confident that before the end of the day, he would have finally made a name for himself. He stood, heading for the turbolift.

"Tajing, Jo' LaH, you're with me..." Glor ordered. They fell into step behind him, puzzled but never questioning. They would find out in good time.

"Good time" was the time it took for them to arrive in the transporter room. As soon as they were there, the Captain ordered Jo' LaH to activate his phaser. He simultaneously drew his own weapon.

"Tajing," Glor smiled. "Coordinate with the next transport of prisoners. I want you to beam up five from the encampment."

Tajing only hesitated a moment and then calibrated the transporter. There were two ships currently in orbit of the planetoid that were in the process of beaming down prisoners. The prisoners were being kept with-in the confines of a pit, a depression in the surface of the planetoid, which he assumed was a meteor strike. He locked onto five life forms, five out of the possible hundreds that were just standing around. He signaled the Captain that transport had begun and Glor turned to face the alcove where the five Romulan warriors appeared upon the transporter pad. They were apprehensive, but silent, and surprisingly restrained.

"Is any one of you a Captain?" Glor asked.

No one responded.

"Against the wall, there!" Glor ordered.

The five Romulans demonstrated that they understood Universal by complying with the directive. That, or they understood Klingon. Or, they understood the waving of a weapon. Jo' LaH kept his disruptor aimed smartly at the prisoners while the Captain turned to Tajing.

"Another five!" Glor ordered.

Tajing seemed hesitant.

"I said another five!" Glor yelled.

"Aye, Sir," Tajing said. "Waiting for the next transport signal."

The next five were more boisterous.

"I demand to know the meaning of this!" one of the five Romulan said. "Who are you? What are your intentions with us? This violates all conventions against humane captivity as agreed upon by the Federation Romulan treaty."

"Silence, Romulan!" Glor demanded. Calling him Romulan was meant to be a worse insult than calling a human a Human. The insult was either wasted on him, or he was being very careful not to try the Captain's patience, which was a wise move. "I take it you are a Captain?"

"I am. The three of us are. And as officers, I demand that we be kept separate from the sub ranks, and demand to know the terms of our..."

"Silence!" Glor yelled. "I am Captain Glor and I am in charge here. I don't have time to answer your fool questions. I am offering you an opportunity to strike back at your conquerors, Romulan."

The Romulan considered this information, now realizing that the Klingon was not part of the aggressive action against his people. He also believed that the Klingon might not actually be flying under the Federation flag, which meant his situation could be more precarious than he had imagined. Who knew what a rogue Klingon might be capable of?

"Good. I approve of your newly found respect," Glor stated. "I would not normally extend such a favor to pitiful Romulans, but, as I am not a fool, I realize that your cooperation might improve my odds of survival. As I understand it, sixty two Romulan vessels have been captured. Each is being manned with three enemies. If I were to beam you aboard one of these ships, do you think yourself capable of recapturing a War Bird, Romulan?"

"Yes," the Romulan answered.

"Good. You three are Captains? What are your two ranks, Romulans?"

"They are our first officers. We were discussing our situation when you... rescued us," the Romulan said, carefully hiding his embarrassment. Rescued by Klingons. Indeed!

"I will beam up five men for each of you, and transport you to a captured ship. There are two conditions to this deal," Glor added. They waited for the caveats. "First condition. You will not begin your attack until I give the order to commence retaliation. If you attack before I give you permission, you will no doubt find your ship in the same powerless condition that you were in when first captured. This would also alert your enemy to my presence and I will personally destroy which ever ship gives me away before they take me."

"And the second condition?" the Romulan asked. He expected a severe penalty for the price of being rescued.

"After I give the order to attack, you transmit my transponder code so that I don't destroy you by accident," Glor instructed, smiling. "For I would be pleased to do so in different circumstances, Romulan."

The Romulan Commander was surprised. His eyes narrowed in suspicion. "Why are you doing this?"

"First reason, Romulan," Glor counted. "If this threat is not eliminated here, the Federation and Klingon Empire will be hard pressed to defeat it. Second reason. Warriors deserve to die in battle. Not like this. I give you the chance to die like Klingons."

"How many Klingon ships are backing you?" the Romulan asked.

"None. Just us, Romulan," he answered.

"It will be a slaughter!" a Romulan's First officer complained.

"That's the spirit!" Captain Glor cheered. "Step down from the transporter. Tazing, I need five men for each of these poor Romulans."

"What about the immobilization force," the Romulan Captain asked. "As long as it's in operation, we can't attack..."

"I will be taking care of that, Romulan," Glor assured him.

## CHAPTER THIRTY

Tammas and his Klingon task force huddled close together, their backs towards a half wall, but not touching it. Looking over the wall one could see down to the next level, where one of the three generators rotated around a complex crystalline structure. The other two generators were in similar compartments, in a triangular pattern a hundred paces away from the one below. Getting to their present location had cost two Kelvan guards their lives. Fortunately for Tammas and Gowr, they had not been in true Kelvan form, but had been transformed to appear as Romulans. Tammas hadn't done the actual killing, but, none the less, he had the blood stains on his poncho to show for it. Below, around the generator itself, were a number of Romulan guards. There was one female present, and she was wearing a bracelet which seemed to be made from the same material as the generator. Tammas had given strict warning that anyone wearing a glowing bracelet was not to be killed, and so far, only women were discovered to be wearing them.

"There's seven of them," N'elent counted. "But I am puzzled. I have never heard of Romulan guards that did not carry disruptors."

"They're not exactly affiliated with the Romulan government," Tammas offered. "I believe they're Kelvan, in Romulan form."

"Still, N'elent has a point. A Romulan without a disruptor is like a Denebian Slime Devil with out slime. We have seen no one with any sort of energetic weapons. Only swords and knives. I would understand this if they were Klingons, but they are merely Romulans, or Kelvan if you prefer," Gowr said, spitting with disgust.

Tammas brought his hands together in front of his mouth, as if in prayer, as he drew conclusions from his friends' observations. "Of course. That makes sense. It has to be."

"Another feeling?" N'elent asked.

"Yes," Tammas said with a smile, rubbing his hands together. "This is going to be easier than I thought. If I'm right, we won't even need to plant our explosives."

"Explain," Gowr asked.

"Obviously these crystal generators, or, more precisely, psychic accumulators, are sensitive to disruptor energy. Perhaps the energized crystal resonates with the same frequency of a normal phaser blast. The harmonics of a direct phaser, or disruptor, will cause the crystal's lattice to shatter and disintegrate."

"Are you saying we shoot one of these accumulators and the whole complex goes?" Gowr asked.

"Exactly!" Tammas praised.

"That doesn't give us much time to evacuate," N'elent said.

"Oh, but it does!" Tammas assured her. "It will be like striking a tuning fork. The crystal will begin to vibrate, the vibrations will spread through the entire crystalline structure, spreading out from the impact source like ripples in a pond, and then the echo will induce the overlapping harmonic and enharmonic dissonance which will shatter the entire crystal grid, and when that happens, the sudden release of all that energy should produce some rather dramatic results..."

"Sounds reasonable," Gowr said, considering it a moment. He nodded, as he talked himself into accepting Tam's theory.

On queue, the three of them drew their disruptors, tuned them to the maximum power setting, counted to three, stood, turned, aimed down at the generator-accumulator, and fired simultaneously. They couldn't have been more synchronous had they rehearsed it a hundred times. They acted as if of one mind, and one spirit, sustaining fire perhaps several seconds too long. The unexpected results forced them to duck back down below the half wall.

The disruptor bolts did indeed hit the accumulator. From there, the three separate energy bolts ricochet off the accumulator, heading for the wall or floor respectively, only to ricochet again off the lines of crystals embedded in the floor or wall, dividing it into multiple beams. Each time the beams struck, they divided into two separate beams of energy and flew to other point in the room to repeat the process. It was an extremely loud, hair raising, process. One of the bolts exited the chamber below and ended its life at the feet of Gowr, after having bounced off the ceiling. The floor wasn't even charred.

Gowr and N'elent scowled at Tammias. He shrugged, helplessly.

"Then again, the energized crystal could have reflective properties which makes disruptor fire extremely dangerous, even to the person firing," Tammias offered.

Gowr growled, drew his bat'telh, and jumped over the parapet to the floor below.

"Wait!" Tammias yelled, a bit late. He dropped his disruptor and followed Gowr over the wall. Only while falling did he wish he had considered the situation more thoroughly. It was a longer drop than he had expected, and the stairs had only been right behind him. He hit the floor and rolled, distributing the energy from the fall evenly enough to avoid injury. He came up standing. No sooner than he had stood, he had to duck and roll to avoid a Romulan sword coming at him. He fell over two dead Romulan guards that had neatly absorbed partial disruptor bolts, and came up standing a second time, with his sword in a defensive posture.

N'elent had landed on the floor behind the Romulan attacking Tammias. The Romulan's sword came down hard on Tam's sword, and he growled in frustration at the block. He didn't even seem to notice that he had been slain by N'elent. He simply fell over as she withdrew her sword from his flesh. She stepped out of its way and moved to attack another guard. Tammias stood, searching for someone to fight. Gowr was taking two on for himself, and they were forcing him towards the corner. Tammias did the unexpected. He slipped up behind one of the Romulans and administered a Vulcan Nerve pinch to the shoulder. The guard fell to the floor, unconscious. Gowr dispatched the remaining opponent, and then killed the guard Tammias had rendered unconscious.

"What did you do that for?" Tammias asked.

"So he won't wake and sneak up behind me!" Gowr said.

"Where did you learn that Vulcan nerve pinch?" N'elent asked Tammias.

"I don't know, actually," Tammias said, trying to figure out where that had come from. "I haven't been formally trained."

"You aren't Vulcan," N'elent said. "Are you?"

"And I did not need your help," Gowr complained.

"Well, excuse me for wanting to do my share..." Tammias said. He was about to suggest they start planting the first round of explosives when ten guards from the adjoining room entered, coming to investigate all the noise. Tammias offered them to Gowr as compensation for interrupting his kill. Gowr and N'elent charged forward, smiling at the promise of more battle. Tammias shook his head and followed.



The door to Selar's room opened and a familiar face appeared. Doctor Selar greeted her with almost a trace of enthusiasm. "Counselor Troi? Are you well?"

"As well as anyone can be, considering the circumstances," Troi offered. She held her wrist up and shook it to show off her bracelet. "Looks like we're all in fashion."

"He's insane," Simone continued to mumble. She was hugging her knees and rocking back and forth.

"She senses Garcia," Selar explained.

"I do, too," Deanna said. "He's close."

"We must prepare to escape when the moment presents itself," Selar said.

"I agree, but we're not going to enlist any one here," Deanna said. "Thinking about escape, even suicide, makes one ill. And since most of these people have been here for upwards of twenty years, they're well conditioned not to resist."

"I know a way out," Simone said.

"Are you going to be alright?" Deanna asked her.

Simone stood, pulling herself up right in perfect deportment. "I am a Princess," she insisted, and strolled out of the room.

Selar pursed her lips, expecting Deanna to make a comment. Deanna just shrugged. "She's a princess," Deanna said, joining Selar in pursuit.



