

STAR TREK:
The Seventh House

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EPH

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This story is the fifth in a series. Book One “A Touch of Greatness,” book two “Another Piece of the Action,” book three “Both Hands Full,” and book four, “Necessary Evil” are available at free-ebooks.net or can be attained in PDF format from the author. (Put Trek in the subject line so the author can readily distinguish from the non-emails.) I expect there will be a sixth book, and hopefully this series will continue to grow in popularity, by word of mouth, and perhaps Simon and Schuster, or Paramount themselves, will finally get around to endorsing it.

Dedicated to Mrs. Rodenberry. Feb 23rd, 1932 to Dec. 18th, 2008 All my love to her friends and family!



PROLOGUE

The IKS Pa Nun hovered fifty meters above the ground, nose down, facing what appeared to be an abandoned Federation Star-base. There was a twelve story tall, central building amidst a cluster of smaller structures that served as housing for the first settlers. No settlers or pets were to be seen. The only activity was the wind stirring debris; paper, a curtain dangling on the wrong side of a window, and a door that swung on its hinges that wanted to stay closed and would almost reach its desired position when the wind eased.

On the Bridge of the B'rel class starship, a bird of prey old enough to have been in service of the Empire during Kirk's days, the crew were busy at their tasks while the 'guests' observed. The ship belonged to HoD Glor, an old mercenary who had bought the ship looking for fortune and glory and was now getting all of his adventures bought and paid for by Tammis Parkin Arblaster-Garcia, officially the Captain of the Starship New Constitution, the first Federation/Klingon jointly commissioned ship. Unofficially, he was also the Captain of The Path Finder which was in orbit, watching the reconnaissance operation with sensors only. Due to the cloud cover, it was impossible to get real time visual images with the PF's tech. Instead, they relied on telemetry from the Pa Nun, and the map painted by their short range scans.

"Still no signs of humanoid life," Pa Nun officer, N'elent, announced. "There's no one here."

"Maybe the Preserver Gods abducted the colonists," Glor theorized, looking to one of his guests for confirmation.

"Possibly. The last message to Starfleet was that a colonist found Preserver technology," Lt. Commander Kitara said. She was one of the 'guests,' and Garcia's Official and Unofficial First Officer. "They were not specific as to what sort of technology they found. If the scanners are not picking up any evidence of biological pathogens, my Away team and I will proceed with a ground investigation."

"Captain Garcia specifically ordered us not to land," Glor said.

N'elent made a sound of disgust. "You know how he likes to hog all the glory."

"I do," Glor said, laughing. "But this time, I think he is just being overly protective."

Kitara scowled at Glor as he patted her stomach. Pregnancy was one of the few opportunity a male could pat a female unsolicited, as it was considered a blessing on the child. Her condition, unlike N'elent's, was not so obvious, but it was well known amongst the crew, due to the higher than normal level of gossip that seemed to follow Garcia and the people in his entourage, that she was indeed carrying a Garcia child. And since she was not the only female on board carrying a Garcia child, there was no end to gossip. She ignored the playful taunt from the 'old man' and pointed at the central building. "Think you can land us on top of that platform?"

"N'elent?" Glor asked, bemused.

N'elent gave Kitara her best stern face for even asking the question. "Aye," N'elent said.

The Pa Nun eased forward, turned into the wind ever so slightly, and descended towards the building. The wings swept back into their landing configuration and landing gear emerged from the main fuselage. There was just enough room on the building top to

allow the bulkiest part of the ship to settle down and still lower the aft ramp. The nose of the bird of prey stuck out over the building, looking down over the landscape, appearing exactly like its name sake suggested, a 'bird of prey' surveying the terrain.

"Incoming call from the PF," the Pa Nun's communication officer, Hout, announced.

Glor pointed at the overhead speaker. Hout immediately opened a channel. "This is Captain Garcia," the voice sounded hollow on the old speakers, with a slight reverberation as if he were speaking from an auditorium. "Captain Glor, declare your intentions." It didn't need a 'please.' Glor was Klingon.

"You hired me to investigate. I'm investigating," Glor said.

"I hired you to do aerial surveillance because optical sensors are being blocked," Garcia said. "I specifically asked you not to land until we had more information."

"And I have more information," Glor said. "We are now proceeding with a ground investigation. Your Away Team and mine are going scouting. It's what scout ships do."

"Number One?" Garcia asked.

"Captain," Kitara said, the tone suggested she was listening but also that she was determined to follow through with this course of action.

"Make sure each team has a full compliment of recommended gear," Garcia said, breaking the uncomfortable silence that followed Kitara's one word.

"We're Klingons," Kitara reminded him, unconsciously patting her side arm. "We're always packing. Alpha team, prepare to move out."

The teams descended down the ramp, two by two. The first group carried phaser rifles at ready to quickly secure the rooftop, spreading out as the others came down the ramp behind them. Each rifle had a tricorder locked to the side of the weapon, open and activated so that the user could read information while simultaneously staying at full ready. Lt. Kletsova led the second group and brought her tricorder out to bear as soon as she stepped off the ramp. In her other hand was a type two phaser set for stun. She carried a rifle by a strap, slung to her back, and a Gorn projectile weapon holstered against her hip, strapped to the thigh. The ammo cartridges on her belt looked out of place on her uniform. Her Uniform was a hybrid of Fleet and Klingon styles, holding a metallic silver gleam with red highlights. The "armor-lite" that she wore was definitely a derivative of Klingon design, only more shiny and high tech.

"Still no life signs," Kletsova said.

Captain Garcia, Lt. Commander Undine, and the Path Finder's computer holographic interface "Losira" stood next to the "Game Table" in the War-room, just below the Bridge of the USS Path Finder. A graphic representation of the terrain was visible on the table top, along with various other details. For Garcia's convenience, his Away Team was represented by green dots enabled by identifier tags, while Glor's crew was represented by blue dots. They heard Glor order his team to split up, and watched as they descended down the stairwells on either side of the building.

"I recommend teams travel in threes," Garcia said.

"We can cover more ground in twos," Kitara answered, her voice vibrant from the Game Table's speakers.

Glor's warriors had already begun their descent down into the building and were not likely to regroup. Kitara nodded to her group, and they fell into threes. She surveyed

the building top and what little of the horizon she could see over the ledge from her position. Even with the diffused sunlight bleeding through the clouds, it was clear that the roof was marked for Fleet shuttles due to the radiant patterns in the design; typical fail safes for power outages, such as the present moment. The landing lights and guide strips were dead. So was the single turbolift.

“Threes,” Garcia repeated.

“Done,” Kitara complied. “You heard him. All teams regroup.”

Kitara, Gowr, and Glor were the last to enter a stairwell, leaving one Klingon guarding the Pa Nun’s exit ramp. From the game table, he appeared to be pacing the roof top, perhaps gazing over the side of the building looking for threats or past threat artifacts.

“The colony’s main computer archive will be on sub-level three, their current building,” Lt. Undine said, scrolling through available information on the colony. “Kitara, you should proceed straight there and retrieve whatever data might be available.”

“Trini, Kletsova, Micceal, check out the main computer,” Kitara said. “Glor, Gowr, and I are going to the main lobby.”

Trini hesitated at the door that would reveal the main corridor to sub level three, waiting for Micceal and Kletsova to catch up to her. Her tricorder showed no anomalies. Micceal, one of five Nausicaan officers serving on the Path Finder, directed Trini and Kletsova to step back from the door, placed a battery power up to the side of the door, and keyed it open. The door swished open and he boldly entered, his phaser rifle charged and ready. Helmet and weapon lights failed to penetrate to the end of the corridor. He motioned them to follow him.

“Hod Glor,” one of the Pa Nun officers called to their Captain. “We’re on level six. There is evidence of a firefight.”

Undine shot a quick glance to Garcia. She made no comment on the fact that he was frowning. That was his way when his people were in danger; more specifically, this was his way when his people were in danger and he was safe aboard the ship. Additional chatter from other teams seemed to corroborate that a battle had indeed ensued.

“Captain,” Lt. Crogan announced. “I’m no longer detecting transponder signal from Lt. Tuer. And I’m unable to raise him.”

Garcia acknowledged Crogan, one of the “Angels.” Each person on the Away Team had a member of the ship watching over them. The techs were coined “angels,” and they sat along the walls of the War Room in individual cubicles, monitoring bio signs and other tech telemetry. The Path Finder was the culmination of the best Federation and Klingon Surveillance technology ever assembled in one platform, and they were using it, regardless of any legality issues. Each of the Angels increased their vigilance over their own individual charges.

Garcia didn’t have to ask who was accompanying Tuer. He knew which of his Angels were assigned to each Away Team members, and he was confident by the distress level of two particular Angels that he knew exactly who was in trouble planet-side. He could hear their concern as they tried to establish a line of communication. Confirmation came when his First Officer tried to contact the missing men. “Lt. Tuer come in? Doctor Jurak?”

Garcia looked to Losira. “Remote activate their comm. badges.”

Screams issued through the speakers, filling the War-room with dread. Whatever the commotion was, it didn't last long. Voices were silenced, followed by the clatter of a tricorder or phaser hitting a floor, and then nothing.

"Open all communicators, main speakers," Garcia said. "I want to hear everything."

Sounds of chaos were coming from several fronts, accompanied with increased static coinciding with the sounds of phaser fire. The teams were starting to come unraveled, which said a lot about the nature of the enemy. Neither fear nor pain would cause a Klingon Warrior to run or make mistakes. More than likely, screaming Klingons was an indication that a battle was being lost. They were either going berserk or executing suicide runs in an effort to take out one or more enemies in sheer reckless abandon. Kitara sounded calm as she tried to issue orders through the chaos, but Garcia recognized the stress in her voice. He was watching her descend down towards the nearest team in distress.

"Commander, we're under attack!" Trini yelled. "Phaser fire is ineffective."

"I don't have anything on my tricorder!" Gowr protested.

"All teams, switch to projectile weapons and pull back," Garcia ordered. "Fall back to the Pa Nun."

The guard on the roof decided to join the action and descended down the stairwell. Another person cried out in pain and horror before their transponder signal faded. Their blue dot dropped from the screen. At the rate the dots were disappearing, the entire task force would be lost in the matter of seconds. The distinctive sounds of the Gorn miniature rail guns could now be heard pulsing in the background.

"Where are they coming from?!" someone could be heard saying, though most of the communications were becoming garbled as people were yelling over each other.

"Kitara, have your teams switch their tricorders to echolocation," Garcia said. "The enemy may have the ability to hide from scanners, or may be cloaked, but they can't disguise their movement. Fall back to the ship." The displacement of air as a body moved through an atmosphere, regardless of speed, always left a signature. Apparently several of the Away Team had heard Garcia's orders; new telemetry was being transmitted from tricorders via communicators to the Pa Nun, up to the Path Finder. Through echolocation the enemy's position was now painted on the Game Table.

"They're screwed," was Losira's assessment. Garcia frowned at the holographic interface to his main computer. She was Kalandan, sentient, and always accurate: his team was screwed.

Micceal screamed and was gone. Kletsova's signal disappeared.

"Damn it, Kitara, get everyone back to the Pa Nun, now!" Garcia snapped.

All the blips on the game table disappeared, one, then two at a time, with only one straggler, the last guy down the stairwell. He was gone as soon as he hit the third level.

"Kitara?" Garcia asked. "Away Team?"

Undine looked to the Captain. "Pa Nun, please respond," was the prominent chatter in the back ground, accompanied by the Angels calling their charges. There was no response.

Lt. Undine went to attention. "I'll take a shuttle down," she said.

"Negative," Garcia said. He took in a deep breath. "Losira, arm the Starburst weapon and prepare to fire."

“You’re going to blow up the planet?!” Undine asked.

“We can’t allow whatever is down there to escape,” Garcia said. “Losira, prepare to launch the Starburst. Helm, at my mark, take us one light year out at warp one.”

“Captain, I have to protest,” Undine said. “We need more information.”

“Captain,” Jenny Larson, ‘Angel One’, said, turning from her cubicle to look directly at the Captain. Garcia could see her station, noting that she had been clever to remote access the Pa Nun’s scanners and redirected them. “I have life signatures. It’s faint, but it’s there. I think our people have been taken to sub level six.”

“See, there’s a chance we can recover our teams,” Undine said.

“There’s no recovery,” Garcia said. “The teams have been compromised. Klingon Warriors are not allowed to be captured. Launch the Starburst.”

“Wait!” Undine snapped, tossing her headset to the Game Table. “Kletsova, Trini, Sendak, they’re not Klingons. They’re Federation Officers and they deserve to be rescued!”

“They are Officers who have just given their lives in the line of duty,” Garcia said.

“We don’t leave people behind!” Undine said, sternly, hitting the table with a fist. Losira looked to Captain Garcia for the final word.

“Launch the Starburst, Losira,” Garcia said, dispassionately.

“Captain, the Pa Nun is coming into orbit,” Larson announced.

“Hail them!” Undine said, grabbing her headset up to listen in.

“I’ve been trying, but they’re not responding,” Larson said. “And, I’m not detecting any life signs...”

“Fire all ready torpedoes,” Garcia said, punching up a new tactical screen on his side of the Game Table. “I don’t want that ship reaching orbit.”

The Klingon tactical officer on duty, Lt. Brel, complied without hesitation. New screens opened up on the game table to allow them to see the level of destruction. The ship hadn’t even made it out of the atmosphere before it was breaking up, falling back to the surface. If anyone survived its destruction, they wouldn’t live long. Garcia turned to Losira and gave her the look.

“Are you sure?” Losira asked.

Garcia nodded. Losira closed her eyes. A Starburst launched from the Path Finder and several video images became instantly available. A torpedo cam gave a rushed view of the bomb delivery. Ship cams watched as the torpedo departed the ship, tracking as far as the clouds. Sensors offered another perspective. The Starburst descended down through the atmosphere, a brilliant speck of light that intersected the planet’s cloud layer with hardly a stir, arriving at the surface in less than a blink. The ship’s cams revealed the clouds suddenly back-illuminated before the bubble of light that was the blooming wave of destruction broke through the clouds, becoming an intense blaze that overwhelmed the optical sensors and whited out the entire screen. The light faded sufficiently to allow them to see details of the planet being consumed by luminescence. The planet became a giant ball of plasma that began to condense under its own gravity. Sensors provided a detailed, graphic representation of the ordeal.

“Helm, take us to warp,” Garcia said.

The Path Finder jumped away at the speed of light. The planet that ‘was’ burst into a spectacular fire ball that outshone its primary star, the light of which chased the

Path Finder out of the system, but gradually fell back as it pushed warp one point five. At one light year out, the Path Finder dropped from warp. Utilizing short range scans, they watched as the entire solar system was temporarily outshone by the light of the Starburst weapon, a modified Genesis Device that had completely vaporized the planet, consuming two other planets in the process. As the light faded, the primary star became prominent once more. It sparked, going through degrees of higher luminosity before decreasing to almost nothing, and then apparently, finally, went out. Darkness blotted the back drop of stars, like a painter's accidental stroke over the wrong part of the canvas. Then the sun blossomed into a stellar event similar to a supernova, not typical for this star type, tearing itself apart, sending star dust in all directions. Long and short range scans would detect the disturbance if any were looking this way, and subspace signals and distortions might be heard if anyone was listening, but it would take several thousand years before the glowing remnants reached the nearest star.

CHAPTER ONE

The twelve holo-suites that typically serviced the clientele of Club Bliss had been appropriated by Captain Garcia in order to facilitate training. It was a rigorous exercise to help his people develop critical combat skills to be utilized against the hell-cat demon things which the Preserver-gods had unleashed upon them. Twice the god Apollo had set the demons upon Garcia and his Away Teams and twice Garcia had lost people. The hell cats were immune to phaser fire, and so far the only thing that had proven useful against them had been the projectile weapons and blades. Blades were fine for the Klingon Warriors under his command, but most of the non-Klingon crew members were insufficiently trained for this sort of combat. Consequently, he had decided the best way to prepare them was by presenting them with a “No Win” scenario utilizing the scariest, most perfect alien ever imagined.

All the holo-suite doors opened simultaneously upon completion and players stumbled out. 2nd Lt. Tatiana Kletsova was rubbing her arm, injured in play. Lt. Commander Kitara pushed past Kletsova and stormed down the corridor. Two Klingon warriors saw Kitara approaching and smartly got out of her way.

2nd Lt. Indira ‘Trini’ Sookanan exchanged looks with Kletsova. “I would sure hate to be Garcia at this moment,” Trini said.

“Why? Every time they fight it turns into romance!” Kletsova pointed out. She noticed her friend wiping her face. “Are you crying?”

“Eyes are just watery,” Trini said. “Probably hormones. But I am growing tired of losing.”

“Me, too,” Kletsova commiserated, trying to stretch her arm out. She acknowledged Doctor Jurak who had paused to examine her arm. He stretched it through its points of articulation and shoved suddenly on the shoulder while lifting the arm, causing an audible ‘pop.’

“Ouch!” Kletsova complained and then realized her arm was no longer hurting. “Thanks.”

Captain Glor of the Klingon bird of prey ‘Pa Nun’ emerged from his holo-suite, singing a victory song. Captain Gowr of the ‘Tempest’ emerged behind him in chorus.