The battle was over almost as quickly as it had started and Nelent lay dying on the floor. It had been over so quickly that Tammias barely remembered holding any conscious thought and as she die, he watched the replay in his head, trying to understand what had happened. He had been operating strictly on automatic, his body going through the motions and forms he had committed to kinesthetic memory through constant repetition. N'elent had dispatched her three Romulans and had turned to help Tammias with one of his. He had not been faring well, and the attack was forcing him to retreat from his team. In one clean cut maneuver, she killed her Romulan. The Romulan fell to the floor, the sound of air bubbling through blood as air escaped through the wounds in his back. His cry was strange, robbed of its force. One of the four that had been engaging Gowr turned at his companion's gargled his last note and launched himself at N'elent while she was maneuvering to help Garcia. The Romulan's swords went cleanly into her side, just below the rib cage. He extricated his sword from her body, using his foot to hold her body back, shoving her while pulling his sword free. Tammias screamed. His sword struck his present enemy, and he felt the initial resistance of the flesh before pushing through to the organs, like gutting a fish. He ran the sword deep, all the way to the hilt, pushing it upwards towards the Romulan's chest. This had left him close enough to head-butt the man, which he did to quicken the demise. The angle had required extra force to bring the sword loose, tearing flesh and spilling the contents of his chest. Garcia had nearly tripped as he turned on the Romulan that had injured N'elent. He had doubled forth his effort, striking at the Romulan with renewed vigor. It was pure rage, and the clashing of swords drove him on. Metal against metal was the heart beat to Tam's new song. Unable to do anything but defend against the blows, the Romulan had retreated, finally dropping his sword. Tammias didn't even pause. He delivered the fatal blow, spinning to add momentum and weight to the blade. It was a movie maneuver, but the Romulan had been so stunned by the force of the attack he could only watch with dread.

The decapitation was final, leaving Garcia in a whirl wind of emotion, sickness at the number of dead lying at his feet. The smell nauseated him, as well as the slimy, mess under his feet.

Tammas forced himself back to the present and ran to N'elent's side.

"You are Klingon," she said, looking into his eyes.

He let go of his sword and took her hand. He was not prepared for the outpouring of emotion. He became totally immersed in her dwindling life force to the exclusion of all else, as if increasing the level of attention would alone sustain her. Two more guards had entered, one of them female. Gowr cleanly dispatched them, before finishing the last of his previous fight. Gowr dropped to N'elent's other side. She was having difficulty staying conscious, her breathing coming in short gasps. Garcia spied ten more guards coming, pulled N'elent's disruptor from its holster and fired. The first guard disappeared in a dance of lights and agony. So did the second one as Garcia held the trigger for a sustained blast that melted a hole right through him and nailed the third behind him. The fourth side stepped it, but Garcia hit the floor with the beam, scattering the energy. It rained disruptor energy down the hall, killing everyone that had decided to investigate the noise.

N'elent made a gasping sound, touching Garcia's face, illuminated by disruptor light. Garcia threw the empty disruptor down and held her hand firm to his face, aware that the wetness was her blood.

"Be the last thing I see, love," N'elent told Garcia.

Gowr forcefully held her eyes open.

N'elent expired, smiling, her eyes never wavering from Garcia's. The spark faded, and she was gone. Tammas and Gowr turned their heads heavenwards and howled, and then Tammas fell back, fighting his tears.

"Come, brother," Gowr said. "She is gone, and we have work to do."

"No!" Tammas raged. Beside him was the dead female Romulan, her arm stretched out towards Tammas, knife still in hand. Tammas removed her bracelet, and put it on himself. At first the shock was overwhelming, but a soothing, familiar force came over him and he found himself in control of the flow. The Ancient One, the facilitator of this technology connected with him, offering her strength. He now knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that this Fortress, the Communication Array, had been carved from Living Rock, perhaps kin to the Living Rock on El, which he had climbed and mind melded with in his youth. Had that been why he was called to climb the path and touch the sacred heart? He reached out and touched N'elent's body. The bracelet brightened, flared, and dimmed. N'elent stirred and sat up.

"What happened? Was I knocked unconscious?" N'elent asked, worried about her honor.

Gowr laughed and Tammas howled with delight. She was even more confused than when she had awoken, but both warriors welcomed her back to life with hugs. Tammas kissed her.

"He knows I'm here, now," Tammas laughed. He stood, picking up his sword. He spun, yelling up into the emptiness. "He knows I'm going to kill him!"

"Tam?" N'elent asked.

For a brief moment, sanity seemed to reign in Tam's eyes, and he removed his back pack with the explosives. He smiled at his friends. "Plant the charges, as planned. If you don't hear from me again in twenty minutes, detonate. Blow this place to hell."

"Where are you going?" Gowr asked, standing.

"To meet death," Tammias said. He closed his eyes, searching for the answer. All the answers were available, but he only needed one. Space-time was an illusion. Matter was simply energy. Energy. Vibrations in space-time, but not separate, as most people imagine the two. Space time and particles were all one piece of fabric, for lack of a better analogy. Particles and waves, Nature's assumed duplicity, was neither and both, spread out across the canvas of space-time. Subatomic particles opened themselves up for explorations. Quarks. Charms. Ups. Downs... Descriptor values, rates of spin, polarity charges, velocity, probability waves. Probability. Probability of being wave, or particle, of being in one place in space/time or another. Change only one of the values of the descriptor and the particle would seemingly appear and disappear. It was analogous to turning it a quarter turn, a ninety degree angle, spinning it from a third dimension into a fourth, and another right turn into a fifth, and so on into eternity... And yet, it was nothing like that analogy at all. Atoms existed in a defined parameter of set values of probability. It did not exclude the probability of finding it outside the defined parameters, but probability of finding it in other forms or places reached towards infinity. Theoretically all it would take was a change in the descriptor value. It was as simple as tuning a guitar. And...

From Gowr's perspective, Tammias phased out of existence. It was as if Tammias had become two dimensional and suddenly turned sideways. A video image fading, flattening first to a vertical line, then squashing down horizontally, becoming a mere dot, and then nothing. Literally winking out of existence.

Gowr turned to N'elent, not knowing what to think.

♪♪▶

Tammias discovered that there was no non-existence in nature. No death. Only a changing of states. It was a state of being that, for him, was nearly changed permanently, but his intent carried some weight. Probability laws suggested that the odds of a large group of atoms simultaneously relocating were low and relocating to some new place even lower. There was definitely some resistance. It took some struggle to convince them not to return to their last known position in space-time, but once they were all of one mind, they went where directed. Once there, even though they really didn't go anywhere, it became another struggle to convince them to crystallize back into their particle-wave existence. They all seemed to have a mind of their own. Tribbles. He saw them as Tribbles. How could life be made up of Tribbles? He asked himself. But he realized getting lost in such a tangent at this moment was too dangerous. He focused.

Tammias found himself in front of the main dais, staring up at the man on the throne. Garcia was no longer holding the sword that he had been holding, but it was the least of his concerns. Rojan reached for the Kelvan bracelet simultaneously as Tammias reached for his. To an observer, nothing happened. The two merely looked at each other, standing in attack posture. To each of them, there were dozens of attacks and counter attacks that only they could see, in a virtual explosion of lights and energies warping around them. An exchange of energy that balanced out, leaving neither harmed. The battle was a computer war that seemed to stretch into hours of futile maneuvers, each

trying to get the upper hand. They shared nothing but pure, mutual hatred and contempt. When that failed, they drew on the psychic energies available to them through the alien technology. The psionic attacks were also fruitless, balanced out, so that neither had come to any harm.

Rojan laughed the laugh of the criminally insane. Tammias kicked himself, believing he should have known that the psionic attacks had been a distraction, for while he was focused on countering the attacks, Rojan was using the Kelvan technology to call his guard into action. Garcia had expected that Rojan would have had the upper hand because he had been using the technology longer, but the power base was equally shared between them.

Tammias turned to witness the threat materialize. On shelves at the far wall were hundreds of the de-hydrated, polyhedron balls, an entire army freeze dried, awaiting to be reconstituted through Kelvan technology. The bottom row disappeared and twenty soldiers appeared. They no sooner hit the floor than they started charging.

Tammias drew a knife and charged forward, throwing the knife at the first in line, hitting him squarely in the forehead. The lead man went down, his sword sliding across the floor. Tammias threw himself down, a shoulder roll, grabbing the sword by the hilt, coming up so that the blade sliced at the second soldier at the abdomen level. He dodged the third as he came to his feet, blocking and turning to finish off the second. He turned back to the third delivering a kick, hitting the fourth with the hilt of his sword. Pushed the fourth back into the fifth. He dodged the weapon of the sixth by using the third as a shield. He let the third drop, taking the sixth's sword with him. Before Tammias got to the seventh soldier, another row of polyhedron balls had been converted into soldiers. He knew he couldn't go on at this rate indefinitely. He would eventually lose.

Tammias reached for his disruptor, but it wasn't there. And that was because he had carelessly discarded it. Then he smiled and touched the button on his Kelvan bracelet. The remaining Styrofoam like balls exploded, sending the constituents that had once comprised the Kelvan trained soldiers into the air like so much colored chalk dust. He had also noted, thanks to the technology, that all the soldiers were simply human, as opposed to modified Kelvan. There was a possibility that some of them may have even been his brothers. The remaining fighting force, already converted back into their human form all froze at the second touch of the button.

Tammias turned towards Rojan. He began the agonizing walk back, feeling some pain. Rojan seemed more reflective and less willing to engage in any further battles.

"So, Jude, the prodigal son has returned," Rojan said. "And, you seemed to have mastered our technology. Very impressive. Even more impressive, non-hesitance in the use of lethal force. I'm surprised you can function at all. I could barely contain the sense of power when I first tapped into the psychic energy of my Chosen."

"I am compelled by conscience to ask you to surrender," Tammias said. The Chosen, he mused. So that's what he was calling the hostages. He could feel their energy behind him and it was a strain not to get lost in that power. He wanted to reach out with that energy and touch the stars. He wanted to listen to the Universe to hear what other voices might be out there in the night. "And release the hostages."

Rojan laughed as if he were drunk. Indeed, he was drunk with power. "Or what?" Rojan asked.



“Oh, must we delve into trite dialogue?” Tammias asked. “Alright. Fine. Surrender or die. Are you happy now?”

"Kill him!" Rojan ordered, releasing his soldiers from the Garcia induced stasis field.

Tammias closed his eyes for a moment to orientate. Drawing on the Kelvan technology and his years of role playing, and on the new abilities of the Chosen, along with their skills and knowledge, he felt invincible. He didn't consider the odds, or the fact that he was duly outnumbered. With all the power and technology at his disposal, this was just another game on the holodeck. A game where he had control over its matrix.

Tammias backed towards the dais, as if retreating. He allowed them to believe he was cornered and loosing. At the last moment, he leaped. He channeled the flow of power made available to him by the Chosen, changing particle descriptor values in order to decrease his weight. He executed a single somersault, no need to show off, he decided, and landed on the dais, twisting, bringing his sword around to bear on Rojan. The sword rebounded off an empty throne. Tam immediately spun the other way, his sword meeting Rojan's sword, sparking. Battle light just like in the epic poem by Homer. The guards below scrambled like two dozen firemen having freshly woken to the sounds of an alarm. They ran towards the stairs that flowed up to the top of the dais. Rojan pushed his weight down on Tam's sword.

"You can't kill me," Rojan said. "Anything you do to me will cause you an equal amount of discomfort."

"You've gone against nature, Rojan. The system here is male and female, checks and balances. The power base here is severely out of proportion. When the dam breaks, you will be carried away with the flood," Tammias promised.

Tammias summoned a surge a power and pushed Rojan far enough away he could have time to set up for another attack. Indeed, he had pushed hard enough that Rojan flew off the dais. In turn, Tam met the first two soldiers topping the dais, killing them, and then leaped backwards to the seat of the throne. From there he jumped to the back of the throne, forcing the chair to swivel out of reach of the approaching guard. He leaped once more into the air, flying over the soldiers, landing on the stairs just behind the last two soldiers. He killed them before they even knew that he was behind them. He turned and fled down the stairs. Rojan was at the bottom of the stairs waiting for him.

Apparently, Tam's days of games had given him an advantage in the creativity department, for Rojan could have simply flown back up to the top of the dais to continue fighting. In addition to that, the soldiers were performing no better than keystone cops, for only the ones in front had seen Tam fly over their heads. They turned to pursue only to run head long into their fellow soldiers still trying to come up. Watching them regroup was a comical thing he didn't have time to enjoy.

Tam heard a voice in his head. "There are a number of communiqué channels now available. Are you inclined to respond?"

"Who are you?" Tammias asked. "One of the Chosen?"

The answer came so fast it was hard to assimilate the information, and it nearly got him killed. The world moved in slow motion; Rojan's attacks, the moving of the guards, the space battle raging above and all around, seemed surreal against the back drop of this new focus. The voice in his head accessed his personal memories as if he were no

more than a computer, very much like the Living Rock, and then responded to his question, explaining that she was comparable in intellect to the Guardian of Time, and may have even been created by the same race. Her purpose was to facilitate communication between species throughout the Universe.

“So, you allowed your facility to be over taken and used in this manner?” Garcia asked. He felt as if he were in two places at once. In one world he was fighting for his life. In the other, he was talking to an illuminated, column of marble that was the center piece of this Communication Fortress.

“My function is to facilitate communication between species,” the Facilitator responded, choosing an identity from Garica’s mind: Babel.

“Can you separate Rojan from the power of the Chosen?” Tammias asked.

Rojan’s sword met Tam’s sword.

Babel reemphasized that her purpose was to facilitate communication between species. It was not her function to interfere in the affairs of those who chose to use the facilities.

“But you could!” Tammias demanded.

“She can’t!” Rojan said, slicing Garcia’s arm. “She’s a computer and she does what she’s told. You really have been human too long. Your anthropomorphizing technology is not healthy behavior. This shows an apparent weakness in your training.”

Rojan swung hard, hitting the dais. Garcia pinned Rojan’s sword to the dais with a foot and swung at his face with a fist. Rojan blocked, stepping in to hit Garcia in the gut. Tammias fell back, nearly stumbling as he retreated back up the stairs. To use the full power of the Chosen, he needed to be at the focus of the accumulated power. That was the top of the dais. The Dais was the column of light in his head. The crystal lines leading up to the throne pulsed as waves of energy flowed towards it. The crystal bracelets pulsed in unison, heart beats for the collective energies. The clashing of swords brought Garcia back to his immediate demands.

“I will control it,” Rojan snarled. “As I will control you. Once you’ve joined the family, you’re always part of the family.”

“I will not be dominated,” Tammias assured him. “I will oppose you until your death, even if it means my own.”

The stairs allowed only two persons at a time to proceed safely up or down, and now Tammias was fighting Rojan and two soldiers directly behind him. One soldier died easy enough, but was quickly replaced by another. He wondered how long he could maintain this, as Rojan was proving to be an equally skilled fighter, though less imaginative.

The doors to the audience chamber burst open, and N’elent and Gowr charged in, bloodied from their latest battle. The distraction was enough for Tammias to parry and attack. Rojan lost his footing and went rolling down the stairs. There was momentary surge of power into Tam as Rojan fell from the dais. Tam turned and dispatched the soldiers on the stairs, fighting through them all until he was once again on top. It was like playing king of the mountain.

Energy coursed through Garcia as he sat in the control chair. He spun the chair, drunk with power. That drunkenness was debilitating, and that was probably the only thing keeping the powers balanced between him and Rojan. His awareness grew with leaps and bounds, slowing the world down as he took note of new things of interests. He

saw the Enterprise and the Sutherland and decided to free the two Federation ships. Just for the hell of it, he freed all the ships from their restrictive holds. Their power systems came on line.

"No!" Rojan yelled. "The wormhole's not big enough yet."

Tammias laughed. He couldn't remember ever having felt so good. Rojan rushed up the stairs to engage him again.

♪♪▶

A solitary Romulan appeared on the Bridge. Kelinda turned to face him, but before she could speak, Worf launched himself at her. With one hit he knocked her unconscious, and in the same move pointed his weapon at the Romulan. The Romulan raised his hands in the classic human pose of "I surrender."

Riker removed Kelinda's wrist band so that she wouldn't be able to use her Kelvan Technology again and then focused on the newcomer.

"Get her off my Bridge," Picard ordered, and turned to the Romulan. "What are you doing on my ship?"

"Captain Glor, of the Mercenary ship the Pa Nun, sends his compliments, and suggests you prepare for a glorious battle," The Romulan said.

"Return to battle stations, everyone," Picard said.

"Captain!" Worf, having returned to tactical, demanded attention. "Sensors show that all ships in this system are powering up. Weapon systems coming on line all around us..."

Just as suddenly, all systems on the Enterprise began to power back up.

"Shields up!" Riker ordered. "Bring us around full impulse... Ready all phaser banks..."

"But, sir?" Worf asked. "Who are we going to fire on?"

"Scan for targets with four or less life forms..." It was the Romulan officer.

"Also, any ship transmitting transponder code 7214 should be considered as friendly."

"Frequencies are being jammed from the planetoid," Data announced.

"Make it a free for all," Picard said, calmly. "Multiple targets. Fire at will. Worf, target engines only."

"Intercepting a hail from the Pa Nun, Sir..."

"On speaker," Picard ordered.

"This is Captain Glor, of the Pa Nun, to Federation ship Enterprise," the Captain announced. "They're jamming transponder codes. The ships running with only starboard beacons are on our side."

"Put those markers on tactical." Picard ordered. "Thank you, Captain Glor! Number One? Assemble a crew, and report to the battle bridge. Prepare for saucer separation."

"Captain!" Worf yelled, excited. "The Borg ship is operational."

"Focus our fire on the Borg," Picard said. "Data, broadcast on all frequencies, tell them to focus on the Borg."

"Aye, Captain," Data said. "The Borg have made their usual declaration, but it seems most interested in the Kelvan ships."

In the back ground radio noise, the words of the Borg declaration, "resistance is futile" caused Riker to shiver. At that moment the Borg took a slice out of one of the Kelvan ships, while firing simultaneously at three Romulan ships coming into their

sphere of influence. A second Kelvan ship rallied around the first. It looked as if a few Romulans were taking advantage of the Borg attacking the Kelvan, and they temporarily joined alliances with them, concentrating on the Kelvan. The Borg wasn't accepting of help, and again fired at the Romulans in an effort to protect its prey. Kelvan technology added to the Borg collective would make the Borg virtually impossible to stop. The Borg fired on the Enterprise as it moved into attack formation. Two Romulan ships fired on the Enterprise in an attempt to get them to leave the Borg alone. The Kelvan also fired a few rounds at the Enterprise, in an attempt to protect their Borg prey. Between the Borg defending the Kelvan for their own design, and the Kelvan defending the Borg for their purposes, the Enterprise was taking a beating.

"I thought the enemy of my enemy was supposed to be my friend," Worf said.

Picard nodded in agreement, knowing his first duty was to protect his ship.

"Evasive maneuvers," Picard ordered.

"I'm trying!" Brookes said, but there was just so much activity it was difficult to know who was who.

There were at least ten ships on the Federation side, the Pa Nun included, and an unknown element, the unknown being an uncertainty of which Romulan ship was officially on the Romulan side, but as the battle unfolded, it might as well have been every ship for itself, for it was total chaos. There were so many ships in the immediate area that navigation had become a challenge and a stray shot was just as likely to cripple someone as much as a planned attack. All they had to do was launch a torpedo and the odds were good that they were going to hit something.

"War Bird uncloaking aft!" Worf announced.

"Bring us around, heading two, one three point four... Fire!" Picard ordered.

## CHAPTER THIRTYONE

Counselor Troi, Doctor Selar, and Princess Simone stood before the door leading out of the Chosen's compound. It was an ornately decorated metallic door standing in a marble frame. There was no obvious control mechanism to open the door that Troi could discern, but that was a popular feature of doors for at least the last couple of centuries. Of course, it wasn't a good idea to compare the architecture of this place to Federation. There could be any sort of opening mechanism, from pheromones to the emission of radiation, but this one was most likely operated by telepathy. Then again, she realized that she was assuming that the designers were human size. The doors were huge, so they might have been giants, but looking up didn't reveal any control interfaces either.

"So, how do we get through?" Deanna asked.

"There must be a sensor or a pressure plate here somewhere," Selar said, searching the frame.

"Something's different," Simone noticed, touching her forehead.

"Yes. I feel it, too," Counselor Troi said. "There's someone else channeling our energies."

"It's Tammass!" Simone said, suddenly full of energy. When she realized how emotional her outburst had sounded, she said it again, in a more controlled, Vulcan manner. "It's Tam. We should try to escape now."

"I am unable to find the mechanism," Selar said.

"Just step back," Simone instructed. She knew for a fact that she could open the door with her telekinesis, but she was uncertain what or who might be on the other side of the door, waiting for an escape attempt. Still, she felt it was now or never. She concentrated on the door, noticing the flow of energy through the operating mechanism. To open the door, all she had to do was change the polarity of one path on a circuit board.

The door slid open and she slipped into a defensive position, half expecting to be rushed by guards. The corridor beyond was empty.

"Where do you think you're going?"

Simone turned to face one of her fellow Chosen. In a small community such as this, everyone knew everyone else, telepathic abilities aside. The person addressing her was T'litha. She was the oldest person, and Vulcan, present and had been held hostage the longest. Consequently, she had assumed a leadership role in their community. She was aware of Simone's Princess status, but it hadn't changed the social dynamics much. They were all prisoners here, so there were different rules.

"I'm leaving," Simone explained.

"I can't permit that," the T'litha said. "There's no one out there to drag you back in when you fall ill and we don't wish to be made sick by your defiance."

"I'm not going to get sick. The rules have changed," Simone said. "There's a new element involved, and if we don't take this opportunity to escape, we might never get another one. Or do you prefer it here in captivity?"

"I've been in worse places," she admitted. "Regardless, you're not leaving."

"And I guess you're going to try and stop me?" Simone said, feeling rather confrontational. She blamed this on Tammass as well.

T'litha smiled, making a small motion with her hand. Five of her elected goon squad stepped forward. Counselor Troi and Doctor Selar took up positions to either side of Simone. Posturing had begun. What the opposing group didn't see were Simone's

cousins coming up from behind. If they chose the hard way, it would be over quickly. Simone hoped they chose the hard way. Negotiations might take too long. A crowd was gathering to watch, interested to know if there was soon to be a change in authority.

"Wait a minute," Counselor Troi said. "Can't you feel it? The tension? The hate. It's not our reality. These feelings are coming from outside of us, from the ones in control of the energy. We don't have to act on their emotions. In fact, maybe we can change them. There's a war raging above us and though we may not control the power, we can certainly influence it."

"We've tried. Nothing works," the Chosen said.