“Did they play the same game that we did?” Trini asked.

“You know they did,” Jurak said.

“But they’re singing?” Trini said.

“They are happy for the glorious death Garcia provided them,” Jurak said.

“They’re happy they died?” Kletsova asked.

“Everyone dies,” Jurak said. “How we greet death when it arrives is what distinguishes us as Klingon.”

“I would rather just not die,” Kletsova said.

“You’re flying with the wrong Captain, then,” Jurak said. “Come on. Let’s not be late to the debriefing.”



Kitara approached the table where Garcia was sitting. He was scrutinizing one of the twelve PADDs on the table before him and it irked her to no end that he didn’t

acknowledge her, even after she leaned on the table with both fists. If nothing else, he surely felt her breath against his face. The fact that he was ‘obviously’ ignoring her added fuel to her rage.

“That was unfair,” Kitara snapped.

“Life is unfair,” Garcia said, continuing to analyze the data on the PADD he was holding.

Kitara swept all the PADDs from the table, tossing them to the floor, then took the one from Garcia’s hands and hurled it over her shoulder. In the back ground, Brock shouted “Ouch!” Garcia’s Ferengi accountant, and manager of Club Bliss, shot a grimace across the room, searching for the offender. He realized who had thrown the PADD and relented some of his anger.

“We’re going to do this exercise again,” Kitara said.

“Sit down,” Garcia told her, his eyes locked with hers.

Kitara hesitated. Perhaps because the crew was gathering around the table for the debriefing it was easier for her to comply. It was okay for her to show her discontent, but it would be a poor example to blatantly disobey her senior officer just because she was angry, regardless of the fact that she was also his mate and was afforded more leniencies. Her eyes never wavered from Garcia’s eyes.

Garcia turned to Cleo, one of his Dabo Girls, and accepted the PADDs that she had collected from the floor. In the exchange, her fingers lingered on his hand, and her free hand lighted on his shoulder.

“Would you like me to bring everyone drinks?” Cleo asked.

“Not right now, thank you,” Garcia said.

Brock approached as Cleo departed. He handed Garcia the errant PADD. “Didn’t your mother ever tell you not to throw things?” he asked from the relative safety of Garcia’s back

“Who’s throwing what?” Captain Glor asked, taking a seat to Garcia’s right.

“Thank you, Brock,” Garcia said, taking the PADD. “We’ll try and be more careful.”

Brock leaned into Garcia and whispered, “Rule of acquisition: a hungry cat is an affectionate cat.”

“What?” Garcia asked.

“Just stop feeding her,” Brock explained, guardedly shifting his eyes to indicate Lt. Kitara.

Garcia gave Brock his best stern face. Brock held up his hands in an “I surrender” gesture.

“I’m just saying,” Brock said, backing away.

Garcia’s table was an octagon, situated so that he was in the corner, two walls joining him, giving him the perfect vantage point to oversee his entire club. Captain Gowr sat to Garcia’s left. The rest of the crew that had participated in the training exercise gathered around the table. Lt. Undine stood behind Kitara. She seemed equally unhappy with how the game had played out. Losira took up a position behind Garcia’s right shoulder. Though technically, she was a hologram, the Kalandan computer system that manifested her body created her with real matter, so she was not restricted to a holosuite. She could go anywhere within two hundred kilometers of the Kalandan generator aboard the Path Finder, or within 400 meters of a Preserver Communication

Crystal. Her body could be maintained past that, but her mind was limited to the frequency range of the Kalandan computer. The Preserver Crystal that extended Losira Range to include the club was glowing red, hidden in plain sight in the midst of luminescent decorative crystals on the walls and ceilings.

“Where did you dig up these aliens?” Jurak asked.

“They’re fictitious,” Garcia said.

“So, you did create a no win scenario, rigging the game against us,” Kitara said.

“No, it is possible to achieve the objectives and get off the planet,” Garcia said.

Micceal grunted discontent. “Pfft! I find that hard to believe,” he grumbled, the pinchers in front of his mouth flaring outwards. “These aliens singled me out, ganged up on me unreasonably.”

“In the line of fiction from where I borrowed these aliens, your species most resembles their mortal enemy, a predator,” Garcia said.

“Well, I vote the next time we run this scenario, we have the safety features engaged,” Trini said, trying to present her seriousness with a touch of humor.

“The safety protocols were fully engaged, Trini,” Garcia said.

“I have bruises that say otherwise,” Trini said.

“I assure you, had the safety features not been engaged, you would not have survived,” Garcia said.

“Speaking of that, you destroyed the planet with everyone on it,” Undine said. “There were still life signs on the planet.”

“Once compromised, you’re dead,” Garcia said.

“That’s not fair,” Kitara said.

“Get over it,” Garcia said. “Because in every simulation I’ve run, just one of those things can take out a Federation Starship in less than 48 hours, so just imagine what a whole hive of those creatures can do. Besides, I’m thinking if you can handle this, then you can handle those hell cats. We’ve lost 6 people to those things and I don’t want to lose another.”

“Our people would have fared better this last time if we hadn’t been protecting the damn Cardassians,” Micceal pointed out.

“Just Cardassians, Micceal. I don’t want to correct anyone on that again, put it in a memo, number One,” Garcia said.

“The Iotian mercenaries Garcia brought in didn’t lose anyone,” Trini pointed out.

“That’s because they all had projectile weapons,” Undine said. “If it weren’t for them, the Grey-warriors, and the Klingon batlehs we would have been slaughtered.”

“All that matters is we killed them all,” Kitara said.

“No, we didn’t,” Garcia said. He spun a PADD at her with just enough momentum to put it at her side of the table where she could read it. “Two days ago a search and rescue team found a pack of hell cat demon things feeding on the dead.”

“There is a lot of dead to feed on,” Jurak said. In the last week, search and rescue had found only two people alive. It was becoming more likely that all the survivors of the Cardassian attack on Sherman’s planet needing to be found- had been found. “Do we know anything about their breeding capabilities?”

“No. So, I want you to capture a couple and see if we can’t find out,” Sherman’s planet has enough misery right now without having to worry about hungry demon-cat things. Meanwhile, I want everyone who works for me going through this exercise,

because if you think Apollo doesn't have something worse to throw at us, then you haven't been keeping score," Garcia said, his eyes locking momentarily with Trini's eyes before he purposely looked elsewhere. "I'm tired of getting our butts kicked by this deity want-a-be."

"In all fairness," Kletsova said. "You've outsmarted him in every confrontation."

"I hardly consider blowing up the Metrone's planet as outsmarting him," Garcia said.

"You did what was necessary to win the battle," Kitara said.

"And we've gotten lucky," Garcia said. He did not have to remind her that his 'winning' often came at a cost, usually lots of death and destruction. "Ya'll have your homework. Dismissed."

The crew went to attention as one and saluted, Klingon fashion, fist to chest. They dispersed, leaving Garcia with his two Captains and his First Officer. Garcia waved for Cleo's attention. She nodded and headed towards him, a bounce in her step. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw that Kitara was aware of the intensity of his observation of Dabo Girl and then looked away. If Kitara was angry, she hid it well. He turned his attention back to work.

"I can't order either of you to stay and continue with the training," Garcia began, addressing Captain Glor, the old Klingon mercenary he had first met at Deep Space K-7, and his friend Gowr, who Garcia had personally chosen to command the Tempest.

"I am with you to the end, my friend," Captain Glor said.

Cleo arrived and Garcia ordered three mugs of blood wine and a carbonated seltzer for Kitara, since there would be no alcohol for her for awhile. In addition, he asked her to bring hot wings, celery sticks, and dressing. Cleo hurried off to fill the order. Again, his eyes lingered on her a little longer than he knew to be socially appropriate, considering his friends were watching. Still, Kitara showed no signs of anger or jealousy, something Garcia was expecting or projecting on her. The Klingon Captains saw nothing out of the ordinary.

"The Tempest is your ship," Gowr said. "Everyone on the crew knows that I'm only her Captain because I am your friend. I will serve as long you will have me."

Garcia's sigh was so subtle as to be barely perceptible. His eyes went to the statistics on the PADD before him.

"Did Star Fleet say anything about you having Iotians here?" Captain Glor asked, wanting to change the subject. He had to remind himself that Garcia was not fully Klingon and his politeness in allowing them 'their leave' was a courtesy, as opposed to doubts about their loyalty. Garcia had demonstrated his willingness to die along side them in battles on numerous occasions. For want of a better word, he was their brother.

Cleo returned and began distributing drinks. Though she set the food in front of Garcia, it didn't stop his companions from each helping themselves to his hot wings. They would work at it till the bone was clean of all flesh.

"Yes," Garcia said, pushing the wings to center of the table. He gave Cleo a look that said, "Please bring me more wings." A mixture of contextual clues and a desire to serve motivated Cleo to head for the kitchen. He then raised his mug to his friends before taking a hearty swig. The wine was warm, approximately the same temperature that it was when the blood had issued forth from the Targ. The blood had been stowed in wooden barrels and allowed to fall to room temperature. The fermenting agents slowly

stirred the liquid as the heat increased. At a certain temperature, the fermenting agents made the liquid so hot that it killed off all the organisms in the liquid, and after that, the longer it sat, the better it tasted- to Klingons.

Glor laughed, pointing a half gnawed bone at him. "There is more than a yes to that question."

Garcia nodded, swallowed his wine, and decided to share with his friends. "Vice Admiral Nechayev was going to demote me for breaking the Prime Directive, but I pointed out that Apollo gave the Iotians the knowledge for constructing a warp capable ship, and so technically they are approachable by the rules of First Contact."

"Even with detailed instructions, it will take the Iotians two years to have a functioning warp drive," Kitara pointed out. "They didn't let you slide on that account."

"You're right," Garcia said, going for the one thing his present companions weren't touching: the celery sticks. He stirred the dressing with the celery. "So I used my Klingon card. I was ordered to hold Sherman's Planet against the Cardassians. I needed the Iotians to do it. The Klingons do not acknowledge the Prime Directive, therefore I didn't violate the rule structure."

Gowr whistled. "Star Fleet will not allow you to continue to go back and forth between Fleet and Klingon rules. They will eventually make you choose a side."

"I know," Garcia said. "And I doubt that being the Captain of the First Federation Klingon integrated ship is why I'm being given so much leeway. Quite frankly, I am as surprised as any of you that I have not been court-martialed and imprisoned."

"Someone is protecting you," Kitara said.

"Who and why?" Garcia asked, swirling the wine in his mug.

"Those are the questions," Glor said, speaking with his mouth full.

"The gods, perhaps," Gowr asked.

"They are not gods," Kitara and Garcia said simultaneously. They touched glasses.

"When is the last time you slept?" Kitara asked him.

"You mean a good, non-pharmaceutical, uninterrupted, eight hours or more?"

Garcia qualified.

"Yes," Kitara said.

"When did I interview you for this gig?" Garcia asked.

"That would be a good indication that you need a break," Kitara said.

"This holographic training program is my break," Garcia said, pointing to the PADDs. "There are still way too many people in ICU and the burn units to be getting real sleep, but I was starting to make mistakes, so I came up with this- distraction."

"Distraction is not a substitute for genuine sleep," Kitara said. "What's going on?"

A hint of a pout flashed across his face, followed by anger before acceptance took hold and he nodded. He doubled dipped his celery, resisting the urge for the passive aggressive comment, "you're not my mother."

"I know you. You could cat nap through a core breach klaxon. What's changed?" Kitara pressed.

"I'm having recurring dreams that I find disturbing," Garcia said.

"Have you seen the ship's counselor?" Kitara asked.

"Please. I've got this," Garcia assured her.

“Because you think you’re above seeing a Doctor, or because you think you know it all?” Kitara asked.

“You focus on training, and I will focus on me,” Garcia said, more firmly. “We need to get our performance ratings up, and though playing games will improve our general rapport and increase synergy, it’s not enough to make us number one.”

“You’re worried about performance ratings?” Kitara asked.

“Yes. And you should be,” Garcia said.

“Star Fleet can kiss my...” Kitara stopped midsentence, aware of Gowr and Glor watching the exchange attentively. “Look. We are a relatively new crew, we’re short personnel, and we are handling a major crisis, not to mention the lesser distractions that keep coming our way, and...”

“And Fleet just posted performance ratings. Once again the Enterprise has the highest stats in the entire fleet. I want to change that,” Garcia said.

“Fine,” Kitara said.

“Fine,” Garcia said, parroting her sarcasm.

“How would you like me to proceed? Kill Picard?” Kitara asked, her dark humor prevailing.

Garcia laughed so hard that Gowr and Glor joined in. Kitara smiled, pleased that she had moved him, if only for a moment, out of his thoughts.

A quiet fell over their table. Cleo arrived with more wings. Gowr stared at his wine. Kitara squeezed the lemon slice, releasing a few seeds with the juice. She used a spoon to catch them out of her drink. Glor tossed a bone into the bowl. Garcia reached for another celery stick.

“The aid from Star Fleet was insufficient, considering the scope of this crisis,” Gowr said.

“Part of the cease fire negotiations with the Cardassians meant a limited presence of Star Fleet,” Kitara said. “We should have not have taken this deal.”

“Well, aren’t the Cardassians supposed to be offering any medical relief?” Gowr asked.

“Would you let one of their doctors practice on you?” Glor asked.

“Hell no,” Gowr said.

“Neither will any of the citizens of Sherman’s planet,” Garcia said. “It’s difficult to accept help from a people who used antimatter bombs on innocent civilians. Hell, many of the survivors have even refused my medical assistance because they think I surrendered to the Cardassians demands, and that simply to save Club Bliss.”

“Those that know the truth are loyal to you,” Glor said.

“It doesn’t matter,” Garcia grumbled. “I have had to use my people to quell several riots and one retaliation strike against the Cardassians to remain in compliance with the terms of the cease fire.”

“You’re doing what Gowron has ordered,” Kitara said. “This is not your injury.”

“That doesn’t make me feel better,” Garcia said.

“To draw an enemy closer, you sometimes have to give them a free hit, make them think you’re vulnerable. Anyone who knows tactics understands this,” Kitara said.

“Yeah, only it’s my reputation taking the hits,” Garcia said. “I don’t like to lose. Consider it my character flaw.”

Captain Glor laughed and then punched Garcia in the arm. "You will survive this. What doesn't kill you makes you stronger."

Garcia attempted a smile. An Earth song began playing in the back of his mind.

"That's a fake ass smile if I ever saw it," Kitara said. Her comm. badge rang and she activated it by tapping lightly. "Kitara here."

"Commander, you have an incoming call from Kronos," the voice of 2nd Lt. Owens sprang from her communicator badge. "Would you like me to pipe it through to you?"

"Negative. Let me find some privacy," Kitara said, standing. "If you will excuse me, Captain? Captains?"

All three Captains stood and saluted her properly. As she left, she heard Glor complementing Garcia on his selection of the finest first Officer in all the Empire, and then heard Gowr add, "In more ways than one." She hid her smile as she heard the Klingons laughing, no doubt hitting Garcia playfully, as she made her way across the room.

Garcia, Gowr, and Glor sat back down.

"You do look exhausted, my friend," Glor said.

Garcia nodded. He knew he needed sleep, which was probably why he was so defensive with Kitara, shutting down the conversation; it was another warning sign that his health and judgment were being affected. He blamed the ease at which the Dabo Girls passing distracted him on his mental exhaustion, but part of him figured, if he was going to zone out, why not let it be on beauty. He pulled himself back to another distraction which he had been obsessing over of late.

"Will you answer something for me?"

"Ask," Glor said.

Garcia picked up a PADD, activated a drawing 'app' and drew a symbol. The symbol was simple enough, a dot over a line. He placed the PADD where they could see it and watched for a reaction. No visible 'tell' of recognition lit their faces.

"What does this mean?" Garcia asked.

Glor looked to Gowr. They both looked to Garcia and shrugged.

"Come on. It's Klingon and it's important somehow," Garcia said. "There isn't anything on the Federation's database and the Klingon database is suspiciously lacking information, so much so I am beginning to suspect a conspiracy."

"Why do you suppose it's Klingon?" Gowr asked.

"Because, I've seen it," Garcia said.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. It's hidden in certain texts, which becomes visible if the font size is formatted in a certain way to fit the screen. Hell, it's right there in your family Crest, Gowr, if you ignore these letters, and it's in both of your signatures, very discernible if you white out these marks here and here," Garcia said, pulling up a recent signature from both and highlighting the symbol. "It can't be a coincidence."

"There are no coincidences, my friend," Gowr agreed.

"Sure there are," Garcia argued. "It was raining the last time I went home. The whole Universe wasn't conspiring to make me wet or encourage me to delay beaming down."

"Your science admits the Universe is a strange place," Glor said.

“Hold up. I’m confused. You say you don’t know anything, but you are saying this isn’t a coincidence,” Garcia said.

“That’s what we’re saying,” they agreed.

“So, you are telling me I’m not crazy,” Garcia said.

“Oh, we aren’t saying that either,” they both clarified.

Garcia missed their attempt at human humor. “I need to know what this means.”

“Need to know?” Glor asked.

“Yes,” Garcia said.

“You will die if you don’t?” Glor asked.