"It didn't work before because there was only one in charge. Now there's two. That gives us options. We can choose who to support," Counselor Troi said.

All of the Chosen reflected on this, wanting to test it, but afraid of the possible repercussions. No one wanted to be sick and no one wanted to be punished should the endeavor fail.

"I'm going out that door," Simone said again. "You can join me, or you can wait here, but do not try to stop me."

And with that, Simone turned and exited the Chamber of the Chosen. She felt herself growing ill with every step, until she stopped, closed her eyes, and blocked all feedback from Rojan. She allowed her connection to Garcia to strengthen and fill her with his mental energies. It was more than just borrowing energies. Given the number of people channeling, there was an abundance of "chi" to draw on and somehow the structure of the facility enhanced and increased the amount available. Before it had been a trickle, but now it was a full cascade, a torrent of energy. If energy was water, then this was like standing under a waterfall. The pain receded and she continued on her way, unimpeded. Doctor Selar and Counselor Troi followed. All the Chosen decided then and there who they would support. They followed Simone.

♪♪▶

"No!" Rojan yelled. "I brought you together. You belong to me!"

That one moment of distraction was enough. N'elent had slipped behind Rojan and delivered a near fatal blow. He jerked away, the knife sticking in his back, and fell to the floor.

Tammas let out a scream and fell to the floor as well. Gowr grabbed N'elent just as she was about to take hold of the knife and twist it, making a fatal strike.

"That's right," Rojan laughed, panting. He spit blood. "Kill me and kill him." At that moment the door burst open and more soldiers began filing through. Gowr drew his disruptors and started firing into the soldiers, and N'elent emulated him, having collected the disruptor that Garcia had discarded. People fell, but they kept coming, marching over their own wounded and dead. Firing at the floor dispersed energy, reflecting it up at various angles, taking down dozens of soldiers, but still they came.

"You can't win, Jude. Surrender now and I will allow your pets to live," Rojan laughed.

N'elent laughed. "Come on, then," she yelled, drawing a second weapon and firing. She was going to make sure she took out as many as she could before she died. Again.

And they would have died had Tammas not intervened. Using Kelvan technology, Tammas immobilized the approaching army and reduced them to their

essential elements. He staggered to his knees and crawled over to Rojan. He put a knee on the man's back and took hold of the knife.

Rojan laughed. "You can't do it. Neither you nor your friends can kill me. It is the weakness your kind are heir to. We are one now. If I die, you die," Rojan said. "The Chosen may support you temporarily, but they will turn on you eventually if you don't show them who's boss and I will be waiting to take back control when that happens."

N'elent went to strike at Rojan again in frustration, but Gowr held her back.

"Forget it," Tammias said. He pulled the knife out of Rojan's back and let it clatter to the floor. He screamed in sympathetic pain, falling back against the throne. As the pain subsided he reached out with one hand to do a healing, a power made possible by the Chosen, facilitated by the Guardian of this Communication Fortress.

"That's right, son," Rojan laughed. "Heal me. Together we will rule the Galaxy. Rojan and Jude."

Tam's Kelvan bracelet glowed briefly as he sought options simultaneously as he chose to heal Rojan. The Fortress bracelet flared with an intense white light, before the glow receded like a dying ember thrown from a campfire. It remained a cool orange. As Rojan's health improved, Tam's sympathetic pains faded even further into the back of his mind, mere memories that only required distraction to lessen the intensity. Tammias stood, smiling. Gowr and N'elent watched Garcia, puzzled, not enthused by what he had done. Even so, they understood.

"My name is Tammias," Tam told Rojan with no uncertainty in his voice. He sat down on the throne. "Cadet Tammias Parkin Arblaster-Garcia."

Rojan came to his knees, laughing even louder. "I knew you would give in to me," Rojan began. "I knew." Rojan paused, horror growing over his face. He grabbed at the Fortress bracelet that was no longer glowing.

Tammias reclined back in the chair, gazing at Rojan's growing rage, only slightly amused by the elder's reaction. He was finding it more and more difficult to stay focus given the amount of people vying for his attention. The fortress bracelet pulsed with activity, like a computer constantly accessing the hard drive.

"What have you done to me?!" Rojan yelled.

"I genetically altered your body so that you would be incapable of utilizing any type of psionic abilities," Tammias explained.

Rojan exploded with rage and attacked with the knife that had only recently been in his back. Gowr and N'elent simultaneously struck the man in his kidneys, driving him to his knees before Tammias. Rojan looked up at Tammias, clutching his gut with both hands. He snarled, anger lighting his eyes luminescent red.

"I'm not finished with you," Rojan said, and his finger slipped onto the button of his Kelvan wrist band.

Garcia raced for his Kelvan bracelet, faster than Rojan, but Rojan had the head start. This was a gun fight, similar to those in the old west. Their bracelets both lit. They both disappeared.

Gowr and N'elent looked around. It didn't occur to them to look up until a yellowish-orange blood fell like rain around them. They looked up to see two monstrous creatures over head. They aimed their weapons at the floating blobs, but not knowing which to shoot at, they were hesitant. The creatures were like two squids fighting, or better, two squid mating. A tentacle gripping a knife clattered to the floor beside Gowr.

There must have been hundreds of tentacles, and it was impossible to tell where one creature started and the other ended. They spun like a living whirlpools, tearing at each other's flesh.

One of the creatures let out a scream that caused Gowr and N'elent to fall to their knees in pain, covering their ears. It was followed by an explosive sound, like a balloon rupturing. The fatally wounded one fell towards the ground, collapsing in on itself like a weather balloon losing its hydrogen gas. Its body surface rippled with undulating waves of escaping gasses and fluids. The blood hitting the floor in torrents appeared to be boiling. The other creature followed, pulled down by the weight of the other, as they continued to battle. And then it was over. The broken one had apparently died, judging from its limp tentacles. It fell to the floor and finished deflating like a water bed with a dozen punctures, oozing multi-colored fluids, and bubbling gasses. The remaining one began to rise again. It drifted over the dais. Its arms dangled around the throne and around the Klingons, almost protectively. And then it was gone.

Tammas appeared back on his chair. His clothes were not torn but his flesh was marked as if he had been whipped with leather.

"What was that?" Gowr asked.

"A Kelvan," Tammas said. "He's dead, now."

The Kelvan body disappeared and again Rojan was back, gasping. His clothes were also torn, and he had similar wounds streaking across his flesh.

Gowr looked to Garcia for an explanation, but Garcia didn't issue one. Either he had been mistaken about Rojan being dead, or Rojan had managed to issue one last thought command to the Kelvan computer, directing it to convert him back to his human body, thereby saving his life.

Rojan bowed to Garcia. He appeared to be winded and defeated. "How is this possible?" he asked, his eyes on Garcia's feet.

"You created me," Tammas said, as if that were explanation enough.

Rojan nodded. That was it. He should have known. Should have seen it coming.

"Will you doom the Kelvan to extinction?" Rojan asked.

"Let that be your last battlefield," Tammas mumbled.

"What?" Gowr asked.

"Something Kirk once said," Tammas spoke up. "I understand it now. Either you learn to cooperate with your fellow humans, or the race wars will drive you to extinction. Whether the differences be race, sex, or ideas, you eventually have to decide what is more important, your species survival or your beliefs. If you don't look out for your fellow life forms that share your planet, you will discover in hindsight that a lost species might have saved you from extinction, like the whales. If you don't live in harmony with the intelligent machines you create, you go the way of Exo Three, where the machines killed off their organic creators, just another version of Terminator. And if you don't create peace with alien life forms, well then it's War of the Worlds. No, Rojan, I haven't condemned you to death. Your inability to adapt, to find peace, has led your species to extinction."

"You're one of us," Rojan said.

"No. I am unique, a one of a kind. My off spring will carry my genetic line, but the Kelvan perspective dies with me," Tammas told him.

"Yes, it will," Rojan said.



Rojan had once again found the knife. Tammas seemed to hesitate, which prompted Rojan to rush him. Tammas pushed the button on his bracelet and froze Rojan in place with the Kelvan technology. He stood up, pried the d'k tahg, the Klingon knife, he had picked up in the armory, from Rojan's fingers, aimed, and pulled back slowly, as if increasing tension on a bow. He was emitting a low hum which would explode into a scream as the knife pushed through flesh into Rojan's human heart.

"Tam!" Simone yelled, obviously wanting him to end the violence now.

Tammas looked at her and then at Rojan. He released him from his hold.

Rojan slumped to the floor, laughing. "I told you you couldn't do it. You're weak. That's the problem with Humanity. You'll let them control you. You need me."

"Don't listen to him, Tam," Deanna said.

Tammas threw the dagger down on the ground, obviously angry, but in control.

"It's only a matter of time, and then we will regroup, and do it all again," Rojan said. "You're not fit to rule the galaxy."

Tammas depressed the button on his Kelvan bracelet and Rojan disappeared, replaced by a polyhedron, dappled in blue and green, like a giant sweet tart. He kicked it like a soccer ball, sending it flying.

"That was unnecessary," Simone said.

Garcia found the thought of candy humorous. He laughed, taking his place on his throne. It didn't occur to him his laugh was very similar to Rojan's laugh. He laughed even harder, as if it were contagious, spreading to every fiber of his being. He found himself unable to quit. Even when his chest pained him from laughing so hard he couldn't quit. He spun the throne around, howling with delight. Somewhere up above, the Klingon Captain, Glor, was mirroring his actions, spinning his command chair around, spitting out orders, and reveling in the glory of battle. There was nothing to compare to the battle raging above in any of their histories. The theatre of operation was larger than even the Federation's showdown with the single, Borg ship. He did pause in his laughter when, for just a moment it appeared that the Enterprise was breaking apart, and he almost reached out to reassemble it, but then he laughed even harder at his misperception. The Enterprise had merely separated from the saucer section.

"Gowr, my brother," Tammas said. "You and N'elent are needed on the Pa Nun. Enjoy!"

Before they could protest, they were gone. Tammas smiled at their adaptability. Once on board the Pa Nun, they fell to their stations. Glor howled with delight knowing Tammas had been successful. He also believed they would have a powerful new weapon on their side. Simone, Selar, and Counselor Troi approached the dais, trying to get Tam's attention. He spun around and faced them.

"Hello, Counselor Troi. It's been a long time," Tammas said.

Deanna tried to be civil, but found herself at a loss for words. There was a first time for every thing, Tammas thought.

"Tammas," Selar interrupted. "Talk to me."

"Anything in particular?" Tammas asked. "Tell me, was I that much of a burden that you just passed me off without giving me any say in the matter?"

"Our relationship was one of convenience, one built on logic," Selar said. "The transfer of that relationship was just as logical at the time."

"It's not like I asked you for your help, you know. You abandoned me just like the others. Just like Troi," Tammias said.

"I never abandoned you," Troi argued.

"It's all right, Troi," Tammias said, each word distinct as if he were practicing speech all over again. "I'm so over you. Now that I have you right where I want you. I have all of the Chosen."

"You're human," Simone pointed out. "It is only natural for you to be attracted to more than one partner. Very few species actually mate for life. Most have multiple partners."

"Ha! Don't try to pass my fallibility off on physiology," Tammias argued. "If you recall, I am a doctor. I know human physiology and psychology. I know the human animal. And I know me better than ever, thanks to this power. I am just as evil and corrupt as Rojan ever was. He just didn't understand the full potential he had here. Give me a fulcrum and a lever big enough and I will move worlds. Ha! I am the Fulcrum, and you are my lever. Things are definitely going to change around here..."

"Tam!" Deanna shouted, taking on a parental tone. "You will release the flows of power this instant."

Tammias laughed, barely able to keep from falling out of his chair. He was quite aware of the other Chosen joining him in the audience chamber. They stood back, allowing the people who knew him best to try their logic on him with their voice while they each focused on thoughts of good will.

"What?" Tammias asked Deanna, pulling himself into some resemblance of authority. After all, the ruler of the Universe should show some control and a sense of decorum. "Let go? For once in my life, I have something to cling to, something I've never had before..." Tammias sang. He frowned at her lack of response. "You know, you never laugh at my jokes. My musical references are just wasted on you. Phew, right over the head." He roared with laughter, trimming his hair with his hand. He spun his chair. "I'm just beside myself with amazement. Good one, Gowr. Nice hit... Who put Riker in charge of the battle bridge?! You're drifting to Starboard... That's better. Stay on target..."

"Tam," Counselor Troi tried. "You could stop the battle up there."

"What? And violate the prime directive?" Tammias asked. "Oh, such a double edged sword I weave... Somebody stop me! Quick, what movie was that from, Troi? Ehhhh. Wrong answer."

"Tam," Simone tried again.

"Drop it, Princess!" Tammias warned her. "You don't want me any more than the others. You were just scared of being alone and so you snatched me away from Selar. You tricked her."

"I did it to save you," Simone said. "To save us."

"I'm sure. It was purely motivated by logic," Tammias said.

"Not completely," Simone said, looking away. She had liked him from the moment she had first met him, when she had interrupted the tea he was sharing with her grandmother, T'Pau. She had not pursued a friendship because there had been no logic in it. There was no reason for them to interact.

Tammias was amazed "What? A Vulcan response without duplicity?"

"I am sorry," Selar said. "I permitted this."

Tammas sighed. "No goodbye, no warning, just pull the old plug on Tammas. Just like a woman. Drop the man for someone new and then regrets it when the old flame comes into power and money. I bet you want me back now, don't you? You, too, Counselor. Is that regret I'm sensing? Now that I don't need from you."

"Fine," Deanna said. "Let us go if you don't need us."

Tammas was silent. His eyes never left Deanna. He could let them go. He really didn't need them. He could live entirely off the fantasy Deanna in his head. Better than a holodeck.

"Go ahead, Tammas," Deanna said. "Let go of us."

Tammas was stunned. It was that simple. So, why the hesitation, he wondered.

"I can't," Tammas said finally, his voice like a child that can't get his hand out of a jar because he simply won't release the goodies tight in his fist. "I won't."

"Why not?" Deanna asked.

"You might as well ask me to cut off my arm, or a leg," Tammas said. "You're all a part of me. We're one. And I'm not going back to the solitude of being human, ever. This is better than the Borg collective. Interesting parallel."

"You were never alone," Deanna said. "I was always with you."

"You have me," Simone offered, stepping forward. "Let the others go, Tammas. Just you and me. We can stay here and listen to the calls of the Universe, just you and me."

"Yeah, because you're not a frigid little..." Tammas began.

"Tammas Garcia! Let us go," Deanna interrupted.

"Tammas," Simone tried, more soothingly. "You've always been a man of great love and passion. Look in your heart. The harder you try to hold onto something, the harder it is to keep it. The only way to keep our good rapport is to let us go. If we stay in your life, then that is love. If we go, it wasn't meant to be, and that doesn't mean we left because you were evil, or even undesirable. It's because we have our own paths to follow. You know this. You teach this. You live this! Let go, Tam."

"I'm afraid. I don't want to be alone, like in the before time," Tammas said, his head dropping with the sudden change in emotions. He crossed his arms, taking on the look of a sulking child who was unable to reason out the problem.

"You will never be alone. Your soul is too generous for you to ever be alone," Simone assured him.

"Absolute power corrupts absolutely," Tammas quoted, understanding. He sighed, envisioning all the wonderful things he could do for the Federation, no, for the Galaxy! And then he realized why he had taken the prime directive as his oath. He would hate it if some other higher life form exercised the same form of control over him that he was contemplating exerting over everyone else. Sure, Q could probably do lots of good for his friends, but who could stand his wrath if he were angered? Tammas wasn't ready to play the part of a god, but still, how could he let go of such power, and live knowing that it was always there, just waiting for him to take it up again. Or worse, what if someone else came along to use it? It was so easy....

"I can't ever go back to what I was before," Tammas said quietly. "I've just learned to see. You can't ask me to go back to being blind... I can't..."

"We'll help you adjust," Counselor Troi said. "Trust me, once more."

"No. I can't go back... But you're right. I know you're right. You have your own path. I have to let you go to follow your path. No one has a right to dominate, and no one should be dominated. Your grandmother needs you, Simone. Go to her..."

Tammas dismissed her with a wave of his hand and suddenly she was gone.

Tammas was crying now. "Perhaps our paths will meet again, Selar. It would be good to walk with you once more..."

Then Selar was gone.

"Tammas, what are you thinking. What are you about to do?" Deanna asked, reaching out for him.

"Just letting you go," Tammas said. "The only way I know how. Thank you for the beach. And chewing gum."

Deanna opened her mouth to protest, but before the words came, she was gone. Tammas closed his eyes. He transported all the Chosen to various ships. It would be standing room only on the Enterprise and Sutherland, but as Tammas was transporting the captives to the ships, two more Federation Starships dropped out of warp. He spread the people amongst the new ships. Even with the last of the Chosen gone, though, there was still the taint of power. It was more diffused and his head was less noisy with the demands and concerns of the others, but it was still leaving a bad taste in his mouth. Ambivalence still reigned, and he struggled not to bring them back, struggled not to fight to keep what he had. He knew it was necessary to let go, but he just couldn't do it completely. He wasn't ready. None of them were ready.

Tammas shivered. As he had feared, he was not able to sever the bonds any more than he could amputate his own leg. Separating Rojan from their group was easy, like pulling a pained tooth, but these others in his head were healthy parts of him and he wanted health so desperately he could taste it, and couldn't let go. He brushed wildly at his face. It felt as if he had just walked through a spider web and his nerve endings were firing as if there were still tangles of silk tickling his face, his nose, and neck. He was startled by Simone and Counselor Troi's voice as they called out to him. It was as if they were still there, standing right there with him.

"You have to let go, too!" Tammas pleaded. "You're holding on. Why are you holding on? You wanted this!"

"Not like this," Simone said.

"No. I'm freeing you. All of you. Why won't you let go?" Tammas asked. "It's the only way you can be free."

"Tammas," Counselor Troi interrupted. "There's always another way."

"Not this time. We haven't evolved enough for this toy. I always thought I would make a good god, a benevolent dictator, but I would abuse even this lesser power. I still have so much to learn. I have evolved too fast as it is. I'm not ready. The rate of evolution is increasing as our species mix, but I am not ready. Go now. Go!"

♪♪▶

"Two new ships arriving in this sector," Data announced.

"What?" Picard asked.

"It's the Infinity, Captain," Worf said. "And the Klingon ship Wolverine."

"On screen!" Picard said.

"Captain Picard. Are you in need of assistance?" Janeway asked.

"I think we got it under control, thank you," Captain Glor chimed in on the communication.

"Who are you?" Janeway asked.

"That was Captain Glor of the Pa Nun," Commander Riker said, standing. "Clear this channel, Captain Glor."

"Commander, please," Glor said. "I was not aware that you were in charge of this battle. Naturally, now that I have done all the work, I place my ships at your disposal."

"Your ships?" Picard asked.

"Yes, I've commandeered two Romulan Vessels," Glor said proudly.

A Romulan cut in on the frequency. "You will surrender our ships immediately!"

"Your ships? I found them unmanned, floating free in Federation Space," Glor said. "I claim salvage rights."

"Surrender my ships or face the consequences," the Romulan said.

"Data, kill this noise," Picard said, reaching for his forehead. Though Glor technically had salvage rights, he didn't want to deal with it at this time.

"Captain, the remaining Kelvan ship is retreating towards the Wormhole. It's got a tractor beam on the Borg ship and it is taking it with it," Data announced.

"Data, open hailing frequencies and tell everyone to finish off that Borg ship," Captain Picard said. "It's imperative that the Kelvan's not escape with Borg technology."

"I hear you, Captain," Riker said, his voice clear over the audio. "Two captured Romulan ships have just entered the wormhole. It looks like it is stable."

Doctor Selar appeared on the Bridge of the Enterprise. Before Picard could welcome her back, Troi appeared right next to her. She seemed to be reaching out to someone.

"Sir," Worf interrupted the welcome home. "The planetoid is moving. Its current trajectory has it on a collision course with the sun."

"It's Tam," Doctor Selar said. "He's attempting to destroy it."

"Captain, we have to beam him out of there. He's going to commit suicide," Deanna added.

"Bring us around on an intercept course. Transporter room, as soon as you get a lock on Garcia's coordinates, beam him up. Data, prepare to lower shields on my command," Captain Picard ordered.

"Sir!" Brooks shouted. She didn't have to add an explanation. The answer was clear enough on the main viewer. Someone was attacking them again.

"Data, hail Riker and tell him the situation. One of us has to get close enough to beam Garcia off the planetoid," Picard said.

"Aye, Captain," Data agreed.

"Evasive!" Picard yelled. "Get us out of the battle, Brooks."

"Sir, the Pa Nun is going after Garcia. They are requesting back up," Data said.

"Acknowledge their request. Get us over there now. Make a hole if you can't find one," Picard said.

"I'm trying, Captain..." Brooks said. Not only were they maneuvering around live ships and dodging stray torpedoes, but there was a tremendous amount of battle debris to avoid.



Simone found herself suddenly in Ten Forward, on the Enterprise. She didn't know it was the Enterprise, but she was comforted to see the faces of the Vulcans around her, her fellow Chosen. They were all glad to be free of that wretched place, but she still had concerns.

The Planetoid passed through the field of vision of Ten Forward. Outside the window was chaos, the ship was obviously turning to avoid collisions. Debris spun by. So did a live torpedo, rays of energy flaring off in starlight patterns. There was the wormhole, blossoming as a Romulan ship entered, and again the planetoid was in view. It was moving away.

"We're not free yet," Simone said, holding her arm up to reveal the glowing bracelet. "Everyone, focus on me."

## CHAPTER THIRTYTWO

There was no viewer for Tammias to watch. It was all in his mind's eye. The sun was his focus and from his perspective it was growing in diameter as he pushed the planetoid towards it. What was once just a pin prick of light was now the size of a pea, the size of Jupiter as seen from earth. The battle no longer raged as before. There were just a few pockets of skirmishes going on. He didn't care that three Romulan ships had just entered the wormhole and were headed towards the Andromeda Galaxy. He knew there were modified Kelvan on those ships, but he didn't begrudge them trying to save their race, even after all that had happened. He also didn't mind the larger Kelvan ship escaping with the Borg ship in tow. What would a biological Borg slash Kelvan look like? The Borg didn't want the Kelvan, just their technology. The Borg were very narrow minded about what species they "assimilated." It was too bad the Kelvan were leaving, for their technology would have been very useful against another Borg attack.

"You're doing the right thing, you know."

Tammias looked down from his throne to where he thought he had heard a voice. Ilona was sitting on the floor, her back against the base of the throne. She was filing her fingernails.

"You?!" Tammias said. "How did you get here?"