“No,” Garcia said, frustrated. “But I’m seeing it in my dreams.”

“What does your dream work say it is?” Gowr asked.

“Normally I would explore that, but I’m having trouble focusing in my dreams. It seems innocuous, but it’s there, in the back ground, and it’s bugging the hell out of me that I can see it but can’t make it out. One time I got close to it and then the symbol disappeared in a stream of text,” Garcia complained. He reflected on the symbol for a moment and then back to his friends. His eyes focused past the glass to discover Leeta entering the bar. “You guys know something and aren’t telling me.”

“What do you think it is?” Gowr asked.

“A star over a field,” Garcia said.

“A light,” Gowr and Glor said.

“You do know!” Garcia said, sitting forward. “Tell me what it means.”

Gowr smiled. “If I tell you, I will have to kill you.”

“Seriously?” Garcia said. “No, really. I want to know.”

“How badly?”

“Oh, screw you,” Garcia snapped, getting up. He paused. “I’m sorry. I’m tired. I want to know. It’s important. And I don’t know why I’m obsessing about it.”

Glor made a motion over his lips to indicate silence as Leeta approached their table. She interrupted their conversation with a pleasant smile to the table but a hug and a kiss only for Garcia. “You guys are obviously working him too hard. He clearly needs his rest.”

“Take him and make sure he sleeps,” Gowr said.

“We will talk again later, my friend,” Glor said. “When you are rested.”

Gowr and Glor laughed as Leeta pulled Garcia away by the arm.



There were a number of private booths available for clients to receive private sessions from the erotic dancers that worked at Club Bliss. Kitara chose one of these to receive her call. Closing the door, she found the inner silence forced and stifling, leaving no noticeable ambient sound as if even the air was stilled by anti-noise technology. The room was sterile, and smelled of cleaning agents, but she imagined she smelled the results of alien biological activities she would rather not consider. A hidden recess revealed a computer monitor. She opened a window and connected to the USS New Constitution, in geosynchronous orbit above Club Bliss. Owens appeared on the screen.

“Alright, Owens, I’ll accept the call now,” Kitara said.

Owens pressed several buttons on his console and his image was replaced by that of Kitara’s father and mother.

“Do you realize how long you have kept us holding? You know the regular channels are being reserved for military. I had to use a Ferengi relay, and so the channel from Qo’noS to Sherman’s Planet is being billed at a premium rate!” her father, Krag, said, using the older Klingon word for the Home World.

“Yes, father. There was a military incident, and I suspect a news blackout on your end. What do you want?” A human might have interpreted her voice as impatient, perhaps even a tad disrespectful to her elder, and they wouldn’t have been far wrong, except her greeting was politically, and linguistically, correct.

“Don’t use that tone with your father,” her mother, A’ral, said.

“He just complained about the rates and being left on hold. I’m trying to save you time by asking you to come to the point,” Kitara said.

“I want you to come home,” Krag said.

“I’m rather busy,” Kitara said.

“I want you to give up this warrior nonsense and come home,” Krag said.

“I am an Officer of the Empire, Elite status, commissioned by Gowron in the presence of the High Council. I have been offered my own command, and I will not have you tarnish my accomplishments by asking me to conform to a traditional female role,” Kitara snapped.

“You turned a legitimate command down to serve under that baktag!” Krag said.

“I am of age and no longer have to explain my decisions to you,” Kitara said.

“Are you pregnant?” A’ral asked.

Kitara was taken aback by the question. Could gossip have traveled that far, so soon?

“It is true!” Krag said, leaning forward on his desk, correctly reading his daughter’s hesitancy.

“I am pregnant,” Kitara admitted.

“It’s him, isn’t it?” Krag said. “I’ll kill him.”

“You will do no such thing,” Kitara snapped. “Garcia has Gowron’s favor, and you know it. Killing him now would bring shame on you and our entire House.”

“And this doesn’t?!” A’ral demanded.

“I will disown you, cut you off from the family,” Krag said.

“You wouldn’t?!” Kitara said.

“Your brother hasn’t produced any children, and I am in my right to disown you to prevent a half breed mutt from becoming heir to my fortune,” Krag said. “You are dead to me!”

The image cut off. Kitara screamed and pounded the walls. She took a few moments to breathe, and then contacted the New Constitution. Owens was still on shift.

“Get me the Harbinger,” Kitara said. “I want to speak to Trolos. Now! Pipe it down here when you connect.”

Kitara proceeded with a meditation while she waited for the call to be placed. She recited a mantra for seven minutes before hearing the notifying sounds of an incoming call. Her eyes opened the moment her brother Trolos came on the screen.

“Wow, the great warrior princess has finally called her brother,” Trolos said, an evil smirk shining through. “Now, what would a girl who has everything want to call her brother for?”

“Father disowned me,” Kitara said.

Trolol sat forwards, suddenly innocent and professional. "Seriously?"

"Somehow he has learned that I am pregnant and he is trying to block a potential bi-species child from becoming heir to the family fortune," Kitara said.

Trolol laughed.

"How dare you!" Kitara snapped. "I've worked too hard and too long trying to make something of myself, only to have my children made illegitimate because dad's making a power play."

"We can fix this, Kit," Trolol said, completely amused.

"How?" Kitara demanded.

"Oh, a little posturing, a party or two," Trolol said.

"Would you stop thinking about opportunities to get drunk and explain yourself?" Kitara snapped.

"When you and Garcia stood before Gowron and the High Council, Garcia used our family crest, did he not?" Trolol asked.

"Yes, but how does..." Kitara began.

"Silence! You and Garcia are only informally married, because there was no actual ceremony," Trolol said. "But by putting our family crest in the top position of his armor, Garcia has not only said he doesn't have a family, so by taking you as his woman, he has technically claimed that his offspring are heir to our family name and all the entitlements thereof."

"So Father can't disown me?" Kitara asked.

"Sure he can, he's Father, and a free man," Trolol said. He rocked in his chair, enjoying his sister's growing discontent and impatience.

"So, how do we fix this?"

"Garcia has earned his own name. He must come to Kronos, formally marry you in front of Gowron and the High Council, establishing his own House," Trolol said.

"But I can't marry into anyone's House if I am disowned!" Kitara snapped.

"That's the dilemma! Why do I even talk to you?!"

"Even if Father disowns you, as your older brother you are still my property," Trolol said. "And, given all the heartache and trouble you have brought to the family, I would be more than happy to pawn you off cheaply to this Garcia fellow. And after your marriage is sanctioned by the High Council, I will align myself with Garcia so when I die, he will become heir to our family's name and fortune!"

Trolol nearly fell out of chair, he was laughing so hard.

Kitara stared at her brother as if he were an alien imposture.

"What's wrong, baby sister?" Trolol asked, using the Earth colloquialism.

"You would do this for me?" Kitara asked.

Trolol seemed shocked. "You're my sister," he said.

"I know that," she snapped. "But why would you go against Father? Why would you do this for me?"

"Because, you're my sister!" Trolol snapped. "You must have Garcia petition the High Council in person."

Kitara did the math in her head. "I will," Kitara committed.

"Excellent," Trolol said. "I will prepare for my part. The sooner this is done, the better, so Father doesn't have time to block his reception. He may have to jump through some hoops."

“Jump though some hoops?” Kitara asked.

“I’ve been studying out dated Earth colloquialism to better communicate with your husband,” Trolos said.

“Well, stop it. He’s hard enough to understand without you encouraging him,” Kitara said. She frowned at her brother skeptically. “I will see you soon. Out.”

As she closed out the channel, Kitara couldn’t remember when she had seen her brother so happy. He didn’t even say goodbye, just stood up and walked away from his desk. She shook her head, and activated her comm. badge.

“Kitara to Garcia,” Kitara called.

Losira’s voice answered. “The Captain has temporarily disabled his communicator. Would you like to leave a message?”

“Where is he, Losira?” Kitara asked, suddenly angry that Garcia was not available. She had to force herself to remain calm, trying to keep in mind that it was her suggestion for him to actually get some sleep.

“He is in his office at Club Bliss,” Losira answered.

Kitara exited her booth and made her way to the lift that would carry her up to Garcia’s office. Tatiana Kletsova intercepted her.

“Um, you don’t want to go up there right now,” Kletsova said.

“Excuse me?” Kitara asked.

“He’s with Leeta,” Kletsova said.

“Again? What is that, six times this week?” Kitara asked.

“Third time today,” Kletsova said.

“Ahh!” Kitara growled, turned around and went straight to the bar. Brock was polishing a glass. “Seltzer, with lemon.”

“We’re not officially opened yet,” Brock said, pointing to the countdown clock on the bar: 46 minutes to go. The look she gave him changed his mind. “But of course, for my favorite Officers, I am very flexible. Flexible on time, and on price...”

Kletsova joined Kitara at the bar. “Want to talk about it?”

“No,” Kitara said.

“You know, it’s just stress relief,” Kletsova said. “Sex is not sacred to him at all.”

“I don’t care who he’s with,” Kitara said, downing her drink. “I just wish he’d keep a schedule so I can talk to him when I need to.”

“I don’t think any of us have kept a regular schedule in the last three weeks, between search and rescue, first aid, and general relief efforts,” Kletsova said.

“I know,” Kitara said. “I said I didn’t want to talk about it.”

Leeta entered Club Bliss and approached the bar. “Hey, Brock, I need to see Garcia. Is he here?”

Kitara turned to Kletsova. Kletsova shrugged. “I swear I saw her go up the lift with Garcia just ten minutes ago.”

“What are you talking about? I haven’t been back to Club Bliss since I quit!” Leeta said.

Kitara launched herself from her bar stool, activating her comm. badge as she ran. “Security, report to Garcia’s office, Club Bliss,” she ordered. She hit the button for the lift, decided it was too slow, and took the stairs up the side of the granite wall. The first level connected to several glass catwalks that stretched across the dance floor, their only purpose to provide dancers with a platform to perform above the guests. She took the

elbow and headed up to the second level and onto the balcony that over looked the Club. She entered the office through the sliding glass door. The office was divided into business affairs and private affairs, with a shared kitchen, hot tub that was continuously filled by a waterfall, a private bath, and a bedroom. There was a second balcony on the far side that opened to the outside.

Kitara aimed her phaser at the imposter in the kitchen who was sprinkling salt from a shaker into her hand. She licked her finger and turned, surprised to see Kitara. She smiled.

“Hello, Kitara,” she said.

“Put the salt down and raise your hands above your head,” Kitara said.

Kletsova and four security officers arrived via the lift and spread out, raising their weapons. The woman had eased the salt to the cabinet, her hand hovering near a knife.

“I said raise your hands above your head, now!” Kitara said.

The woman complied. “What’s wrong?”

“Where’s Garcia?” Kitara asked.

“In bed,” the woman answered.

Kitara nodded to Kletsova, who hustled to go confirm the woman’s story, a second security officer following to provide backup. Kletsova touched a wall and a wide door slid open to reveal the bedroom. Garcia appeared dead to the world. Kletsova rushed to Garcia and shook him. He yawned and stretched.

“I’m sorry, Leeta, I must have dozed... Tatiana?!” Garcia asked, sitting up. He didn’t attempt to conceal the fact that he was naked.

The Leeta ‘look-a-like’ tried to move towards Garcia.

“Don’t move!” Kitara ordered.

“Put your weapons down,” Garcia said, standing up. He took a moment to put his pants on. “Have you all lost your minds?”

“She is an imposture!” Kitara said.

“What are you talking about?” Garcia demanded.

“Please, don’t hurt me,” the woman said.

Garcia walked towards the woman, but Kletsova took his arm and held him back. “Let go,” he said, and pulled free of her grip.

“Tam, stay back!” Kitara warned.

Garcia didn’t listen. He put himself between the woman he thought was Leeta and the security force. The woman grabbed Garcia, pulling him into a choke hold with one arm, while putting her other hand to his face, as if she might execute him by performing a Vulcan mind meld. She handled him as easily as a child might handle a rag doll. “Put your weapons down, or I will kill him!”

The real Leeta entered Garcia’s apartment. Her mouth opened, but no words came out. Garcia was pulling at the fake Leeta’s arm, but simply hadn’t the strength to pry it loose.

“I said put your weapons down!” the woman who looked like Leeta said.

“Oh, screw this,” Kitara said, and shot Garcia and the woman with her phaser on stun setting.

Garcia went out like a light, becoming dead weight in the woman’s arms. It took four phasers firing stun to bring the woman to her knees. She dropped Garcia, staggered forward, and then fell to the floor. As she fell, her appearance changed. She no longer

appeared to be a female Bajoran. She was 1.6 meters tall, with rough skin that resembled leather, mostly brownish in color with purple highlights. Her mouth formed a short snout, opened and revealing four teeth spaced evenly apart. Smooth, silky white hair, flowed from her head, and ran along her back, the backs of her arms and hands, the back of her thighs, and down the back of her legs. Her fingers were thick, and had evenly spaced suckers similar to what might be found on an octopus' arm. She was wearing a simple net garment, and a silver necklace that looked more like a bondage leash than an ornament of decoration.

“What in the world is that?!” Leeta asked.

“A salt vampire,” Kletsova said.

“That’s impossible,” Kitara said. “They’re extinct!”

CHAPTER TWO

Lt. Commander Zara Undine sat on the edge of the couch as if she might depart suddenly. Her expression was anything but stoic. She could appear quite relaxed and friendly at times, but not with a perceived ‘enemy.’ Technically, anyone who wasn’t a friend was an enemy, but Lt. Giada Rossi, computer intelligence specialist slash psychiatrist slash assassin was definitely an enemy, socially and professionally. The fact that Rossi had had a hit list that comprised the senior staff didn’t bother her. Undine had had a similar alternative command agenda should the Path Finder project be in jeopardy and she would not have balked at using it had Garcia not called the “Truce,” providing her a way out of her moral dilemma. No, what annoyed her was the fact that she was being forced to attend counseling sessions. Counseling, as far as she was concerned, was a waste of time. And she was determined to prove it by not speaking.

Rossi understood the game. Zaldan’s considered most human niceties to be insincere at best, manipulative at worst, and so she knew Undine had made an assumption about counseling and counselors; that the process was all touchy feely and about figuring out the past in order to change present behaviors or feelings. Rossi was as determined to dispel Undine of her perceived prejudices as Undine was determined to resist the process. However, she also had a schedule to maintain.

“Here’s how this works,” Rossi said. “I ask questions. You answer questions. Together, we come up with solutions. Thesis. Antithesis. Synthesis. So, again, did you understand the consent form?”

“I see an ethical issue to this relationship. I am your senior officer,” Undine said.

“Dual relationships are an issue,” Rossi agreed. “Did you understand the consent form?”

“You know that I would not be here now if I hadn’t sign Star fleet’s general consent form, providing you with the ability to force my attendance.” Undine said.

“I’m not forcing you,” Rossi said. “You’re free to leave whenever you like.”

Undine stood up to leave.

“Of course, the consequence for not completing today’s session is that you will be removed from the roster and confined to quarters for 72 hours, the minimum time requirement for self-reflection, as agreed upon by Star Fleet’s general consent form,” Rossi said.

“I do not need self-reflection,” Undine insisted.

“An hour with me, now,” Rossi said. “Or 72 hours in your quarters, or a week in the Brig. Which do you prefer?”

“And you don’t call this force?” Undine said.

“I call this choice,” Rossi said.

“Proceed with your interrogation,” Undine said, sitting down.

“Alright then,” Rossi said. “Did you understand the consent form?”

“Why are you going over the consent form? Signing a consent form was an obligatory requirement before graduating from Star Fleet,” Undine said.

“Yep. Everyone signs it. But you would be surprised how many people sign it just to get on a star ship, only to be surprised by issues surrounding the complexity of confidentiality on a Starship,” Rossi said. “Now, I’m going to ask you again, did you understand...”

“Yes,” Undine said, sounding fairly irritated. “I understand all about the consent form and that you can break confidentiality if you deem it necessary. Next question.”

“So, you do understand that our conversations are not completely confidential,” Rossi said.

“I understand...” Undine began.

“Most of the time what is said in here stays in here, but there are exceptions. If you threaten to harm yourself or another person, I have the authority to break confidentiality...”

“I said I understand the consent form,” Undine insisted.

“I said I have the authority, that doesn’t mean I will break confidentiality,” Rossi continued. “Where I have no choice in the matter is when I hear you say that you will or have harmed a child or an elderly person. If I even suspect this is happening, I will report this. If I suspect your function on the ship will be affected by your mental state, I could...”

“What part of I understand this don’t you understand?” Undine asked.

“Alright. We’ll skip protocol for now. You mentioned dual relationships, which is an issue aboard a Starship. I assure you, I can compartmentalize well. To prove a point, how would you like to use part of your session to deal with ship’s business?”

Undine hesitated.

“It’s not a trick,” Rossi said. “We’ve all been stretched to the limits lately and I want to check in with you to see if you got my recommendations.”

“Ask your question,” Undine said.

“Are you going to pull Lt. Sookanan from the roster?”

“No,” Undine said.

“You understand that I believe she is on the verge of a mental break down,” Rossi said.