"Transporter, of course," Ilona said.

Tammias pushed the button on his Kelvan bracelet to transport her away, sending her to the nearest ship, only she didn't go. He studied the information scrolling across the Kelvan interface and was surprised to find that Ilona didn't show up at all. He could see her with his eyes, but not with the Kelvan technology.

Duana appeared, as if beaming in. "Tam! You got to get out of here."

"Are you kidding? He's got to destroy this thing!" Ilona said. She pointed her fingernail file at her. "You stay out of this."

Tammias blinked. They were both there in his field of vision, but neither registered on the Kelvan sensor sweep. They weren't real! He disengaged from the Kelvan technology and considered the possibilities. Schizophrenia was the first thing that came to mind, but surely his neural interface would have detected such a thing and recommended medical treatment. "Okay, who are you two and what do you want?"

"I want you to stop this foolish mission and transport over to the Enterprise this instant," Duana said.

"Stay focused, Tam," Ilona said. "You're doing this for the good of the Federation and the Galaxy at large. How much more of a noble sacrifice could you make? You'll make the history books."

"Screw noble sacrifice and history books," Duana snapped. "Tammias, haven't you learned anything from the Federation? Life is the most precious gift in the Universe, and as a Star Fleet Officer, your job is to preserve it."

"Please," Ilona said. "Next you'll be telling him he doesn't have the right to die."

"Tam, you can't destroy this thing! It's older than the Galaxy itself. You heard the Voice! It's related to the Guardian of Time," Duana said.

"Maybe he can't destroy it," Ilona said. She stood up, adjusted her skirt and then sat in the chair next to Tam, putting her arm around him. "But at least if it's sitting at the heart of that star, no one else can use it either."

Tammias could feel her touching him. How could this be a hallucination?

“Who are you?” Tammias asked.

“We’re your guardian angels,” Ilona said.

“Excuse me?” Tammias asked.

“It’s like this, Tam,” Ilona said. “We are the manifest personalities derived from a mass psychic collective.”

“What?” Tammias blinked.

“What happens when you connect a sufficient number of super computers together, Tam?” Duana asked.

“You get a sentient computer?” Tammias asked.

“You’re so smart,” Ilona said, pinching his cheek. “That’s why we love you.”

“So, what happens when you tie a sufficient number of brains together in tandem through telepathic links?” Duana asked him.

“Insanity?” Tammias asked.

“Ehhh, wrong answer,” Ilona buzzed. “You get us.”

“Well, his answer wasn’t completely wrong,” Duana said. “No doubt, had you been a normal human, the results could have very well been insanity. However, you weren’t normal. Your Kelvan imprinting gave you the ability to process a great deal more information than the average human and consequently, when you plugged into this machine, you tapped into not only the group of hostages here, but you tapped into a number of sentient species across the universe. All our minds melded into one, for just a brief moment in time, which was all it took for us to be born. We’re real, live personalities, but, due to complexities beyond our control, we only live within your mind. You can see us, but no one else.”

“If you had paid closer attention to the names, you would have realized that it’s even more complicated than we understand,” Ilona said. “We’re archetypes. Duana, the little dark one, and Ilona, the light one. Are you starting to see the ramifications?”

“But, I saw you before I plugged into this machine,” Tammias argued.

“You’re thinking too linearly,” Ilona said. “Simone took over your psychic bond from Selar before you reached Deep Space K7.”

“What she’s struggling to say is that we weren’t temporally located until Simone connected with you,” Duana said. “And that’s a good thing for you, cause if we hadn’t helped motivate you to complete your mission, we might not have been created. Just ignore the fact that it’s a paradox.”

“Just think of us as angels on your shoulders,” Ilona said, squeezing him towards her like a little brother.

“Oh, my, god,” Tammias said. “I’m crazy.”

“Okay, you’re about to commit suicide by diving into a star and you’re doubt that you have some mental issues?” Duana asked. “Hello? Suicide? Crazy?”

“Suicide is painless, not crazy,” Ilona pointed out.

“I can’t go back,” Tammias said.

“And why the hell not?” Duana asked. “Feeling sorry for yourself? Lonely? Such rubbish! Let’s pretend for a moment that there is sixteen billion people on earth. I don’t know the current population, but sixteen sounds about right. And out of all those people...”

“Not one is like me,” Tammias said, blowing it off. “Yeah, yeah, I’ve heard this speech before. McCoy gave it to me.”



“I don’t like being interrupted,” Duana said.

“She really doesn’t,” Ilona said.

“And that wasn’t what I was going to say,” Duana added. “I was going to say, there’s a good chance that I’d say forty percent of that populations would trade places with you in a heart beat if given the chance. You have a fabulous life, not because you’re famous, but because you’re you. You are interesting. Your life is interesting. The people around you are interesting. There are people on Earth, in that population, that simply can’t do all the things that you are doing, or that you have done, and they live through you vicariously. It gives them hope and inspiration. It spurs them on to continue to be the best they can be. If you give up here, when it’s so obviously not necessary, well, then you’re condemning the rest of them to death.”

Tammas blinked.

“And don’t even think of trying to down play your influence in society,” Duana said before he could say anything. “You’re needed.”

“I think she’s talking a lot fluff, if you ask me,” Ilona said. “We all got to die sometime, and, well, this is like jumping into the Volcano to appease the gods and save the village. I find that very inspiring. Orange crush?”

Tammas didn’t know from where her can of orange soda came, but he rejected it. Could he drink a hallucination?

“Would you shut the hell up, Ilona,” Duana said.

“I have just as much right to his attention as you do,” Ilona said.

Both girls looked around suddenly, surprised to hear another voice.

“Tam? It’s me Simone. Let us help you,” Simone voice rang clear in his mind.

Duana noticed Tammas wincing, as if in pain, reaching for his head with both hands. She touched him compassionately.

“Yes, listen to her,” Duana said.

“I can barely hear my own thoughts anymore. Which are my thoughts? Did I ever have my own thoughts? Literature, poetry, songs...” Tammas cried.

“It matters not if the thoughts came from you, or Simone, or Selar, or all these other sources available to you,” Duana said. “Experience them and know joy.”

“I’ll never be the same,” Tammas said.

“Thank god!” Duana said. “You’re evolving. The Universe is Evolving. Static is death. The Universe is unfolding just like it’s supposed to.”

“With the exception of the occasional time distortions and paradoxes,” Ilona said.

“Look, Tammas. That’s why Ilona and I are here,” Duana said. “Three heads are better than one. We can help you better process this informational over load that you’re feeling. The thing is, we can’t help you if you’re dead. You die, we die. We’re kind of a package deal.”

“I am dreaming,” Tammas said. “I want to wake up now.”

“Why would anyone want to wake up from a dream?” Ilona asked. “Death isn’t such a bad thing. It’s a place of dreams. To die, to sleep, you know, to dream? You just sort of forget and start all over again somewhere else.”

“Rubbish,” Duana said. “You have work to do here, Tam. You have a daughter you’ve never even met!”

“He can never meet,” Ilona pointed out.

“Perhaps in person, but maybe you could arrange to meet on two separate holodecks that are connected in tandem. Did you ever think of that?” Duana asked.

Tammas smiled at the idea. That was a good idea. Yeah, that could work. Like playing a game over the IS-Net.

“They are asking for songs,” Duana said, referring to the calling of the Guardian of the Communication Fortress. “Can’t you hear the voices all over the Universe? They know you have songs. Songs you haven’t even written yet. Will you rob them of that?”

♪♪▶

On the Bridge of the Pa Nun, Captain Glor sat forward in his chair.

"We're not going to make it," Gowr announced.

"Detonate those charges. Perhaps blowing those generators will slow him down," the Captain said.

"Done, Sir... No effect. Active scans show no damage..." Gowr reported.

"Increase speed to full impulse," Captain Glor ordered.

"Sir, intercepting an emergency broad cast to all Romulan vessels. It's originating from their flagship," Taging said. "They're ordering their ships to converge on the planetoid. They are being ordered to capture it at all cost."

"It's too great a weapon to allow them to have it," Glor said, sitting back in his chair. "Tammas is right. We'll support him in his death run. Ready all weapons."

"Ready!" Gowr said.

Two Romulan War Birds uncloaked and locked onto the planetoid with tractor beams. The Pa Nun opened fire on them. One was destroyed instantly while the other disengaged its tractor beam to take evasive action. Four other Romulan War Birds were coming into the battle arena from the Pa Nun's port side. What the Pa Nun didn't see was the bird of prey uncloaking directly behind them. At least, they didn't see it until the Sutherland hit it with full phasers. The bird of prey's attitude changed just as it fired its torpedoes, skewing the trajectory wide off the mark. The stray torpedo crippled one of its fellow War Birds. The other War Birds took evasive, firing on both the Sutherland and the Pa Nun.

"Shields holding!" N'elent yelled. "Sir, I have a lock on Tammas. We can beam him up as soon as we lower the shields..."

"We will wait until we are certain that the planetoid can not be recovered," Captain Glor said. "Just don't lose that lock. And hail the Enterprise, Taging. They were supposed to be offering us back up!"

"We're right behind you," Riker answered the hail. The saucer section was tied up in its own struggle. "We'll provide cover while you transport Garcia."

"Agreed, stand by one," Glor accepted the help.

"The solar wind is blowing the planetoid's atmosphere away," Gowr reported. "Tammas doesn't have much more time. The Enterprise is taking up a support position directly aft. They're providing us cover!"

"Lower the shields on my mark and begin transport," Captain Glor ordered.

Tammas looked up from his throne and laughed. The wind was roaring around him, whipping his hair and clothes. His hallucinations stood, holding onto the throne, their hair and skirts moving with the breeze. He saw the shields coming down on the Pa Nun and the War Birds trying to hit it through the Enterprise's shields. He reached out his hand. It was so easy. How could he have lived all his life and not known how easy it

was and that the power had always been there. The Romulan War Birds went dead in space, momentum saving their velocity and vectors, which would bring them into collision with the Enterprise if it didn't alter course.

The Enterprise didn't adjust course. Riker had promised to provide cover and he was going to risk impact in order to give the Pa Nun time to rescue Tammias and get out of the way, even if it meant their deaths to keep that promise. It was a gesture that almost made Garcia want to like the man. The Klingon Empire would hear of the sacrifice.

Except Tammias wasn't about to let that happen. The Pa Nun and Enterprise disappeared and the War Birds collided with each other. New War Birds took their place, sweeping past the debris as they pursued the planetoid, trying to lock onto it with tractor beams.

The Pa Nun appeared again, one astronomical unit away from their last known position with the Enterprise sitting right behind it. They could do nothing but witness the planetoid power diving into the sun. The impact left a crater on the sun that was short lived as liquid fire filled the impact crater with solar plasma. The impact caused fiery ripples across the surface of the sun, and a solar flare reached out from the center of impact, engulfing the Romulan War Birds chasing it. The solar flare continued to extend out beyond the two War Birds that had collided, melting the two together. Smaller pieces simply evaporated and joined the solar winds, diffusing into the vacuum.

Though the crew of the Pa Nun could not see their fallen comrade's eyes, they could still perform the Klingon death ritual. The entire Bridge of the Pa Nun let loose a powerful howl to warn the dead that a Klingon warrior was about to arrive. The howl was an exaltation of the victorious. Not of mourning. Not for Tammias. He chose his fate and died a true Klingon. No one would have to say the words, "Tammias would be missed." He had become a part of their crew and a part of them.