“I read your report. You provided no medical evidence to support your conclusion regarding possible hormonal issues due to the pregnancy. Her decreased performance rating is best explained by exhaustion and since everyone’s scores have seen some decline due to work overload, I am comfortable leaving her on the roster. And since you haven’t used your authority provided by her consent form to pull her from the roster, I believe you are equally comfortable with my decision,” Undine said.

“She has complied with the letter of regulation, but not the intent of the regulation,” Rossi said. “She is meeting with me...”

“And her performance is adequate given the situation,” Undine said. “If this is all you got, I would like to proceed with my session.”

“Fine. Talk to me,” Rossi directed.

“I prefer you ask me closed ended question, requiring simple affirmations or negations,” Undine said.

“You know, this process is facilitated by us communicating,” Rossi said.

“I have nothing to say to you,” Undine said.

“Okay then,” Rossi said, and relaxed a little into her chair. It was a ploy. She was anything but relaxed.

Undine stood as if to leave.

“Not so fast,” Rossi said, motioning her to sit back down. “You’re not excused yet.”

“You understand that I have tasks to perform? There was an incident involving Garcia and he’s presently in Sickbay,” Undine said.

“When is he not having a crisis?” Rossi asked, sarcasm evidenced in her voice. “We might as well move his quarters to Sickbay.”

“You don’t care?” Undine asked.

“I trust the Doctor to do his job. If they need me they’ll call me,” Rossi said, her tone projecting irreverence. “Returning the focus back to you, I get the sense that you don’t want to be here for other reasons.”

Undine seemed cross, her eyes narrowing. “We’re in the midst of a crisis. People’s lives depend on me being at my station,” Undine said.

“I understand that we’re on the closing end of a crisis. Further, I believe your absence from that endeavor for this short interval will be negligible. And, since it’s my job to interview you, coupled with the fact that you’ve been avoiding me, I’m exercising my authority to finish out this session,” Rossi said. “So whether your excuse to exit is Garcia’s injury or the Universe is about to end, you still have to spend time with me first. So, is there anything on your mind that you would like to discuss before I get to my core questions for today?”

“I do not intend to discuss my pregnancy with you,” Undine said.

“Oh, that’s just one of many things we need to discuss,” Rossi said. “We also need a dialogue concerning the Path Finder’s illegality issues, specifically to any moral ambiguities that may lead to internal conflict. We need to have a dialogue to see how you’re processing the recent battles and loss of crew members. I need to know how you’re coping with the stress of the rescue operation on Sherman’s Planet. There are so many things we need to get to that we’re not going to be able to do it all in today’s session. Not to mention, I still intend to go over your informed consent, line by line, but might consider allowing you to write an essay covering each point and emailing it to me before next session.”

“That’s fairly sophomoric, don’t you think?” Undine asked.

“I was aiming towards elementary, considering your passive aggressive tendencies suggest you’re at a sixth grade emotional level.”

“You want direct, I will give you direct,” Undine said. Had she been human, Rossi would have considered the response ‘snappish.’ “I abhor the fact that you’re treating all the females carrying a Garcia child as if they were raped.”

Rossi smiled. “You seem to be stuck on the pregnancy issue. Shall we begin there?”

“It wasn’t rape,” Undine insisted. “Treating your clients as if this is a rape should be unethical.”

“How else would you have people process it? This wasn’t a mutually agreed upon event. It wasn’t like everyone woke up one day and said, you know, I’d like to have a child, I wonder what the Captain’s doing?” Rossi said.

“Unintended pregnancies happen,” Undine said.

“Yeah, when you’re having consensual sex,” Rossi said.

“Nonsense,” Undine argued. “My species spends a great deal of time in the water, and unintended pregnancies occur 30 percent...”

“Alright, pretend this is my ignorance shining through my face and educate me as to how your species makes babies,” Rossi said.

Undine explained that the saline content of the womb is exactly the same as the ocean's from which their species evolved. Breeding usually occurs in tidal pools, warmed by the sun, and since it isn't a solitary event, that groups of adults return to the same spawning pool simultaneously, that it was possible that lone females could be impregnated by just being in the waters with groups of couples.

"So, you're just going to play along like nothing unusual has happened and sign up to be one of Garcia's many wives?" Rossi asked, hiding the fact that she was grossed out by Undine's educational moment.

"In my culture all males treat all children as if they were their own. In this case, we know Garcia is the father. The child should know him," Undine said.

"Doesn't mean you have to marry him!" Rossi argued. "Or does your species believe in polygamy?"

"It's rare, but not unheard of. Marriage was never about raising a family, but rather it is a commitment, a bond between two or more people that went beyond the social obligation one holds to every citizen. In terms of parenthood, any gender can participate solitary or in groups long enough to raise a child to the first tier, and then parents usually go their separate ways, but the word 'parent' doesn't necessarily mean biological connection. Lineage is defined in terms of mothers, not fathers, as females confer family names and are the holders of property," Undine explained.

"Must be nice to be a male in your species," Rossi remarked, flippantly.

"How so?" Undine asked.

"Males can go and sire as many children as they want, leaving the female to raise a number of different children from different parents," Rossi said.

Undine got up and walked to the door. It opened for her, but she paused, pushed the button to close it, and turned to face Rossi.

"For your information, it is the male who holds the greatest parenting responsibilities, and the female is free to pursue other relationship or career opportunities, as it is our job to establish and maintain the nest," Undine said. "Further, being adversarial is not the same thing as being direct. Trying to provoke me is not the best strategy for soliciting a conversation."

Undine manually opened the door and departed. Rossi sighed, shoulders slumping, and leaned back into her chair. Outside the window she could see the forward tip of the left engine nacelle, and the sweeping curved plane of Sherman's Planet. She was secretly glad that she had been spared the bulk of dealing with the actual search and rescue, or administering first aid, because that was her least favorite duty. Mental injuries on the other hand, were her forte. She enjoyed the intellectual challenge of helping someone move forward, but again, this wasn't what she had signed up for when she came to work on the Path Finder.

Rossi picked up her PADD and then put it back down. She glanced at her sleeve long enough for the chronometer to reveal itself. She had time to spare before her shift planet side started, but not enough to nap. She considered meditating, but knew she would fall asleep. She forced herself up and walked leisurely to the "Gateway," casually observing crew. Most of the crew was planet side, so the minimum crew on rotation shipside was busier than normal, but not so busy that they didn't notice her. In fact, it was her lack of bustle and prolonged observation that drew their stares as they assessed who she was and why she was 'lollygagging.' Once 'Rossi' the counselor was identified,

they quickly returned their focus back to their tasks. Some were so suddenly serious, Rossi suspected that they believed they were being evaluated.

She arrived at Club Bliss during normal business hours. She could hear the din coming from the bar the moment she arrived and moved away from the Gateway, hidden in one of the storerooms across the dance floor from the bar. She emerged into the voluntary chaos that was “Club Bliss” and made her way through the crowd. If she wanted a distraction, there were many to be had. Professional dancers gyrated their hips above the dance floor on invisible catwalks. Several were male, though she didn’t recognize the species, a point that irritated her somewhat. The dancers could only hold her interest for so long, though, as she was not in the mood to be ‘hypnotized’ by the music nor the suggestive moves of the dancers. The music was being ‘deejayed’ by a Phylosian, a humanoid plant with five arms. If she could pull the plant man into therapy she would, just so she could interview the alien mind, knowing full well that it was probably a defective sampling. Everyone knew Phylosians hated aliens. Why was it here at Club Bliss of all places? The drugs? The music?

A tray of recreational drugs passed in front of her by a waitress in a revealing uniform. It was not the kind of uniform she would wear, but she would grudgingly admit to liking it. She gave Garcia credit. His change in uniform policy suggested he knew how to pimp his women. The occasional sounds of excitement at the daboo tables rose over the music and faded. The fact that there was any ‘partying’ here at all suggested a huge disconnect with the fact that not even a month ago tens of millions of citizens had lost their lives in the bombings on Sherman’s Planet. It was being called a “police action,” but the atrocity committed against the citizens of this planet had no parallel, in terms of loss of life within the Federation on a single planet since the last Borg attack. Across the street, the hotel converted into a hospital was still inundated with the sick, injured, and the dying. It was a place she was going to have to go and do rounds in about thirty minutes.

Rossi made it to the bar unmolested. Brock was suddenly there, pushing his bartender out of the way to be of service. His eagerness to please her made her eyes roll.

“What can I get you?” Brock asked, all grin, ragged teeth gaps and all.

“You can stop hitting on me for starters,” Rossi said.

“Well, that’s what I ‘can’t’ get for you. I’m asking what I can get for you,” Brock said. His grin faltered a little as his eyes focused beyond her. He made a hand motion towards one of his bouncers without his eyes leaving the scenario that was unfolding.

Rossi turned around to witness the beginnings of a quarrel between a Klingon and a Cardassian. The posturing had already escalated to the point that hands were moving towards weapons. She inflated her chest, stood tall, and went right to work. She whistled an ear splitting tone while pushing a person out of her way as she made for the two trouble makers. Music was coming down and lights were coming up.

“Hey!” Rossi shouted, the loudness of her voice in the sudden absence of music surprising even her. “Morons, look at me!”

The Klingon and the Cardassian wearily gave her one eye, not willing to fully terminate their engagement with each other. Patrons moved to create an empty space around the pending feud.

“Give me your complete attention,” Rossi said. When they did, she pointed up. “Look.”

Officers from the USS New Constitution had made themselves visible on the catwalk, phaser rifles pointed directly at the two potential offenders. Apparently no one had noticed them even though their uniforms had silver, metallic gleams as if they were band uniforms. It would have been a mistake to believe those Klingons were less menacing because their uniforms were more polished. In fact, many of them were going out of their way to gain some battle marks on their armor plate.

“Good, back here, look at me,” Rossi said, using her fingers in a V to point towards her eyes. She confiscated their phasers and handed them to the bouncer who had finally arrived at the scene. “Your privilege of carrying weapons in this establishment is hereby revoked. Now, are you two going to drink peacefully in here, or do you need to be escorted out?”

“You can’t speak to me like that, nor disarm me. I am an officer...” the Cardassian protested.

“According to the rules of the cease fire, in this establishment, in this zone, I outrank you,” Rossi said. “You have a choice, sit down and enjoy your drink, or leave, and by leaving, I mean you’re escorted back to your commanding officer in chains, and if you think for a moment that I’m not willing to enforce the full letter of the cease fire in this regard, keep talking.”

The Klingon broke a smile. “Courage. I submit to your authority here,” the Klingon said. To the Cardassian, he said. “Be thankful this female saved your life.”

The Cardassian’s fists tightened.

“Don’t,” Rossi interrupted his thought patterns. Years of counseling had given her the ability to read faces, body language, as easy as a telepath could read minds. She was often accused of being a closet ‘tele!’ She pointed at her eyes with fingers spread into a V. “Focus.”

The Cardassian took a deep breath and with a sullen gesture returned to the table with his friends. Rossi returned to the bar, hoping no one noticed that her hands were shaking from the adrenalin of it all. The music slowly came back up to speed.

“Ma’am,” the bouncer said. “You should let us handle these things.”

“Yeah, well, perhaps if you were doing your job and not ogling the dancers, I wouldn’t have to,” Rossi said, and pointed to the Cardassian weapon. The setting was on maximum, which could have easily vaporized fifteen to twenty people given the dense proximity of patrons. She gently reached over and depressed the safety to the ‘on’ position.

The bouncer paled when he realized the severity of the situation and how haphazardly he was handling the weapon. She turned back to the bar.

“Thank you,” Brock said.

“Whose idea was it to allow Officers to carry weapons in here?” Rossi asked.

“Commander Kitara’s and Captain Garcia’s,” Brock said.

“Morons,” she mumbled, departing the bar without touching her drink.

Outside the weather was balmy, stark contrast from the air in Club Bliss. Rossi made her way towards the hospital, taking a meandering path as if it were a maze. It would have been quicker to cut straight across the lawn, or use the sidewalk, but she knew from her research that walking mazes seems to have a calming effect on the minds of sentient folks. It was so consistent from species to species that it was almost a universal concept, as if “Maze Meditation,” was hard wired into the genetics, not just a

random harmonic resonance of brain physiology. At least, thinking about it in an almost metaphysical sense kept her mind distracted from the true suffering that was unfolding around her.

“Would you like chicken on a stick?” a vendor interrupted her attempt at self-distraction.

Rossi looked around to see if the vendor might have been talking to someone else before giving him her full attention. “Do you recognize my uniform?”

“Yes,” the vendor said. “Star Fleet, shiny band uniform, Garcia’s crew?”

“You can stop at Star Fleet,” Rossi said. “That alone should tell you I’m not going to eat the dead flesh of an animal.”

“Humans on Sherman’s planet eat my cooking all the time,” the vendor said. “I thought you humans like tasting new experiences?”

“Well, you thought wrong, but keep practicing, you might eventually improve,” Rossi said.

The vendor seemed unconcerned by her harshness. Sherman’s planet had a way of toughening people up, reminding her of New York, her birth city. He persisted to keep in her line of sight, like a Ferengi certain a sale was in the making. “I think you will really like this,” he said, pushing it towards her.

Rossi nearly vomited. The smell was actually appealing, like a combination of smoked, honey roasted, ham. Her mouth watered and she grew angry with herself. It was odd to her that she could have such revulsion and find something appealing at the same time. “Alright, maybe some people do, but most Fleet will not participate in killing an animal just to eat when there are so many other, viable options available to them. Also, that is not chicken.”

“True, this is not technically chicken, the animal is more like rabbit, but I am told it taste like chicken,” the vendor said. “It was a humane death. I killed it myself. And, there is an ecological necessity to control the population. This death helps the species, and helps us. Very nutritional! Try it.”

“You are sick,” Rossi said.

The Vendor didn’t understand. “Yes, but it’s not contagious,” he said, wiping his nose on his sleeve.

Rossi shook her head and walked away. Why she had even allowed herself to be drawn into the conversation was beyond her. So many other things to think about. And apparently, she was the only one that seemed to have any true issues with all that was going on. There was the bombing, of course, but also, counseling the crew for unwanted pregnancies. It seemed as if everyone else on the New Constitution was going about their work as if it was just another day. Was it just her, or were there serious mental health issues on her ship?!

As Rossi drew closer to the hospital/hotel, she failed to avoid another Cardassian having some social issues. He drew her into an argument he was having with a Star Fleet officer, ground force division. Rossi quickly recognized the officer as part of the peace keeping force, his communicator emblem revealed the ship he was with. She also recognized that he was not alone. She could discern three, but suspected there was a fourth or fifth person she wasn’t seeing. The ‘definite’ three in his squad were in a staggered formation, typical for this sort of assignment.

“Your Uniform and communicator emblem signifies you’re with Garcia, which means you are this person’s superior officer?” the Cardassian asked Rossi, pointing rudely at the younger officer.

“I am,” Rossi said. “What’s your name, son.”

“He’s your son?” the Cardassian asked?

Rossi gave him a hand sign that said be silent while she addressed the soldier in question

“Lt. Jenkins, ma’am,” the officer introduced himself, surprising her with a heavy Australian accent. He adjusted his backpack, holding his phaser rifle with one hand.

“With the 821st.”

Rossi took in a deep breath, let it out slowly. “What’s going on?”

The Cardassian spoke for him. “He failed to display the appropriate respect due me for my rank.”

Rossi looked at the Cardassian, her eyes diverting from his eyes long enough to capture his rank insignia, designating him as a Captain, back to his eyes, and then looked to Jenkins. “Really, what’s going on here?”

“I just told you,” the Captain said. “All military ranks and privileges are to be observed within this zone. I expect a formal salute.”

Rossi became very stern. “Lt. Jenkins, have your men fall in.”

“Ma’am?” Jenkins began.

“Do it, soldier!” Rossi said, command voice.

“Squad, on me,” Lt. Jenkins said into his collar, simultaneously issuing the hand signal. They quickly obeyed. Rossi suspicions were confirmed when a fourth person she hadn’t seen appeared and joined the line.

“Attention!” Rossi ordered. As one, they brought their hands up to salute. “This is Captain...”

“Tersek,” the Captain supplied.

“Captain Tersek! I expect you to show him the respect due his rank, and make sure EVERYONE knows to do this, do you understand me?”

“Yes, Sir!” the squad responded, using the formal language set.

“Present arms!” Rossi ordered

“But, Sir,” Jenkins began.

Rossi was in his face. “Do you have a problem following orders, Lt.?”

“No Sir!”

“Anyone else want to argue with me?” Rossi demanded, her eyes not leaving Jenkins.

“No, Sir!” they all answered.

Rossi stepped aside. “Then, present arms! Lower Arms,” Rossi ordered. “Now, if I hear of any further complaints, I will escalate this right to Captain Garcia, are we clear?”

“Aye, Sir!” they responded.

“We’re done here,” Rossi said. “Dismissed.”

The squad quickly exited the immediate area.

“Thank you,” Captain Tersek said. “None of your people have shown respect. And you are the first one to appropriately address this issue.”

“This your first tour of duty?” Rossi asked.

“I’ve worked...” he began.

“Yeah, yeah, but, this is your first time in-field, isn’t it,” Rossi said. “It’s ok. You’ve probably spent a lot of time in command school and special training. You’re probably the son of some rich politician, or a high ranking military officer? Lots of book smarts?”