"Sir. Picard has announced a cease fire is in effect. The Romulans are surrendering. We are victorious!" N'elent cheered.

"How many torpedoes have we left?" the Captain asked.

"Three, Sir," Gowr reported.

"That will suffice," the Captain Glor said. "Open all channels, Taging. In honor of our dead, for the warriors that have come and gone, for the battles yet to come, and to our friend Tammias Garcia, we salute you... "

Gowr fired the three torpedoes, best dispersion pattern. A brief show of lights lit up the battle debris and all the remaining ships, many of them crippled beyond repair. Captain Picard added some words and his compliments to the Pa Nun, and added three shots of his own from the saucer section. The Enterprise followed suit. One by one, all the ships in the area that were still capable of responding gave their respects, even the Romulan Captains participated in the salute.

## EPILOGUE

Only Tam wasn't dead. He had been ripped from the planetoid by force. He was in Ten Forward, encircled by the group who had rescued him, using their combined power and the influence of an alien technology. Kelvan technology. Simone let go of the solitary button that was on her wrist band. She had risked severe brain damage accessing it, but she had been able to use the computer successfully, perhaps because of the telepathic link to the others, or perhaps because she was one with Garcia, or maybe, and most likely because of her superior intellect.

The Chosen were no longer in his head and the crystal bracelets that had linked them together were gone, compliments of Simone and Kelvan technology. Tammias should have been relieved, but the only emotion he could feel was anger.

"How dare you!" Tammias said. "I have free will."

"I give you your free will back," Simone offered, bowing traditionally.

Guinan stepped into the circle. "Tam," she said.

"Not now!" Tammias snapped. "I'm not going to be calm now. I am angry now. I made a choice."

"Tammias," Guinan interrupted firmly. Even now he found it hard to resist her peacefulness. "You need to go to sickbay."

"The hell I need to go to sickbay," Tammias said. "I'm tired of people telling me what I need."

"It's McCoy, Tam. He's dying and he's asking for you," Guinan said.

"What?" Tammias asked, his visible anger was gone, his voice a whisper. It was like he was another person standing there.

"Come with me," Guinan said, putting an arm around his shoulder.

Tammias broke through the circle, brushing Simone rather harshly as if challenging her to a fight. They exchanged glances, each expressing different thoughts. Garcia and Guinan hustled to the turbolift and took it down to sickbay. The lift didn't go fast enough, but it eventually opened up, and Garcia's vision blurred as he made it the final way. He wiped his eyes on his sleeve and entered. Guinan walked over to join Picard, Worf, and Counselor Troi. McCoy lay very still, life support readings didn't look promising. He was literally "circling the drain." Crusher, who was treating another patient, looked up to see Tammias and turned what she was doing over to the nurse so she could attend to him. She scanned him with her tricorder to ascertain his health.

"Doctor, you have to heal him," Tammias said.

"I can't do anything more for him," Crusher said. "He has a living will."

"I don't care. Fix him!" Tammias demanded.

"Tam, is that you?" McCoy called out.

Garcia went to McCoy. "I'm here, Pa Pa."

"You're alive," McCoy said. "I'm very relieved."

"Let me help you," Tammias pleaded, holding McCoy's hand to his face.

"No, it's time," McCoy said. "I go to join my friends."

"That's silly," Tammias said. "How do you know your friends haven't cheated death? They have before!"

"It is okay, Tam. I'm ready," McCoy assured him. "I'm just glad to see that you're well."

“What kind of talk is this?” Tammias demanded. He felt hypocritical, but he didn’t care. “How am I supposed to stay well knowing you’re not here? Who’s going to come bail me out of trouble?”

McCoy chuckled. “You’ll have to stay out of trouble.”

“That’s too difficult,” Tammias said. “We can help you. Even if you’re bed ridden, your brain is still good, and we can liberate your mind through virtual technologies.”

“Humans aren’t supposed to live forever,” McCoy said.

“How do you know that?” Tammias asked. “Maybe people just keep dying because of tradition. There’s the Kelvan ship on board. I can use its technology to make you young again.”

“No!” McCoy said, adamantly. The force of his “no” started a coughing fit.

“Please,” Tammias said, crying on McCoy’s chest. “You’re the closest thing to family I got. I know we’ve hardly spent any quality time together, but I thought you’d still be around. I need you.”

“Promise me something,” McCoy said. “Take charge of my burial ceremony on New Fabrini. See that I get buried there, next to my wife.”

Garcia begged, “At least let me carry your Katra!”

“No,” McCoy said. “No more mind melds. My funeral arrangements. Promise me.”

Tammias wiped his face on his sleeves and looked into McCoy’s eyes. He wasn’t sad, or afraid, or lonely. He was just tired. He would be alright with just a little rest. McCoy was obviously tired and his sanity slipping. No sane person would seek death, right? Isn’t that what Duana was telling him?

“Promise me,” McCoy said.

“I’ll take care of the New Fabrini arrangements,” Tammias said, resigned.

“Thank you,” McCoy said. “One more thing.”

“Name it,” Tammias said.

“You’re a lot like him, in many ways,” McCoy said. “I see me, too, but more of him for some reason.”

“Who?” Tammias said.

“I’m going to tell you what I told him,” McCoy said.

“I’m sure you’ve told me already,” Tammias said, sniffing, guessing at what was to follow.

McCoy told him anyway. “Out of trillions of galaxies there are probably only a billion earth like stars, and out of those, perhaps only a few millions of those will have earth like planets where life has developed, and out of those, maybe a few thousand that have sentient life, but in all of this, in all the Universe, there is only one you. Be kind to the one known as Tammias Garcia.”

McCoy’s hand went limp as he passed over, his eyes remaining open. One moment he seemed to be looking right at Garcia, and then suddenly his focus went through Garcia and beyond to infinity. There was the death rattle, something Tammias had never heard before, never so clearly anyway, but he had read of such things. It was the sound of the last bit of air leaking from McCoy. McCoy was gone. Tammias looked towards the ceiling and howled. For a moment it was his voice alone, but then Worf, recognizing the Klingon ritual, was behind him, adding to the chorus. The medical

display over McCoy's bed cracked and the three glass containers on a mobile cart just behind Garcia shattered, allowing the contents to ooze out, mixing the primary colors. He placed McCoy's hands on his chest and raised the cover over his face, and then laid his head down on top of the lifeless body. Counselor Troi touched Tam's shoulder and he allowed himself to be led away.

## Note from the Author

My best friend and I have often commented that someone should write a sequel to Star Trek:TOS episode, "A Piece of the Action." In fact, we already have a title for it: "Another Piece of the Action." What we didn't have, yet, was a finished story. I set out to write that story, but before I could, I had to write "A Touch of Greatness," just to get it out of my head. What I tried to do differently in this story was to stretch time out over a larger time period. I did this partly because very few things in life are so neatly wrapped up over a week, or month's time, which is the usual episode time. The other part was to try and show that who we are comes about through a life time of choices, people encounters, and learning opportunities. The events in this story take place before TNG episode, "Unification."

I have endeavored to stay consistent with "Trek" history, (or trivia if you prefer,) blending multiple forms of Star Trek media, including episodes, books, movies, and the original cartoon series. Given the amount of material available, it may be impossible to keep every published story in sync with every one else's vision, but I'm still endeavoring to keep my stories in sync, first with the tv and movies, and next with the books. There are those who know more of the trivia than I, and there are no doubt better story tellers, so feel free to contact me for disparities or continuity issues. Enclosed here are my references. References... Umm, references almost make this seem scholarly. It's not. It's just my way of paying tribute to the people that deserve credit for the ideas in my head and for providing me with a vehicle to share those abstracts in some meaningful form. At least, I hope there is meaning. I will settle for coherence and continuity. Again, I consider this document a work in progress, so feel free to email me corrections or ideas.

## STAR TREK: THE ANIMATED SERIES

Yes, I watched the cartoons. And, yes, I remember them.

So, let's start by going back to "Yesteryear," episode 3. This is a "I want a sehlat" classic. We get to see Spock as a child. Hell, we get to see Spock as an adult see Spock as a child, which is well done for a time travel episode. The quality of the writing for the animated series was really refreshing. I didn't know that at the time. I was just a kid and I didn't have millions of people writing me letters saying, "Please, bring Star Trek back." Hello! Was that a clue or what?

Sorry, little bit of a tangent there. (Chasing rabbits.) LOL. Where was I? Ah, yes, it's a time travel episode. But it's actually not trite. Besides, it's not like time travel ever happens in the Star Trek universe. Very often. It was also nice to see the use of the Guardian of Forever again.

And then there was the "The Slaver Weapon," episode 11. What makes this one particularly special is that it was a short story written by Larry Niven, and you just can't have a sci-fi classic without a reference to Larry Niven! If you watch the episode, take

notice of the “life belt” which eliminated the need for space suits by surrounding the user with a force field and breathable atmosphere. (It makes characters seem as if they had an aura, like the daughters of Zeus in the movie Xanadu.). Umm, I wonder if there were some health related issues which caused Star Fleet to recall them. (I will revisit the life belts in Another Piece of the Action.)

#### STAR TREK: THE ORIGINAL SERIES.

I made passing, and perhaps obscure, references to the following episodes: “Let That Be Your Last Battlefield,” by Lee Craven; The Mark of Gideon, by George Slavin and Stanley Adams; The Savage Cutain, by Gene Roddenberry; The Enemy Within, by Richard Matheson; and, The Deadly Years, by David Pharmon.

“Is There no Truth in Beauty” TOS episode 62, written by Jean Lisette Aroeste, and aired first in 1968. Not a crucial episode for this story, but I do reference the Medusan, which was featured in this episode. The Medusan have minds that are believed the most beautiful in the Universe, but their physical form is so hideous in appearance that a human being can be driven mad by merely looking at one without a protective visor. It would be interesting to know if the damage is strictly psychological in nature or has a neurological component.

“By Any Other Name” episode 50, first aired in 1968. (Did I say I was born in 1968? Do you know, the episode “The Gamesters of Triskelion” first aired on my birthday and there’s a good chance my mom was watching it with me? Okay, maybe I wasn’t really watching it, and maybe it wasn’t actually my birthday, but it would have been the episode of the week and I’m sure my little ears were absorbing all the sound effects... (Where do all these rabbits come from?)) The Kelvan are extremely crucial to the plot of “ATOG.” It’s not compulsory to watch the episode, or read any of the references, just highly recommended. One of these days I’m going to have a Star Trek pizza restaurant, and you can come in and watch the episodes while having a (vegetarian) Vulcan pizza.

Star Trek is my paradise, so I suppose it no wonder that paradise is a theme so often revisited. “The Paradise Syndrome” Star Trek time line: Year 2268. Gives you a hint of who “the Preservers” are and what their mission might be. It also lends good evidence that the Milky Way was/is being seeded, at least in the Star Trek Universe, and this theme will also be seen again and again. Anyhow, we keep trying to get to paradise. Sometimes we even get there and decide it wasn’t really what we wanted after all. And sometimes, we even take it away from those who were quite happy with their paradise until we came along and showed them, hey, this isn’t paradise. It’s amazing what the power of perspective can do.