“How do you know all this?” Captain Tersek asked.

“Just guessing,” Rossi said. “Are you open to a little advice? Even if it’s not from a fellow Cardassian, or even a male?”

“Of course,” Captain Tersek said, chest inflated, almost offended. “We’re both commissioned officers...”

“So were they, by the way,” Rossi said. “Very few non-coms in Fleet, and most Fleet want to show courtesies. Anyway, this is just a suggestion, so feel free to follow it or ignore it as you think fitting, but if you check the morning memo, you’ll probably find a warning or alert to the fact that there is a civilian sniper in the area that’s been shooting at high ranking officers. I personally wouldn’t want anyone saluting me in the field, but that’s just me. Good day!”

Rossi saluted him smartly, exaggerated perfectness, rotated on her heels, and walked away, leaving him with his mouth agape. She didn’t turn back to see if he ran off embarrassed, or tried to walk it off nonchalantly, looking about for a possible sniper. She just didn’t care. It was her personal bias that she was okay with one less Cardassian in the Universe. As she approached the hospital entrance, Jenkins sidled up to her.

“Are we in trouble, ma’am?” Jenkins asked.

“Don’t be stupid,” Rossi said. “I didn’t see anything worth reporting.”

“Thank you,” Jenkins said. “Did you really want us to spread the word to have everyone salute him?”

“Did you hear me say, don’t be stupid?” Rossi asked.

Jenkins chuckled. “Yes, Ma’am.”

Rossi entered the hospital and proceeded to floor seven. The center of the floor was the nurse’s station where she checked in by placing her hand on a recognition plate. It illuminated and logged her on. She moved to her small corner to retrieve a PADD and notes. While sorting through patient information, she took in a conversation that she had no business listening to but was unable to avoid due to proximity.

“He refuses to wear the prosthetic leg,” the nurse complained: human, male.

“Then ship him out, we don’t have time for his nonsense,” the doctor said. His voice was so gruff that Rossi had to glance at him to determine his species. He was Klingon, male.

“The humans on this planet are beyond the Earth norm for illogical, which must be a Klingon influence towards stubbornness,” a third Doctor said. Rossi didn’t have to look up to confirm that she was Vulcan. She returned her focus to her the current patient, trying to find an update.

“The Klingons didn’t make humans crazy, they came that way. All we did was toughen hem up,” The Klingon Doctor argued. He was close enough to her to see what she was doing. He pointed to the “dead” file. “He killed himself last night.”

“That can’t be,” Rossi said. “I had him on a suicide watch!”

“He turned off the monitors,” the Doctor said.

“So? A Suicide watch requires a person; two eyes on the client at all times!” Rossi pointed out.

“We don’t have the man power for that level of intervention or vigilance,” the Klingon said. “And it is his right, under Klingon law to kill himself.”

Rossi was angry, evidenced by the flushed look on her face and the slight turning of her eyebrows, but she bit back on her initial response. She took the prosthetic leg from the nurse and headed towards the amputee’s room they had been discussing. She was still carrying her angry energy when she entered the room and loudly put the artificial leg on the rolling table beside the bed. It was probably luck the patient’s water didn’t spill. She did this so dramatically that the room’s occupant actually came out of his wall gazing to look at her. He watched her, mirroring her anger, as she scanned his tag to bring his chart up on her PADD.

“You cannot make me wear that,” he said, his Klingon accent suggesting he had been raised in a province that was mostly Klingon influence.

“You’re right,” Rossi said, matching his tone. “Do you see me trying to put it on you?”

He didn’t answer.

“Says here that your nerves at the point of the amputation are healthy and intact, making you a good candidate for this technology,” Rossi said.

“It’s not my leg,” the man said.

“Really? What would it take, me writing your name on it?” Rossi asked.

“Are you a Doctor?” he demanded.

“Technically, yes. Practically, nope,” Rossi said.

“What are you?”

“A psychiatrist, so even though I could technically write you a prescription for being resistant, even write you a prescription for being moronic, I have found that using my skills as a licensed professional counselor usually serves my clients better than the pharmaceutical route,” Rossi said. “However, I’m not opposed to prescriptions. Better living through pharmaceuticals is okay by me, so if you’re not producing enough neural transmitters, we could determine what part of the RNA and DNA is failing to produce the appropriate amount of proteins and fix it at a genetic level. Better than having to remember to take a pill every day, but generally, most people today recognize that there are legitimate social and psychological routes to mental health without drugs. It’s my personal bias to try to change body chemistry with talk therapy before drug therapy, but how would you like to proceed?”

“I don’t know what you just said, but whatever it is you do, you suck at it,” the man said.

Rossi sat on the bed next to him. His right leg was unashamedly exposed, revealing the emptiness below the knee. She had no qualms observing it, was even willing to touch it, but didn’t want to ask permission, and she wouldn’t touch him without his permission.

“It doesn’t disgust you?” the man asked.

“Should it?” Rossi asked.

“Yes! I want everyone to see it! I want everyone to know what was done here. How the Empire and the Federation failed us,” the man said.

Counselor Rossi nodded. Without saying another word, she jumped up, took the artificial leg off the table and departed the room. When she returned, she brought with her a grotesque, metallic, mechanical, prosthetic leg. The sleeve that received the rounded off part of the thigh was neon green. The leg was unforgiving metal with an orange neon stripe running down the length on either side. A string of lights ran down the front and back, with a larger light at the kneecap, and at the end of each skeletal toe was a flashing light, all of which illuminated with articulation. She pointed to a symbol for Sherman's Planet on the sleeve, and a date of the Cardassian bombing.

"Will this draw sufficient attention to your status?" Rossi asked.

The man laughed. It was probably the first real laugh he had had since the bombing, something that surprised even him. He became embarrassed and started to openly weep. "What are you doing to me?"

"I'm not doing anything. You're doing all the work. You are processing your grief," Rossi said.

"I don't want to forget," he said.

"Then don't," Rossi said.

He reached for the leg. Rossi pulled it out of his reach.

"I have a condition," Rossi said.

"Keep it," he said, gruffly.

"I need your help," Rossi said.

"I will not fall for any more of your counseling tricks," he said.

"This is not a trick. I am not trying to help you," Rossi assured him.

"What do you want?" he asked.

"The person two doors down is on a suicide watch and there is insufficient personnel to provide the level of intervention I want him to have. I've lost three clients to suicide this week. I need two eyes on this guy for at least twenty four hours. Would you be my eyes? Can you stay awake that long?" Rossi asked.

"I've not been sleeping well," the man admitted. "But I'm not trained for this work."

"No one ever is," Rossi said, handing him his new leg.

The man took it. Rossi let go and walked to the door.

"May I call you?" he asked.

"Nope," Rossi said. "You're good."

"I don't feel good," he said.

"Recognizing that probably makes you the healthiest guy on this floor," Rossi said. "Good luck."

Counselor Rossi stopped by the nurse's station to close out a file and then headed for the lift. She entered the lift, turned to face the way she had come. She saw the doctors and nurses staring in amazement at the amputee using his grotesque artificial leg. He was struggling to use it, but greater mobility would come in time. He paused to look at her. She pushed the button to accelerate her departure. She had ten more floors to visit and this was just the start of her day.

CHAPTER THREE

“What a remarkable specimen,” Jurak raved, as he scrutinized the salt vampire sprawled out on the medical bed before him. He was doubly intrigued by the fact that all his medical instruments acted as if there was a Bajoran on the table, and not a monstrous, salt sucking, creature. Moving the high resolution scanner over the length of her body, the image it recorded and displayed was Leeta. Leeta’s feet, legs, thigh, clothing, cleavage, neck and then her face was reflected on the screen as the device slid back towards the wall, disappeared into a hidden recess. The image displayed on his tricorder revealed the same information, but clearly his eyes saw the salt vampire. “The last known member of this species was killed by Doctor McCoy in 2266.”

“We know its history, Doctor,” Kitara said, arms crossed in front of her. She was dressed in full battle armor, a full complement of weapons included, as was Kletsova who had followed her up to the USS New Constitution’s Sick Bay. Four Klingon Security Officers stood at ready, disruptors in hand. Garcia was still out cold, being attended to by a nurse. The Path Finder’s Kalandan computer system, Losira, had made herself available the moment she knew Garcia was in trouble. The presence of her avatar was her declaration that she wanted to be involved. The only other person present was a telepathic friend of Garcia’s, a non crew member, who stood in the corner observing the situation with her mind; Kors by name, she was a subset of the Andorian species known as Aenar, and regarded as one of the strongest telepaths in the Alpha quadrant.

“What I don’t understand is how she is able to trick our sensors into believing she is Bajoran,” Kletsova said. “Her talent to assume identities is a psionic ability. She telepathically takes the information from a person’s head, and then manipulates the mind of the observer with that very information. She literally projects what the observer wants or expects to see, the perfect camouflage. Two different observers might even observe her as two different people simultaneously. But she shouldn’t be able to trick Losira or our tricorders.”

“I must admit, that is a mystery,” Jurak said.

Losira seemed intrigued, biting her lip. “She must be using some sort of technology that projects the identity of the person she is impersonating.”

“That’s some technology,” Kletsova said.

“Preserver technology, perhaps,” Losira said.

“You’re saying she’s a Preserver spy?” Kletsova asked.

“That would make sense,” Jurak said, musing out loud. “We know for a fact that the Preservers have been relocating species and conducting experiments on diverse populations. What better way to get up close and personal with your test subjects than to insert a spy capable of reading minds and assuming personalities! This salt vampire could ascertain information without corrupting the data set, or influencing the study group. She literally is the best possible, natural anthropologist. Kors, are you able to pick anything up?”

Kors simply shook her head. “She is still sleeping. I might be able to glean some information as she makes the transition from sleep to wake, however, I must remind you that I have met her as she impersonated Leeta, and I was not aware of any duplicity.”

“Would you have told us if you had been?” Kitara asked, scowling. She didn’t like telepaths in general, and she especially didn’t like Kors.

Though Aenars are blind, Kors was still somehow able to meet Kitara's eyes. "If I had detected a physical threat to Garcia's well being, or anyone else for that matter, I would have intervened. My telepathic oath of non interference and non disclosure is a virtue instilled in my species as a respect for personal liberty. That does not mean I will sit by and do nothing while she uses telepathy to prey on victims that have no telepathic defenses, especially against people I love."

"What about people you don't love?" Kitara asked.

"I'm not the thought police, Lt.," Kors said. "If I reported every thought of violence that I over heard, even you would be in the Brig. If a non telepath contemplates harming someone, especially Garcia, mostly I would not intervene. I trust Garcia to be capable of handling himself. So why should I intervene if a telepath harbors similar thoughts, but has no intentions of acting on them?"

Garcia stirred, interrupting their ongoing debate, which was growing into a feud over the moral responsibility of a citizen who has telepathy. The monitor above Garcia's head displayed his increasing heart and respiration rate. When Jurak didn't respond to the new information, Nurse Janet Cohen brought it to his attention. Jurak waved her off. Garcia started to cough and then gag.

"Doctor," Nurse Cohen insisted.

"Relax, nurse," Jurak said. "He's fine."

"He's choking!" Cohen snapped. "Should I give him adrenalin?"

"What?!" Jurak asked, doing a double take. "You want to kill him? Look, he's just fighting off the paralysis. The coughing is a spasm, a common panic disorder associated with certain stun victims, especially those who are high strung individuals."

"But he's not getting enough air," Nurse Cohen pleaded.

"And Garcia isn't high strung," Kletsova added to Cohen's argument. "I've never met anyone as calm as Garcia."

"He's a master at displaying outward calm," Jurak said, only glancing at her before returning his focus to his tricorder, trying different wavelengths to see if he could see through the illusion. "He can even fool most of the biometrics, but you can't fool brain scans and neural transmitters. Mentally, he's wound tighter than a ferret in a badger's hole..."

"Doctor!" Cohen pleaded.

Jurak frowned, pocketed his tricorder, went to Garcia's side, and slapped him twice across the face. "Hey! Relax. Your stun is wearing off and you should have complete control over your faculties in about five minutes."

"Dr?!" Kletsova said, drawing the doctor's attention back to the salt vampire.

The salt vampire sat up abruptly. Before her feet hit the floor, she had already assumed the identities of several people. Kletsova saw her as Trini, her best friend. Kitara saw her brother, Trolos. Doctor Jurak saw the creature as his long since, deceased mate. Nurse Cohen saw the creature as her dad. The guards lowered their weapons. Everyone present seemed mesmerized by the creature, with the exception of Losira and Kors. The creature walked face first into a force field and fell back to the bed, completely shocked, proving her telepathy was not a hundred percent or she would have seen the precautions they had taken against her.

"Kitara, let me out of here," Trolos said.

"Why are you doing this to me, Tatiana?" Trini asked.

“You will cease all attempts to manipulate their minds,” Losira said, stepping forwards menacingly. “Or I will be forced to execute you.”

The creature ceased her mental attacks and became visible to all as the salt vampire. Even Losira now saw her as she truly was. “Please, do not hurt me. I mean you no harm.”

Garcia flopped over, pushed himself off the medical table, landed on his feet, and fell right to the floor, crashing flat on his face. Nurse Cohen came around the table to help Garcia up but Doctor Jurak grabbed her arm.

“Let him be,” Jurak said.

“But?” Nurse Cohen tried.

“I want you to help me collect tissues samples from the creature,” Jurak said, taking new tricorder readings. “Go fetch me the full inventory kit. Losira, start a full medical scan now that you can see her.”

Garcia’s hands reached the top of the medical table and he pulled himself to his feet. No one seemed interested in his struggles, except the nurse who was following orders to ignore him. She gave him a sympathetic look and then forced herself to focus on her task at hand.

“Wat di yu hid me wid,” Garcia asked, his voice slurred as if he were recovering from a Dentist’s numbing agent.

“What was that?” Kitara asked.

Garcia flashed back to his youth when he was in speech therapy under the guidance of Counselor Troi, who wasn’t a counselor then, but a student that had been assigned to his case. “What,” Garcia said, forcing himself to speak slow and enunciate every syllable. “Did you hit me with?”

“Oh,” Kitara said. “Sorry, but it took four shots of the highest stun setting to bring the creature down, and you were in the way. You had a tachycardia, which ended in ‘afib’ before we got you back to the ship. I administered CPR until the Doc got your heart back into sinus rhythm.”

“We warned you stay back,” Kletsova said, appearing to be just as unconcerned about his well being as the Klingons.

Garcia stomped his foot and rubbed his thigh, trying to get the feeling back completely. He felt like ants were coursing all over his body. Almost instantly, all the numbness vanished, accompanied by a brief, intense pain in every joint in his body. He nearly collapsed again. His face mirrored the agony and the relief that followed. Then, slowly, he became aware of small injuries, perhaps attained when he was forced into a choke hold: falling to the floor after the initial stun blast, chest pain from the CPR that was administered before medical intervention that had resulted in two fractured ribs that required healing, and lastly, from when he just fell off the bed. He scratched his face, unable to see the red, circular blotches that had been caused by the salt vampire’s finger-suckers.

“You shouldn’t struggle so,” Jurak said, only half paying attention to Garcia as he focused on his new pet project. “You make it so much harder on yourself.”

“Yeah,” Garcia said. “Thank you so much for your concern.”

“No worries,” Jurak said, missing the sarcasm all together. Jurak gave Garcia a friendly gesture, a pat on the back, which nearly toppled him. “I know it hurts, but

breathe deep, fully expand your rib cage so as to make sure the newly mended ribs flex properly.”

Garcia was already doing so, and the pain caused him to wonder why his First Officer had administered CPR. What, she couldn't have waited ten whole seconds to transport him to Sickbay?! Perhaps she had just been too eager to practice her CPR skills on a live victim. He closed his eyes, sought his center, relaxing his muscles, and then turned his attention to the creature. He stepped closer, just shy of the force field that was in play.

“Please, don't hurt me,” she said.

“Who are you?” Garcia asked.

“If you mean, what is my name, it is Panayz,” she said. “If you are asking what I am doing here, well, I was sent to infiltrate your command structure and assassinate you. Mars sent me.”

Garcia looked to Kors, who nodded confirmation. “As far as I can tell, she is speaking truth,” Kors said. “Her ability to penetrate minds and camouflage herself is a far greater skill than I have. She could be tricking me, but I don't think she is.”

“Please, I am speaking the truth,” Panayz said. “I was sent to kill you, but I chose not to. That must count for something.”

Garcia gritted his teeth, his eyes still on Kors. He was certain she was holding something back, not revealing all that she knew. Her personal philosophy prevented her from intentional “eavesdropping” and “gossiping,” so had she gleaned information through unintentional channels, she would probably ignore it or suppress it.

“How long have you been stalking him?” Kitara asked.

“Two weeks,” Panayz responded. Her shoulders slumped and she kept her head bowed, trying to appear submissive.

“Two weeks?” Kitara asked. “She's been with us two weeks and she's never telepathically slipped in front of you, Kors?”

Garcia interrupted the potential fight. “What about you, Losira? Couldn't your sensors tell she wasn't Bajoran?”

“She's wearing technology that conceals her identity,” Losira said.

“Even her weight against the floor plating?” Garcia asked.