“A Piece of the Action.” If you know how it ends, you know McCoy left technology behind and Kirk is heard saying, “Who knows, in a few years, the Iotians may be demanding a piece of our action,” or something to that effect. Is that a set up for a sequel, or what? (Another friend bought Star Trek trivia, we started to play, I answered one question, he packed the game up, closed the box, and put it away. Was it something I



said?) Um, wouldn't it be great if the Enterprise D were to return one hundred years after Kirk, who was there one hundred years after the Horizon and see what happens?

“The Trouble With Tribbles.” A Star Trek book without a reference to Tribbles is just begging for trouble. A little more development for Sherman's planet, just because I wanted more, and I thought, wouldn't it be funny if neither the Klingon Empire or the Federation won the rights to Sherman's planet. (And just who is Sherman, anyway?)

“For the World is Hollow and I Have Touched the Sky” Year 2268 A must see, especially if you're a McCoy/Kelley fan. I would like to hope Kirk wasn't the only one to have a romance. We have to go back there with McCoy. We want to know more of that story. Just a little bit. Don't want to invade his privacy too much.

“City on the Edge of Forever” this has to be the all time best original episode ever. The Guardian of Forever will be found here. So will Edith Keeler. And it was this episode that helped me get an A on a research paper for World Lit. Yes, I did a compare and contrast between “The Aeneid,” and “City on the Edge of Forever.” I've never heard anyone else make that comparison, either, so I can only hope that I have written something original! So, if you needed another reason to read classic literature, or World Lit, well, there you have it. (Not that anyone who watches Star Trek has a problem with that. Almost all the characters read classic Lit, so you're getting compounded with allusions in the scripts and in the episode titles and... A case for Star Trek and Literature as a college level course!)

“The Menagerie.” Episode Sixteen, by Jason Warren. It might have been the first episode had the ‘powers that be’ not considered “The Cage” as “too cerebral” for us poor Americans to handle. Still, it's an important episode with some interesting sociological over tones that humans may need to consider should our entertainment technology continue to advance as it is.

“The Cloud Minders.” Written by David Gerald and Oliver Crawford. Every planet should have a floating city, but since that doesn't seem to be the case, the protagonist gets to visit this one. Sure, it's a plot contrivance, and filler. Not that this needs filler. It's pretty thick as it is.

And the android episodes:

“Requiem For Methusela”

TOS episode #76, by Jerome Bixby. Stardate 5843.7 Long before Lal has an emotional conflict that ultimately causes her cascade failure, and death, a similar emotional conflict with Rayna Kapec causes her demise.

“What Little Girls are Made of”

TOS episode #10 by Robert Bloch

Sub plot for this is that the android/robots destroyed the civilization that created them. Kind of reminiscent of Terminator, so Exo Three is the example Tammis is referring to in his final ramblings.

“I, Mudd”

TOS episode 41, by Stephen Kendel... begs the question: Where can I get my Alice series android?

#### STAR TREK: THE NEXT GENERATION

Since this story’s resolution takes place before 2368, and some of those events take place at Star Fleet Academy, I’ve relied on some of the characters established in “The First Duty” (episode 89, by Ronald Moore and Naren Shankar) for familiar faces around the campus.

“The Last Outpost,” episode 7, by Krzemien, (Yes, that’s really how it’s spelled! I’ve looked it up four times now because Word doesn’t recognize it...) introduces us to the Tkon Empire. I wanted more Tkon Empire! (It could be I just want more in general. I must be a Ferengi at heart.) Anyway, it’s a nice introduction to the Ferengi who play a crucial part in the sequel and so it’s important to note this episode’s influence on this particular writer and story. It’s not that I’m obsessive compulsive, it’s just... Okay. I got OCD. Anyway, there is more on the Tkon Empire in a TNG book... or so I heard, but I haven’t read this one or know its name. It supposedly delves further into their extinction level event and gives us more of the Dyson Sphere, as seen in the episode “Relics.” (Go, Scotty!)

“Justice,” Episode 9, by Ralph Wills and Worley Thorne. You got to have Justice. Yeah, I know, some of the first season shows were tough to sit through, but this episode has so much promise, and, well, I actually had to watch it again during a college level course! (What’s that, you say? Credit for watching Star Trek? Can life be any sweeter or what?! (The course was at UNT, run by Doctor Chilton, Criminal Justice.) And can you see me in class, imitating Picard, “there can be no justice as long as laws are absolute...”) Okay, I’m back now. The character, Rivian, plays a crucial role in the third and fourth books, and in others if this continues to develop as I am hoping. (I assume if you’re actually reading this, you have managed to tolerate my ramblings so far. Possible title, “The Other Klingons?”)

“Peak Performance” (episode 47, by David Kemper) Can you have a game without Strategema?

“Coming of Age” (Episode 18, by Sandy Fries.) is the episode where we meet Olana Mirren, and the species Zaldens.

## STAR TREK: TNG BOOKS

I have read a number of Star Trek books and there are some authors I simply can't turn away from. Peter David is one of them. His book "Imzadi" is an absolute must read. I draw heavily on the characters in that book as being major influences on my protagonist in his childhood years. (And there's the Guardian of Forever, again. Is there no-when safe?)

True, I was hesitant about the Round Table concept, but who can argue with David's logic, hidden in the guise of his alter ego, Captain Mackenzy, (not verbatim:) "In a Universe where President Lincoln, creatures of molten lava, and giant hands reach out and grab your ship, and..." Well. Point taken. (Oh, and I may be mistaken about Mackenzy being Peter's alter ego. I mean, I'm sure there's none of me in Arblaster-Garcia. Pretty sure. Alright, alright, but who doesn't want to be a hero? And maybe I did watch too much television, but hey, when you can get college level credit for watching Star Trek your life starts to have some legitimacy.)

You know, you will also find allusions to Peter David's "New Frontier" books in this, but I've decided to let you do your own homework... Just go read his books. That's an order. (Mr. Peter, should you be reading this, I do hope you like it. I tried to keep the integrity of what you had written, as well as maintain the continuity of the time line, story line, etc...)

I also wish to mention a Star Trek TNG, book, titled CROSSOVER, by Michael Jan Friedman. There were parts of it I liked, like stealing a Starship, something I've always wanted to do, and Scotty seemed the right person to do it. What I didn't like was the stereotypical way the aged McCoy was presented. Specifically, I didn't like McCoy coming across like dithering, old fool, as if anyone that reaches McCoy's age has to be experiencing senility. I gave McCoy more naps. That seems reasonable, but knowing what we know today about senescence, it seems reasonable that the 24<sup>th</sup> century will have eliminated many of the negative qualities associated with growing old. Our best science suggest that people who exercise regularly and have access to good nutrition, and keep their mind stimulated, barring diseases such as Alzheimer's, can function into their eighties and nineties while maintaining the activity level of a sixty year old. (My grandfather is a testament to that mind set. He's in his eighties, has worked every day of his life, and is still going strong. He still mows lawns for a living! Of course, he might be an alien, or just really old school.) Medically speaking, though, our knowledge of senescence is already begun to slow the aging process. When we throw in what we know of genetics, and where that will soon be taking us, it is not unreasonable to believe that through science we can reverse, or even stop, the aging process within the next twenty to thirty years. Though Star Trek has explored this concept a little, with usually a negative spin, such as in the movie, "Insurrection," one would think that, given 24<sup>th</sup> century's advance knowledge of genetics, where the whole ship can mutate and de-evolve into their primal states, and be returned to normal, all in one episode, with no negative side effects, it is reasonable to speculate that McCoy could technically live forever, barring accident or encounter with a unknown disease.

And that is a theme I would like to further explore, and McCoy had to die to do it. There's always the hope of resurrection, something that has happened quite a few times in Star Trek. (Renascence is probably a better choice of words than resurrection, due to the religious connotation of that word. Roddenberry did not mutter when it came to proselytizing that religious ideology as well as the politics of the time are hindering the progress of man by keeping us divided, along with concepts of nationalism, and any other ism that you can think of that divides the human race.) So, my cross road is this: if I consider CROSSOVER as legitimate Star Trek history, as opposed to an alternate universe's history, then McCoy being brought back from the dead, somehow, is compulsory. (That and the powers that be won't allow his death to happen. (Plot spoiler. (No worries, folks. McCoy will be back.)))

## STAR TREK: THE MOVIES

Finally, the movies. There are some references to "Star Trek: The Motion Picture." Specifically the Kolinar sequence. I know I should lighten up and just accept that Star Trek is not real history and therefore movie producers are entitled to some creative license. I can appreciate that while Spock/Nimoy was there on Vulcan, doing his Kolinar, the director saw the empty blue behind him, or the curtain on the set for all I know, and thought to himself: "You know, all I see are curtains... No. I see... a blue sky. No. I see, a blue sky, and a moon. No, two moons. Okay, three moons. Yes. That's it. The scene is now perfect. Cut. That's a wrap." (Oh, I have a new release of that film and there are no moons! Did I go crazy and just remembered that wrong, or has someone actually heard my plea and erased the moons?!)

Okay. Excuse me! Yes, me, out here in the audience. I know I don't have a life, but according to the Original Episodes, "Vulcan has no moon." (That's a direct quote from Spock responding to a query from Lt Uhura who wanted to know about romance on Vulcan. True, Spock said "Vulcan has no moon," which I suppose could be interpreted as meaning not one moon, making three moons acceptable, but that would be stretching it knowing that Spock was not prone to misdirection, exaggerations, or lying at that stage in his development, and he has a propensity of being extremely accurate when it comes to specific details. (Don't even get me started on the half brother thing.)) Anyway, I'm now so distracted by the moons that I can't focus. I'm getting hot and the glue on my Vulcan ears is starting to melt and my ears are sliding off. Yes, me, the dorky one in row five who Shatner is yelling at: "Get a life!" Not only was it apparent that you didn't do your homework, but, if I'm not mistaken, that's the Earth's moon! Did you think I wouldn't recognize my own moon? Do you know how long I've wanted to tell you this? What, when our moon ripped away in "Space 1999" it ended up on Vulcan after passing through a replicator? (Can someone hire a fan to make sure the continuity of Star Trek history is preserved?)

But I'm so much better now. The medicines today, let me tell you... Sorry. Chasing rabbits. I just wanted to say, to who ever was responsible for the moon fiasco, I forgive you. And, knowing how important it is to be in sync with all your Star Trek friends,

fanatics, critiques, um, audience... I have provided you a solution with-in the confines of this story. (Besides, anyone with the taste to choose Perrin as the Deltan deserves a little leeway.)

Finally:

Did I forget anyone? Let me know. I dedicated this to Deforest Kelley, for his portrayal of McCoy, for he embodied the ideals of the kinder side of medicine and science. (He would have made a good Doctor in "People Will Talk.") Of course, I would be negligent not mentioning Gene Roddenberry. After all, it was his dream that inspired me and so many people around the world! Just in case there is any doubt, yes, I have been touched by greatness. (Oh, it's also probably in my best interest to make the compulsory compliment to Paramount, which I now respectfully pay my homage... (I think there's a rule of acquisition in there somewhere...)) Since finishing the first draft of this, and publishing version 1 on the net, James Doohan died. I met him in person twice, and he was an extremely kind man.

Oh, and finally, the potential other legal disclosure: Um, this story is like, fiction, m'kay? Any coincidental similarities with characters in and with real life is just that: a coincidence. As to copying, duplicating, or otherwise sharing it: be my guest. It's not like I wrote it to be rich and famous. I just wanted to write. I need the practice. Just let people know where you got it, so if there are any crazy stalker types that want to kill all writers of Trek, they'll get the "write" guy.

John Erik Ege

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