“That's not in the security protocols,” Losira said, clicking her head over. “But not a bad addition. I could certainly implement that on the Path Finder.”

Garcia nodded and turned back to Panayz for an explanation.

“My necklace,” Panayz said. “A gift of the Gods. It allows me to be photographed or scanned, projecting the image and life signs of the person I am choosing to impersonate. I download the mental image directly into the technology, which is psionic based.”

“You're very forthcoming all of a sudden,” Kitara said.

“I am at your mercy and I want to live,” Panayz said. “Please, Tammis. I did not complete my assignment, which is no small risk I'm taking considering who gave me the directive. You know my failure to comply is tantamount to a death sentence.”

“Wow,” Jurak said. “You're pregnant!”

Garcia closed his eyes, sighing heavily. Kletsova rolled her eyes, and said: “So much for using protection with the rest of your partners.” Kitara glared menacingly. Garcia was too busy in a mental exchange with Kors to address Kletsova's comment.

(You knew this.) {It was not my place to reveal it.} (OMG, you've known all along what and who she was, and you've said nothing?! Done nothing!) {No, you've known all along who and what she was, but I couldn't see past your lies. Your physical intimacy with her opened psychological pathways to her brain, and you chose to be blind to it. You've ignored your own intuition and suspicions because you wanted to believe she was Leeta, so don't act all surprised that I became psychologically complicit in your self-deception.} (I expect more from you, Kors.) {I'm not your counselor. It's not my function to hold your hand or improve your psychological health.}

"So, did you like forget that you have a reproductive issue, or did you just give into the heat of the moment?" Kletsova asked, giving Garcia that pathetic, jealous look that she always did whenever she learned he had a new partner.

"I manipulated his mind so that he thought he was using protection," Panayz admitted.

"It is rather convenient," Kitara said, disgusted more by the fact that her mate would sleep with a 'monster' than the fact that he had taken yet another partner.

"Considering she knows we have to kill her. Forget for a moment that she is a spy and a telepath and probably knows everything your command staff knows and that she is working for your enemies. She is still the most dangerous creature ever classified by Starfleet. She has the ability to mesmerize her victims, and then sucks the salt right out of their bodies! Her ability to assume alternative personalities is more dangerous than even the cameloid-shape-shifter species, for at least that creature leaves protein signatures if you know what to look for. Do you forget Kirk himself was nearly killed by a creature such as this? That one killed five people before they brought it down and it tossed Spock around like a rag doll."

"I know of this one," Panayz said, shaking her head. "And this is an unfair comparison. That creature from M-113 was alone on her planet for who knows how long, the last of her kind. She probably watched her kind die off, and knowing she was going to die, alone, is enough to drive most anyone insane. And then to add insult to injury, alien invaders arrived on her planet. Tam, would you really judge an entire species on the actions of one individual, an individual that, by any human evaluation, was merely acting out of fear or other forms of situational depression?"

"I'm a Captain, not a forensic psychologist," Garcia argued.

"But you know I'm right!" Panays said.

"You admitted your intentions were to assassinate Garcia!" Kitara snapped. "This reinforces our belief that you are a dangerous creature! You're physically stronger than Vulcan and Klingons combined."

"I have been a servant to the Gods for as long as I can remember," Panayz said. "When I was a child, my village sacrificed me to the mountain Gods so that their village might be spared from catastrophe. The Gods took me, trained me, and I followed orders."

"They are not gods," Garcia said.

"I know that," Panayz said. "But this is the first time that I have ever met anyone that has fought back and been successful. I've learned a great deal from you, Tammas."

"Yeah, apparently you learned you could get pregnant if you slept with him," Kletsova said.

"Not a great secret there," Panayz said. "Everyone in the Alpha quadrant is talking about that. But yes, when I learned that my species was extinct and that there

might be a chance to have children, I chose to stay here and be with Garcia. To guarantee that I would have a child, I continued to be intimate with Garcia as frequently as possible over the last two weeks. The Leeta personality had the highest probability of multiple successful intimate encounters.”

“Do you understand that, at worse, any offspring will be a highbred, most likely sterile?” Doctor Jurak asked. “The best case scenario would be the formation of a completely new species. You can’t repopulate your species with only one of you.”

“I know the risks, yes,” Panayz said. “At least something will survive beyond me.” She looked to Kitara. “You, as a mother, can understand that, can you not?”

Kitara grunted. Losira bit her lip, seeming perturbed, definitely sympathetic. Garcia rubbed his forehead, trying to lower his stress levels. He engaged one of his biofeedback games via his neural implant. Tetris blocks fell into place as he began to mentally relax, speeding up as he let go. This was just one of his strategies to slow his Kelvan brain down so that he could focus on the present.

“You aren’t seriously considering letting her go, are you?” Kitara demanded.

“We can’t keep her imprisoned,” Garcia said. He was still holding prisoner a female Gorn he had impregnated with the Kelvan transporter, waiting until the fetus had developed sufficiently so it could be transferred to an artificial womb. Or was it an incubator? It would be delivered as an egg, and then hatched. Anyway, once ‘whatever was to be’ was a done deal, he intended to let the Gorn go, but not until then, for she would most certainly kill the child. Garcia rubbed his forehead more intensely, massaging a headache not related to being stunned. Some blocks missed and began to pile up.

“Yes, we can,” Kletsova argued. “Technically, by impersonating someone in order to be intimate with another, she has violated the law. Lying and misrepresentation in order to be intimate with someone for the purposes of sexual gratification is immoral. The legal definition is rape.”

“It’s almost like stealing someone’s reproductive material so they could get pregnant, wouldn’t you agree?” Garcia asked, reminding Kletsova of her own infringement. “Our coupling was mutually agreed upon.” He scowled at Kors, but deep down he knew Kors had been right. He had known it wasn’t Leeta the first moment he touched her. He could blame it on his stress levels, the crisis on Sherman’s Planet, all sort of things, but it all boiled down to that had there been any duplicity, it was him fooling himself.

Kletsova flushed with anger, wondering if Garcia was ever going to truly forgive her for her trespass.

“Tatiana, were you suggesting that we send Panayz to a rehabilitation center?” Losira asked.

“You can’t rehabilitate a functional telepath who’s primary biological survival instinct is to assume the characteristics of a victim’s fantasy in order to survive!” Kitara said, wondering why they were even discussing the matter. “You can never have 100 percent assurance that it wasn’t a deception. She was born to manipulate.”

“We all were, which brings us back to my statement,” Garcia said. “We can’t keep her imprisoned.”

“Exactly,” Kitara said. “We have to kill her.”

“Have I not made myself clear?” Garcia asked.

“We can’t kill her,” Jurak said. “The warrior code prevents us from killing civilians, women, and children.”

“The exception is a female warrior and she is a self admitted assassin!” Kitara pointed out. “Further, she is the most dangerous creature known to nature- she’s a female carrying young. She will do anything, say anything, to protect her offspring.”

Jurak nodded, unable to argue that point.

“Tam,” Panayz spoke, quietly. “I know I tricked you. Like Kitara said, part of that is a survival skill. I can’t help but be who I am. But I am sentient and I have intellectual and cognitive abilities. I can negotiate. I am rational, reasonable. Again, I chose not to harm you.”

“I recognize that,” Garcia said.

“She’s capable of sucking the salt right out of your body, Tam! These circles under your eyes aren’t signs of sleep deprivation,” Kitara snapped, poking the rings on his face as if they were buttons. “You may be good at taming Targs, but I object to you thinking you can make a pet out of a salt vampire! She’s dangerous.”

“Oh, please, she’s no more dangerous than any female,” Garcia said. “You could at any time plunge a knife into my back or kill me while I sleep.”

“When I come to kill you, you will be awake and armed,” Kitara said.

“The point is, the level of danger to me is still the same, regardless if its Klingon, Andorian, or human,” Garcia pointed out.

“I could make it worth your while,” Panayz attempted to negotiate. “I could be any woman you ever imagined. I can tap into the pleasure centers of your brain and unleash intensities you have yet to experience. You would never be bored!”

Losira smirked, suddenly realizing Panayz’s telepathic abilities were no where near perfect. Garcia laughed out loud, did an about face, and headed for the door. “Put her in the Brig,” he said, as he made to leave.

“I can also be a spy for you, as I don’t have the same ethical problems about spying that Kors does,” Panayz said, and then added quickly: “And I can tell you about the Gods. And I can tell you if they ever send another of my species.”

Garcia paused. He looked to Kors.

“She is being truthful about her willingness to negotiate the terms of her survival,” Kors said.

Garcia’s eyes closed as he took in a deep breath. Only a slight grimace touched the corners of his lips, which might have been mental discomfort, or the pain from expanding his ribs full out.

“Kitara, assign Panayz guest quarters, where she will remain confined for the time being,” Garcia said. He blinked, looking up to access his itinerary through his neural implant; tetris fell away from the forefront of his brain. The stun had cost him two hours out of his day and it was not a beneficial rest. “Confiscate any technology on her person. Doctor, tag her with a biochip locator. Losira, assign a Losira agent to her quarters. She is to remain under constant scrutiny.” Garcia approached Panayz. “You are not to attempt escape, and you will remain in your natural form. Consider this present situation a courtesy extended to you for sparing my life, but know you are a prisoner of war. More courtesy might be provided as you demonstrate your good will and earn trust.”

“This is fair,” Panayz agreed, bowing her head, like a puppy being scolded.

Garcia looked to Jurak, tapping his wrist. "I believe we're due at a conference in ten minutes," Garcia said, and headed for the door.

"Captain, I need to talk to you," Kitara said.

"We're not killing her Number One!" Garcia snapped, without looking back. He was out the door before he could hear her protest.

Kors turned to leave, but as she did, she paused by Kitara and added: "Now see that? Wouldn't life be so much easier if everyone were telepaths?" Kors said, smiled mischievously, and then walked out.

Kitara thumbed the hilt of her knife.



The rogue 'Diana Troi' Kelvan-computer program which had been downloaded into Garcia's brain with the complete personality matrix of the real Counselor Deanna Troi made herself visible to Garcia. Originally she had been designed by the Kelvan to manipulate him, but had since simply become an annoyance. She appeared beside him in a dramatic flare that rivaled Q, maintaining his pace.

"Oh!" Garcia jumped, wondering how the extra personalities in his head had the ability to sneak up on him. It was his brain literally scaring itself! "What do you want?" Garcia asked, full of Klingon tonality and gruffness.

"What makes you think I want anything?" Rogue Troi asked.

"Because I can see you," Garcia said. The door to the lift didn't open, indicating that there was not a turbolift immediately available. He pushed the button to expedite the next available to him. "And when I see you, you want something."

"Have you ever considered that I may want things even when you don't see me?" Rogue Troi asked.

"I try not to think about it," Garcia said.

"You sure are grumpy today," Rogue Troi pointed out, pinching his cheek.

"Umm, lack of quality sleep, perhaps?"

"Or the fact that my First Officer killed me and then beat my heart back to life?" Garcia asked. There were actually a dozen things aggravating him, but he couldn't point to any one thing affecting his mood. He pushed the button a couple more times. It occurred to him that on the Path Finder the lift would have been waiting for him. "I suppose you want to counsel me? Perhaps follow up on what Kors projected to me?"

"Nope," Rogue Troi said. "As I've explained to you already, it is not in my best interest to alleviate your psychological discomfort. I want you addicted to me. That said, seeing how your encounter with the salt vampire is technically a rape, you now have an ethical obligation to go see the ship's counselor."

"I don't like the ship's counselor," Garcia said, and grimaced as he realized several crew members had overheard him.

"Don't guess you should have said that out loud," Rogue Troi said, grinning at him.

The lift opened and Garcia jumped in. "Deck four, transporter room." Troi entered, standing right in front of him, facing him. Garcia stared right back, and asked, "Are you jealous of her?"

"Hardly. She's probably the only one of your crew who won't willingly sleep with you," Rogue Troi said, smiling deviously, as if baiting him to test that. "Partly because she's your counselor and partly because she doesn't like you."

“Really?” Garcia asked.

“Really she won’t sleep with you or really she doesn’t like you?”

“What do you think?” Garcia snapped.

“Priority one news flash, not everyone is going to like you, Tam. And unlike the stereotypical plot contrivance of most of your holodeck fiction, that doesn’t mean she subconsciously wants to sleep with you. You’re so predictably, incorrigibly, juvenile,” Rouge Troi said.

“I wasn’t thinking that,” Garcia said.

“I’m a Betazoid, you can’t lie to me,” Rogue Troi said.

“No you’re not,” Garcia argued.

“Okay, technically I’m not a Betazoid, but I can still read your mind,” Troi said.

“Yeah, about that, how come I can’t read yours?” Garcia asked.

“Trade secret,” Rogue Troi said. “Anyway, Counselor Rossi’s behavior modification strategy of trying to get you to conform to a particular stereotype of human normalcy is completely the wrong tact for you. She’s wasting time and frustrating you, and that is why you are feeling some hate for her.”

“What do you mean?” Garcia said.

“Tam, you’re not a monogamous animal. That’s not your personality type, and the sooner you come to grips with that and accept it…” Rogue Troi began.

“I accept it,” Garcia said.

“Intellectually, perhaps, but not emotionally,” Rogue Troi pointed out.

“Emotionally, you hate yourself for being outside the box, and your discontent comes from trying to make yourself fit into something that isn’t you. Your whole gimmick is that you want to be normal and invisible in everything you do, and the more you try to be something you’re not, the more conspicuous you become. You care too much what people think.”

“I don’t care what people think,” Garcia said.

“Yeah, right,” Rogue Troi said. “So you’re naturally curious as to why Rossi hates you and are making contracts with all the mothers because you’re bored with life?”

“I have a social responsibility to the children,” Garcia said,

“That doesn’t mean you have to marry all their mothers!” Rogue Troi said.

“I’m not marrying all of them,” Garcia said.

“Near enough, it seems,” Troi said.

“You are jealous,” Garcia said.

“Please, you and I are forever,” Rogue Troi said. “No one will ever know you the way I know you.”

“So you won’t be jealous if I do decide to see Counselor Rossi on a regular basis?” Garcia asked.

“You’re not ready for therapy. You’re not ready to own it, and, I dare say, her advice will only antagonize you to the point that you will continue more fiercely with your current strategy,” Rogue Troi said.

“Which is?” Garcia said.

“You will indulge in self denial and delayed gratification for as long as you can and then at the first moment of weakness, you will give in to whatever temptation is available, followed by intense feelings of guilt and self disgust at the depths of your own depravity, which will begin the next cycle of denial,” Rogue Troi said. “Sleeping with the

salt vampire is evidence enough for me that I'm right. And one day, when you've pushed the boundaries of denial and have no available partner to alleviate the stress that naturally builds up, I am going to be there to bask in all the attention you're going to lavish on me. So, go ahead and spend time with that Rossi chick. It will only drive you to me faster. Either way, I win. Even your attempts at avoiding me are attention, and I will take whatever you give me."

"You're sick," Garcia told her.

"No," Rogue Troi argued. "We're sick."

The door opened and Garcia was in such a hurry to get out that he pushed through Rogue Troi and nearly walked into his teenage daughter, Tama Orleans. He felt his throat suddenly tighten in expectation of having an allergic reaction to her Delta genes, but then remembered he had not missed a dose of his "allergy" treatment since they had established a functional regimen that had minimal side effects.

"I heard you were on board," Tama Orleans said, hugging him. She stepped back and presented the book she was carrying. "I made this for you."

"What is this?" Garcia asked, accepting the book for inspection. Hardback edition, black cover with the title etched out in gold. He brought it closer to his face to smell it, a quality that PADD's simply didn't carry.

"Your favorite book, the Star Thrower, by Loren Eiseley," Tama Orleans said.

"Oh, well, I already have an electronic copy downloaded into my implant," Garcia said, offering the book back. "I'm off to a conference..."

Tama Orleans bit her lower lip to hold back a complaint, but couldn't prevent her tears from gushing. She turned and fled at best speed, leaving the book in Garcia's hands.

"Oh, that was an awesome display in great parenting skills," Rogue Troi said, applauding.

"What did I say?" Garcia asked.

"It's what you didn't say. She gave you a present, Tam," Rogue Troi pointed out. "What follows is: thank you. Or, I love you."

"But there's no context or occasion for a gift. Additionally, I already have a copy but even if I didn't have a copy, or a photographic memory, the computer chip in my head gives me access to all forms of media fed directly into my brain via the ship's computer. Further, she should know I don't collect material objects. And I'm trying to get to a conference. What am I supposed to do with this? Put it in the nearest replicator? Carry it all the way back to my quarters?"

"She was just being nice, Tam. You know what nice is, right?" Rogue Troi asked.

"Of course, but that's my point; I didn't say anything negative," Garcia said. "I didn't even tell her not to do it again."

"Just give it away, like you do with all your gifts," Troi said. "Hand it to your favorite yeoman."

Garcia pointed a finger at her, pausing in frustration as he was not quite sure what to say, consequently what came out sounded more like a diatribe: "Why would I give it to Tomoko? What a horrible thing to do to someone. Cause you're not just giving a book. You give one book and then she'll need a place to put it. So, she makes a book shelf, but because this would probably be the only book she physically owns, now she needs bookends to hold it upright, unless by giving her this she starts a new hobby of collecting old tomes, which this isn't, based on the smell it was definitely replicated. Then it sits on

the desk, collects dust, and if the inertial dampeners ever fail, it could become a deadly projectile flying across the cabin.”

“You know what the worst thing about sharing your brain is?” Rogue Counselor Troi asked, interrupting Garcia’s rant. “Is that there are times when I don’t want to be anywhere near you. Like now. You’re just a monster.”

Rogue Troi snapped her fingers and disappeared. Garcia stood there a moment, trying to figure out why Rogue Troi was so upset. It hurt being called a monster, and his dead sister’s voice reverberated through his conscious mind “Monster!” Doctor Jurak emerged from the turbo lift behind him and hit Garcia on the shoulder.

“Come on, we’re going to be late to that conference,” Doctor Jurak said.

Garcia tucked the book under his arm and followed Doctor Jurak to the transporter.

CHAPTER FOUR

“Computer,” Rossi said.

“Working,” the computer responded.

Rossi was relieved to hear the voice of the computer of the New Constitution. The Path Finder’s computer’s voice was that of Losira, the sentient and alien computer that ran the ship, and it was unnerving knowing that it was always watching and available. The NC’s computer was just as invasive and ever present, but something in Rossi’s mind made it easier to accept it as a non-sentient, but highly sophisticated mechanism.

“Download information about the Zaldan species to my PADD, and push it to the top of my priority readings,” Rossi said. “And find time in my schedule that I can actually get to my readings.”

“Due to finishing your rounds early, you have 25 minutes before your next client’s appointment,” the computer pointed out, displaying her schedule on the wall terminal.

“Pfft,” Rossi said. “Not right now. I want a glass of wine.”

A glass of wine appeared in the replicator. She had a change of heart before she could collect it, though. She rubbed her forehead, deleted her order with a push of a button, and hit her forehead against the wall several times. “Computer, something wine like that won’t affect the fetus. But not synthehol. And add that caveat to all my future orders so I don’t accidentally order something harmful to fetal development.”

A new glass appeared. It looked like wine. It smelt like wine. She grimaced at the taste. Close enough. She grabbed her PADD and went to her couch and sat down. She made herself comfortable, propping her feet up on the table. She sipped her wine, and scrolled through the PADD that rested in her lap. There was the file on the Zalden Species at the top. A prominent file on Garcia and Tama Orleans. Her diary... A chime interrupted her.

“Come,” Rossi called out.

Lt. Tatiana Kletsova entered. “I’m early, is that ok?”

Rossi pointed to the chair across from her. Kletsova nodded and sat down. She fidgeted for a moment, not making eye contact at first. Rossi pointed to the bowl of candy on the table. The bowl was crystal clear, revealing that it only contained butterscotch.

“I’m not a fan,” Kletsova said.

“Of candy?” Rossi asked.

“Of butterscotch,” Kletsova said.

“Suit yourself,” Rossi said, setting her wine glass on the table and helping herself to one of the candies. She slowly unwrapped it, waiting for Kletsova to begin her rant. The candy and wine mixed just right on her tongue.

“Am I crazy?” Kletsova asked.

“For not liking butterscotch?” Rossi asked, toying with the foil.

“For loving Garcia,” Kletsova said.

Rossi moved the PADD from her lap to the couch, put the candy foil on top of it, drew her legs up so that she was sitting Indian style, clasped her hands and rested them on her lap. “You tell me,” Rossi said.

“You’re the shrink,” Kletsova said. “You’ve read my file, scored my inventories, probably even casually diagnosed me based on my ramblings in treatment...”

“You want me to tell you that what you did was okay, and what you’re doing is okay, but that’s not my function as your counselor,” Rossi said.

Kletsova looked confused. “What I’m doing now? What am I doing now?”

“Chasing after a fantasy relationship,” Rossi said.

“Fantasy? I love Garcia and I know he loves me,” Kletsova said.

“I’m sure he does,” Rossi said, going for her drink. She crunched through the butterscotch and chased it down with wine. “And half the women in the quadrant. The fantasy part is that you believe you can have an intimate relationship with Garcia that has any substance, even when it is clear to anyone with half a brain that Garcia is incapable of intimacy due to severe abandonment issues during his primary nurturing years, which is evidence in his classic ‘rock star’ approach to relationships which happen hot and fast and many blow up in his face because no one ever taught him how to emote. And you would know this if you had been even half attentive in high school. What, that was basic self-care 101? And I know you had to have had at least three psychology classes long before college, which means you should clearly see that Garcia has some issues.”

“I thought we were supposed to be talking about me?” Kletsova asked.

“We are. You’re chasing someone who can’t give you what you want,” Rossi said.

“But Garcia’s a great man. He can learn, change, grow,” Kletsova asked.

“Oh, so now you are a psychologist,” Rossi said.

“No, but I believe people can change, don’t you?” Kletsova said.

“No,” Rossi said.

Kletsova came forwards in her seat. “You’re a psychiatrist!”

Rossi raised her wine as if giving ‘cheers.’ “So my diploma says. And I’m pointing out to you that you are chasing someone who will clearly only bring you pain, while you continue to rationalize how you can make it work. Instead of changing yourself, you want to change him. Of course, I could be wrong. I am drinking alcohol while seeing clients.”

Kletsova sunk back into the seat. Rossi took Kletsova’s lack of a challenge as an assessment of her present mental state. Had she said ‘you shouldn’t be drinking due to the pregnancy,’ it would have indicated concern for others. Had she said you shouldn’t be drinking while seeing clients, it would have indicated heightened self care, or good boundaries.

“Let’s talk about your pregnancy,” Rossi said.

“I know, you think what I did was bad,” Kletsova said.

“It doesn’t matter what I think,” Rossi said. “It matters what you think. You want to change, start with changing your philosophy. Instead of thinking in terms of good or bad, think of terms of effectiveness. Was getting pregnant effective in getting you what you want?”

“No,” Kletsova said, sulking.

“What did you want?” Rossi asked.

“I didn’t want to be only one on the ship not having a baby,” Kletsova said.

“You know, you can leave your bullshit outside my office when you come in here,” Rossi said.

“What the hell?” Kletsova asked. She didn’t know if she should be shocked or offended, so her face displayed both simultaneously

“There are a number of women who are not with child, so you wouldn’t have been alone, but even if you were the only one not pregnant, you are a Star Fleet Officer. ‘Everyone else is doing it so I should, too?’ That’s high school bullshit and that’s the most incredibly, ignorant reason I have ever heard for having a baby from anyone older than 14. No thought of the child in that line of reasoning. No thought of how it affects the father. Or the crew. The family. Now, tell me what you wanted, before I dismiss you with five hundred push-ups.”

“I wanted to be closer to Garcia!” Kletsova said, her eyes tearing up.

Rossi nodded. “That’s at least plausible. Was it effective?”

“No. We’re even further apart than ever,” Kletsova said. “Why plausible?”

“More likely it was a subtle attempt to manipulate Garcia emotionally, forcing him into a pattern of behaving towards you, but not really increasing intimacy,” Rossi said.

“You have a really dark view of human psychology,” Kletsova said.

“Sometimes. But more likely it’s your interpretation of the word ‘manipulate’ which has a dark connotation,” Rossi said. “All human being, all sentient life for that matter, manipulate systems to get their needs met. It’s hard wired into us genetically. We start off as babies with big eyes and cuteness, drawing others into us. Then we cry, and, if we’re really lucky, we learn with each cry we get our needs met. Manipulation is what we do. Some of us learn that we can get more with direct/honest, where others learn subtle, or devious. When subtle failed to get you a Garcia relationship, you went straightway to devious. Now, that didn’t work for you at all, but you still have yet to try direct honest and just ask him, perhaps because your family of origin didn’t come at each other direct, but more likely you simply fear he will say no and then you would be forced to deal with reality as it is instead of how you fantasize it to be.”

“He could say yes,” Kletsova said.

“Absolutely, so either way you would be kicked out of this self-created purgatory by direct honest, and you don’t because you either like suffering, or you’re a coward,” Rossi said. She ignored Kletsova’s reaction, continuing as if musing. “There could be other explanations. Coward doesn’t completely fit, as you would sacrifice your life without hesitation for the ship or a crew member. Fear of rejection seems the most likely, but isn’t a complete answer. It’s deeper than that. It’s not the fear of rejection as much as perhaps the fear of what you think that rejection means...”

Rossi sat back, drinking her pseudo wine. Kletsova stared past her for a long moment. Battle debris sparked in the sunlight as it tumbled by, capturing Rossi’s attention. It would probably be years before the debris burned up in their decaying orbits. It occurred to her that people were a lot like battle debris, simply objects in orbits. What exploded in Kletsova’s family of origin that would explained her present trajectory, or her orbital attraction to Garcia, and how close would she have to get before burning up...

“I thought counselors were supposed to be compassionate,” Kletsova said.

“You want me to hold your hand and tell you everything is going to be alright?” Rossi asked.

Kletsova pouted. “Not when you put it like that,” she said.

“I didn’t think that was why you came here early,” Rossi said.

“What do you mean?” Kletsova asked.

“Think about your entrance. You were already in an emotional state, fairly angry?” Rossi said.

Kletsova nodded, started to look away but Rossi gave her a hand signal and redirected her focus back on her. She wanted her client to hear this, face it dead on.

“I can do compassion, and sell it pretty good, but that’s not what you came for,” Rossi said.

“What did I come for?” Kletsova said.

“You tell me,” Rossi said.

“Absolution?” Kletsova said, half-heartedly.

“My understanding is you were already given that,” Rossi said.

“Then why does he keep reminding me of my indiscretion?!” Kletsova said, her volume going up out of proportion to the question.

“Hmm,” Rossi said, thinking ‘bingo.’ “Maybe because a part of him is human and forgiveness is the hardest thing humans practice. He trusted you and you betrayed that. I believe his forgiveness was sincere, but he gets distracted, and experiences pain, and when you add in all of his other issues, like his passive aggressive tendencies, to what you bring to the mix...”

“What I bring? Whoa, you’re saying I have a part in this?” Kletsova demanded.

“Oh, thank you, Jesus, we can finally go there,” Rossi nearly sang.

“Is that sarcasm?” Kletsova asked.

“Da,” Rossi gave the Russian affirmative. “Garcia has issues. The fact that you know he has issues and still try to box him into a normal relationship shouts loud and clear that your issues are equal to or greater than his issues. He doesn’t want to be in a standard, monogamous relationship with you.”

“But he does want it. He’s just struggling with a sex addiction,” Kletsova said.

Rossi laughed so hard she spilt her wine on her uniform.

“You know it’s an addiction and he wants to do better. He can change,” Kletsova said.

Rossi had to set her glass down and laugh into the couch, pulling the pillow up and clutching it to her chest. She forced herself to breathe.

“You suck at this,” Kletsova said.

Rossi nodded. “Sometimes.”

“You laugh at your clients and don’t believe people can change,” Kletsova accused her.

“Again, my experience suggests people rarely change. Sometimes if they hit rock bottom, provided rock bottom doesn’t kill them, they consider change,” Rossi said.

“People can change. Why become a therapist if you didn’t believe people can change?” Kletsova insisted.

Rossi took a deep breath. “Were you always a Star Fleet Officer?”

“Of course not,” Kletsova said.

“So there was a time before when you were not, but since then you learned some skills and behaviors and knowledge and you were given this title, which is probably the most prestigious title one can earn in today’s society. But it’s more than knowledge, skills and behaviors. Who you are fundamentally, as a person, also had an influence on you becoming Star Fleet. Star Fleet is not in the habit of promoting people who are bad

people. That said, we're all human and sometimes even the best of us go astray. If we boil away all your personality and default philosophies and behaviors, who you are has inherent value, and that value doesn't change. That precept is a fundamental philosophical view that our society holds dear. Everyone has inherent value beyond their thoughts and behaviors. Your stunt lost you some credibility as a Star Fleet officer, and had Garcia pressed the issues, it could have resulted in criminal charges. Additionally, it gave rise to gossip, even generated some animosity. And you have to live with that the rest of your life and that child is going to be a reminder of your mistake as well as the fact that you aren't with Garcia, and so you need to start getting on the right side of a positive philosophy for that child's sake, because it's no longer just about you or Garcia."

Rossi took a breath and Kletsova was about to say something but Rossi told her to wait with a hand motion. Her eyes moved right to left in rapid fashion, as if she were processing something in REM sleep, something Kletsova had only seen Garcia do. When her eyes focused, she continued:

"I don't know why you're chasing the fantasy of Garcia and I don't need to know to employ my typical intervention strategies. I suspect I could line up a number of random men, some nice, safe, quiet guys, and some flashy-shinnies like Garcia and you will always magically pick the flashy-shinnies because your relationship radar is askew. So, not only would it be unethical for me to tell you to stop chasing Garcia, it would be a waste of time because you're going to keep doing it, with Garcia or someone like Garcia, until you're so fed up by not getting anywhere that you decide to change. When that happens, you'll start the next phase by asking self 'what's wrong with me?' which will typically bring you back to therapy and we'll argue about the state of your mental health because you won't be able to accept that there isn't something fundamentally wrong with you, other than simply making poor relationship choices. Who you are attracted to isn't likely to change. It's ingrained. Now, you can date other, but you will ultimately be bored and have a higher propensity to cheat with a bright/shiny, with one caveat: YOU fundamentally change your philosophy and how you rate attractiveness," Rossi said.

"What would you have me do?" Kletsova interrupted her.

"Truth?" Rossi asked.

"Of course," Kletsova said.

"With full abandon, throw yourself at Garcia."

"You're insane," Kletsova said.

"See, even you know that won't work, or you would have already committed everything you got, and I really think that is going to be your only cure. Until you throw everything at it and you have nothing left to give, you will keep doing what you're doing. Stop holding back. Get all in there, or get all out, but this sitting in the middle crap is killing you slowly, so step up your game or end it already, because I really don't want to go a five year mission listening to you cry about not being loved by Garcia the way you want or expect," Rossi said.

Kletsova felt as if she had been pummeled and didn't have the remaining sense to hide how shocked she was at the counselor's directness.

Rossi sighed heavily. "Here's your part, and you need to know this regardless of what you eventually decide. You can't see it, but every time Garcia hooks up with a new partner, or even glances at a potential partner, or his eyes simply linger too long on a female, you get your own little anger, passive aggressive thing going, which is

telegraphed to everyone present. Garcia sees it which confirms his irrational belief that he is a monster, which actually increases his likelihood of behaving the very way you don't want him to act. If you really love Garcia the way you believe, you will cut it off, because even if there is a healthier way for him to be, he will never reach it with you because he will never measure up to your ideal standard. This way leads to nothing but pain for you and him. It seems to me that you came here because Garcia threw your indiscretion in your face, again, but think back on it. What was your part? How did you contribute to that?"

Kletsova started to tear up. "How did you know?"

"Wow. It's almost like I've seen this movie before," Rossi said. She took a breath and emptied herself of the sarcasm. "I didn't know, Tatiana. I made a calculated guess. From a narrative perspective, all movie plots, books, and plays have been exhausted, so all human interaction is merely variations on a theme. The fastest way to change your life is to change your script. People think psychology is a science, but it's not. It is part science, part art, and part experiment. Sometimes, I come up with a hypothesis, I guess, or experiment. Getting it wrong isn't failure, but rather directs potentialities. Look, this is not a bad thing. It's just a thing. What I am asking you to do is to be hyper-aware of why you do things. Don't fly on autopilot. The only thing you have control over is you. Make choices, be purposeful, take responsibility for the consequences, and hold your head up high. And if your choices aren't effective, try something different."

"So, I should just accept that he won't change and participate in free love?"

Kletsova said.

"That is not what I said. If you're monogamous, be monogamous," Rossi said.

"And as far as I am concerned, serial monogamy is not monogamy. But again, why ask my opinion? You know what you want, but you still signed up to be one of many Garcia wives. I personally think you've all lost your minds. If I wanted to marry a community, I would have dated a Denobulan. And if that makes me a prude, I'm a prude. You want to share him, go right ahead? It just doesn't make any sense to me."

"Because you don't love him," Kletsova said.

"Believe it or not, I love everyone equally," Rossi said. "But I see him for who he is. Maybe you should try that. Do you remember reading 'Man's Search for Meaning' in high school?"

"That wasn't required in my district," Kletsova said.

"What about college?" Rossi said.

"I've never read it," Kletsova said.

"Abstracts?"

"No, it never drew my interest..."

"Before your next session, read that book," Rossi said.

"You want me to do homework?" Kletsova asked.

"You just earned yourself more. I will send you links to selected readings of the Dali Lama on forgiveness and letting go," Rossi said.

"You're joking," Kletsova said. "You want me to read ancient religious philosophy?"

"You want me to add Jung, the Dao de Jing, and Joseph Campbell?" Rossi asked.

"Alright, alright, I will do it," Kletsova said, standing.

Rossi stood with her. She came around the coffee table, staring at the floor, musing. For a moment Kletsova thought Rossi was going to hug her, but Rossi put her hands behind her back and walked with her to the door.

“Um, thank you,” Kletsova said.

“For?” Rossi asked.

“Therapy, I guess,” Kletsova said.

“We haven’t started therapy yet,” Rossi said.

“We haven’t?” Kletsova seemed surprised. “When will we start that?”

“When you’re ready,” Rossi said.

CHAPTER 5

Captain Garcia and Doctor Jurak arrived outside of Club Bliss. The doors were open for business, but it was not just the typical clientele looking for erotic entertainment clamoring to get in. Ever since the Cardassian bombardment and subsequent occupation, Club Bliss had more than its share of people seeking distraction and “medicinal” relief in any form they could get, be it drugs, sex, rock and roll, alcohol, or illegal substances, all of which were attainable at this den of iniquity even before Garcia had confiscated it from the drug lord and slave trader “Bliss”. Every time he approached, he ran through the story of acquisition again, pondering the legalities and absurdities that not only kept the place running, but gave him full credit. With the overwhelming support of the legal Orion government, and the grudgingly given support of Star Fleet, he was now, for all practicality, a crime boss. His Klingon crew loved it, because it only gave more credibility to Garcia being a maverick with ambitions to take over the Galaxy.

Everything at Club Bliss was technically legal at Club Bliss, but the commodities consumed were the kinds that were illegal to transport. How the substances managed to arrive at Club Bliss, the Patrons didn’t ask, and Fleet tended to look the other way. Take Romulan Ale, for instance. Everyone knew it was illegal to traffic, possess, and consume the substance. It was highly addictive. Too much of it would trash a human’s liver. And, most importantly, the only way to get it was to interact with the Romulans. It was the equivalent of buying Cuban cigars during the cold war. The penalty for having it was usually counseling, a fine- which for most people equated to community service- and all the Romulan Ale confiscated and destroyed.

Across the street, the Alba Hotel was full beyond capacity. A number of large medical tents supplemented the hotel’s compliments. A shuttle was in the process of landing. An easterly wind blew, with a low wind sock describing the direction and intensity. There was a hint of rain in the air. Garcia paused to watch the shuttle land, critically evaluating the performance before proceeding to the club.

There was a line going around the Club, but Garcia and Jurak were immediately passed through by the Klingon guard. Entering the lobby of Club Bliss was hardly a preparation for the din awaiting them inside the main club. Cleo greeted Garcia with a smile, but was unable to engage him in conversation as she was busy screening customers, first by age, second by species. Civilians turned their weapons at the door, while Star Fleet, local Klingon militia, and Cardassian Officers could carry theirs. She tagged guests with “smart” bracelets so that the staff could better recognize and accommodate their needs in the most efficient manner possible. The tags were also programmable to some extent by customers, allowing them to more readily find compatible company, whether it was the paid for kind, or just other patrons that scored similar interest. The tag was basically an electronic resume that spoke to other resumes, and as one drew closer to a potential match, the badges would light up. It was a fun, efficient way of meeting people, provided people were honest in their profiles.

“Go on up, I’ll be right there,” Garcia told the Doctor, excusing himself to make a quick stop at the bar. Waitresses shoved through the crowd to fill orders. Brock was quietly directing the flow of business as superbly as a conductor does a full orchestra. The dance floor was full of patrons and staff. The catwalks and cages had erotic dancers of various species, and the dining area was so full that Garcia was certain that they were

violating fire safety codes. He had never seen Brock happier, his little Ferengi mind burning overtime as he found ways to maximize the evening's profits. Garcia got Brock's attention and indicated he wanted a drink. Brock nodded to him and went about making the drink personally.

Garcia felt a tapping on his shoulder and turned to find the "real" Leeta standing behind him. Before he could greet her, she slapped him hard across the face. He opened his mouth to ask "what was that for," but she answered before he could even vocalize the question.

"That is for thinking you could sleep with me," Leeta said, and then smacked him again with the back of her hand. "And that is for not being able to distinguish between us!"

"Is that all?" Garcia asked.

"No. I need your help getting off this planet," Leeta complained.

"You slap me, but you want my help?" Garcia asked, clarifying the situation.

"What?! I have to sleep with you, too, just to get off this planet?" Leeta demanded.

"No, just to get off," Garcia said, trying to be funny.

"What?!" Leeta asked, raising her voice as if she were shocked, as opposed to just making herself heard over the new song in the background.

"Oh, please, Leeta, you know I don't operate that way," Garcia said, disgusted. He took her by the arm and led her out of the way of traffic. "What's the problem? I got you an interview with that Quark fellow. Did it fall through?"

"Yeah, the tele-interview was fine. He'll hire me. The problem is that I can't get off the planet because I'm Bajoran," Leeta said, pulling her shoulder strap back into place, quite aware that Garcia knew she was attempting to manipulate him, just a little. He was more than willing to let her try. "They're treating me as if I were part of the Marquis."

"I'm sure you'll pass the screening," Garcia said.

"No, I won't," Leeta said. "The Captain in charge pulled my file and has told me there are only two ways for me to get off this planet. I either need to come up with 40,000 gold pressed latinum or spend the night with him."

"I'll have a talk with him," Garcia said.

"It won't make a difference," Leeta said. "He's had his eyes on me ever since he arrived."

"Your drink," Brock yelled, delivering it in person.

"Fine," Garcia said, changing his volume to coincide with the change in volume of the music. It was a popular song which solicited more dancers; people adding their voices to the chorus. "Brock, give Leeta 40,000 gpl's to buy her exit visa."

"I'm not doing that!" Brock yelled.

"Give it to her out of my share of the earnings," Garcia snapped.

"I'm not doing that either!" Brock snapped right back. "In order for Club Bliss to maintain its license to operate, you have to maintain your neutrality agreement. If it appears you're violating your neutral status, not only do the Cardassian close the club, but they'll kick all the non Cardassian medical staff off this planet. And when that happens, even the thin red line of Star Fleet officers won't be able to quell the riots and the Cardassians will level a few more towns. I'm not risking it."

“You’re just not risking your neck or profits!” Garcia said, ignoring the fact that his comm. badge was ringing, just barely audible over the noise of the club, and increasing in loudness with each chirp. At a certain volume it would begin to vibrate as well.

“I never claimed to be a humanitarian!” Brock shouted. “If I choose to make a small profit by setting up in a neutral territory between two rival factions, that’s my business.”

“By profiting in a neutral zone, you prolong the conflict by catering to each sides!” Garcia argued.

“I’m going to make A Ferrengi of you yet!” Brock said, and departed.

Garcia downed his drink and tossed the glass to the waitress behind the bar, ignoring the flashing lights going off in his head, out of sync with lights from the dance floor. A message scrolled across his vision, compliments of his neural implant, requesting that he call the ship. “How much money do you have in your account?” Garcia asked Leeta. (TXT me,) Garcia transmitted back to the ship.

“Just the two hundred GPL’s you paid me when I quit,” Leeta said.

“Alright,” Garcia said. (Call ASAP), was the response to his txt. To Leeta he said, “I want you to go get in the Dabo game. I’ll be right there.”

“Are you kidding?” Leeta demanded. “I’m a dabo girl by trade! I know the odds of winning, and I happen to know that your tables have been certified by the local government as not being fixed.”

“Do you trust me?” Garcia asked.

“Yes,” Leeta said, grudgingly.

“Then go play. I’ll join you in a moment,” Garcia said.

“What are you going to be doing?” Leeta asked.

“Changing the name of Club Bliss to Rick’s Café,” Garcia said.

“Who’s Rick?” Leeta asked.

“The character I’m channeling,” Garcia said.

The reference was lost on Leeta, but she gave a fake smile, and headed off towards the Dabo tables. Garcia sought out one of the private, secluded booths to have enough quiet to make a call. The first booth he tried to open was locked. He became aware of the red light that indicated it was occupied. He stepped back only to find they all seemed to be occupied. Cleo was suddenly at his side.

“What’s wrong, honey?” Cleo asked.

“I need a booth,” Garcia said.

“Oh!” Cleo said, excitedly. She grabbed Garcia’s hand and led him to the executive suite, punched in the code, and opened the door for him. She tried to follow him in, but he blocked.

“I need to be alone,” Garcia said.

“You sure? I don’t mind helping you,” Cleo insisted.

“I’m just placing a call,” Garcia said.

“I’m not judging you, honey,” Cleo said. “I just want to make sure you’re happy.”

“Thank you, I am,” Garcia said.

“I really like this new look you got going,” Cleo persisted, trying to spend time with him. She rubbed his head, running her hand over his military cut. She hadn’t ever seen him with this much hair. “No more shaving bald, eh?”

“Just wanted a change,” Garcia offered.

“You know I want to spend time with you,” Cleo said.

“Cleo, this call is important,” Garcia said.

“Another time?” Cleo asked.

“Sure,” Garcia said.

Cleo kissed him and then closed the door. Garcia took a deep breath, put a hand to his rib cage, and exhaled slowly. He activated his comm. badge. “Garcia to New Constitution.”

“Sorry to bother you, Captain.” It was Trini.

“No sorry, Trini. I just have to get use to being so popular. What’s up?” Garcia asked.

“Priority One call from Star Fleet,” Trini said.

“You couldn’t send that to me in text mode?” Garcia asked.

Trini bit back a response, and audibly sighed. “Sorry, Sir, but the Admiral is demanding audio visual transmission,” Trini said, a bit of a pout.

Garcia sought out the controls to activate the monitor in the booth and connected it to Trini’s station up on the ship. “Fine, hook me up, scrambled. Oh, and Trini. Send Micceal down and tell him to wait at the bar for me. Traditional Nausicaan uniform.”

“Sir?” Trini asked.

“Really, Trini? I have to repeat that?” Garcia asked. “Look. Just tell him it’s a personal favor for the Captain.”

“Aye,” Trini said. “Here’s Star Fleet Command.”

The monitor flashed a Star Fleet call sign, which was replaced by the transmission of Admiral Madison. Garcia was completely surprised, since it was no secret that the Admiral hated him. Then again, like or dislike was irrelevant. Business was business, and the Admiral was using a priority one channel, which meant there was an emergency somewhere...

“Admiral...” Garcia began.

“Where’s my grand-daughter?!” Madison demanded.

“Um, excuse me?” Garcia asked.

“You’ve kept me on hold for a good six minutes and you want me to ask ‘how are you’ first? Just tell me; is Arlene with you?” Madison said more than asked.

“Why would she be with me?” Garcia asked, obvious confusion on his face.

“Because you want her in your harem? I don’t know?! What are you doing with all your girls? Pimping them out at Club Bliss?” Madison asked.

Garcia didn’t hide the fact that he was angry, but he got it under control before he spoke. “I hear that you’re angry. And, obviously worried. You’ve contacted me on an emergency, priority one channel to ask if I have seen your granddaughter,” Garcia said, hoping that pointing out the obvious would help the Admiral feel “heard” and quell the attack.

“As many rules as you’ve been breaking, you have the audacity to question my use of a Star Fleet channel?” Madison demanded.

“Nope, just making sure we’re on the same page,” Garcia said, immediately indifferent. “Look, Arlene’s not here, but if you’re troubled, I’m troubled. I take it she hasn’t been home? Maybe she went to a friend’s house?”

“The last one to see her was the Federation President. They were seen together before she ended up missing,” Madison said. “I assumed that since you and the President are sleeping together, you might know something.”

“I am not sleeping with the President!” Garcia protested.

“Yeah, right. It’s either that, or you’re on special assignment with the President’s favor. Is that it? Have you enlisted Arlene into some secret ops mission? She’s not qualified for that kind of stuff. You should know that! You did at least talk to her before you knocked her up, right? ”

Garcia sighed. “I know nothing about any secret ops mission,” Garcia said. “And I’m not sleeping with the President.”

“This channel’s secure, you could tell me,” Madison said.

“I am telling you,” Garcia said.

“About sleeping with the President or secret op missions?” Madison pushed.

“I’m not sleeping with the President, and I have no secret orders,” Garcia lied. He did have secret orders, but those orders were not germane to Madison’s agenda.

Madison sunk into his chair.

“Give me some time. I’ll look into the matter,” Garcia said, feeling compassion for the grandfather. And he did like Arlene.

Madison nodded.

“And keep me informed,” Garcia said. “Let me know the moment you hear anything. Please.”

Madison nodded, touched an icon on his monitor, and closed out the channel. Garcia’s first impulse was to call Admiral Eric Pressman, his boss, and ask him if he knew anything, but he had to get to the conference. He exited the booth and started for the lift, remembered Leeta, and turned for the Dabo tables. Serendipitously, he turned just in time to see a Klingon coming at him with a dagger. Garcia reacted without thinking, blocking, forcing the knife hand into a joint lock, twisting the arm up into his back, and pushing the Klingon up against the wall. It was done without malice or any other emotion, just that quick, up against the wall. Only security seemed to notice, and they arrived only after the Klingon had relinquished his dagger to Garcia. Joint locks hurt like a son of a bitch, rendering even the most hardened compliant. The music kept playing as if nothing had happened. The patrons continued to dance and drink and laugh. The surreal quality of the event was not lost on Garcia, but he didn’t have the time to tarry in reflections.

“Sorry, Captain,” Lt. Reyes said to Garcia, as the other Officers took the Klingon into custody. “I don’t know how this civilian got that knife past security.”

“Ask him,” Garcia said, handing Reyes the dagger. “Run the cameras back and see if he stole it from an officer or an officer gave it to him. Carry on.”

“You sure you don’t want an escort?” Reyes asked.

Garcia shook his head and proceeded towards the Dabo table as if nothing had happened. The look on Leeta’s face suggested she was not happy, and that was no doubt because she had been playing conservatively and already lost half of her money. Before focusing on the game, he checked over his back just to make sure no one else was about to kill him.

“Put it all on red 42,” Garcia told her.

Leeta looked at Garcia as if he was crazy, but she did as he instructed, moving her money electronically to the designated square with a hand held gaming PADD. Dabo was very similar to Roulette, with a spinning wheel and a small marble, a favorite amongst the games of chance. When the ball hit her number, all the Dabo girls yelled out “Dabo!” triumphantly, the closer of which also hugged her friend, and previous co-worker. One of the other players eyed Garcia suspiciously.

“How did you know?” Leeta asked.

“Do it again. All on red 42,” Garcia instructed.

“The odds of it hitting the same number twice in a row is astronomical,” the critic commented out loud.

“Technically, the odds are exactly the same for each spin,” Garcia argued. “Put it all on red 42.”

Leeta was still weary, but did as she was told. Garcia avoided eye contact with the operator, who made sure all bets were in before releasing the ball. Once again, the ball landed on Leeta’s mark.

“Are you using a gravimetric scanner to predict the outcome?” one of the other players asked?

“No; gravimetric scanners can’t account for the potential quantum fluctuations that are influenced by the observers,” Garcia said.

“Oh, you’re one of them, eh?” the critic said more than asked, and went back to ignoring him.

The excitement at the table was settling down as the players began making their next bets. Garcia grabbed a drink off a passing tray. The waitress paused to argue, but then saw who it was, and smiled pleasantly. He downed the drink and sucked air, as he discovered too late that it was a mixture of Romulan ale and something unidentifiable. The drink caused his hands to warm.

“Play it again, Leeta,” Garcia said.

Everyone at this table placed their bets on 42, except for the critic. The critic went away disgruntled, grumbling about how Garcia had ruined the odds for everyone. After Leeta finished hugging her fellow Dabo girls, she turned and hugged Garcia.

“I don’t know how to thank you,” Leeta said.

“Come with me,” Garcia said.

Leeta followed him, fully prepared to follow him upstairs. She was thoroughly surprised, and slightly disappointed, when he took her to the bar. Maybe he needed a drink first?

Micceal, in full Nausicaan gear, shoved at Garcia chest with his knuckles. Garcia shoved back, emulating the gesture.

“Captain!” Micceal said.

“Lt., this is Leeta. She has a transaction to make. Accompany her and make sure the transaction goes as agreed upon. Then I want you to personally escort her up to the Ferengi Freighter that’s in orbit and make sure they understand, she is a personal friend of mine and I expect her to arrive at her destination safe, sound, and unmolested, if you know what I mean.”

“Everyone will know she is your woman,” Micceal said.

“She is not...”

“Do not worry,” Micceal interrupted, pushing Garcia with his knuckles, and smiling that smile only a Nausicaan can execute, its pincers spreading wide. “I will protect your woman with my life. Come, woman!”

“Travel Light, Leeta,” Garcia said, deciding the misinterpretation wasn’t worth correcting. He had to get upstairs to that meeting.

Leeta hugged and kissed him. “If you ever visit Bajor, look me up.”

Garcia watched her leave, Micceal leading the way. He then made his way to the lift at the back of the Club. There were so many guests that avoiding the patrons was difficult, and many of them smiled or purposely touched him as he went by. One female put herself right in front of him, forcing him to dance around her. The staff made eye contact, but they were far too busy to try and solicit a conversation. Even though he had refused an escort, he noticed security had doubled. He entered the lift and turned to see Cleo blocking the doors from closing. She handed him a book.

“You left this in the booth,” Cleo said.

Garcia nodded. “Thank you,” and took the book, putting it under his arm.

Cleo smiled and retreated so the doors could close. The female who had obstructed his path blew him a kiss. The lift doors closed, giving him immediate respite from the den of the club.

The conference was in progress when Garcia arrived at the private meeting room upstairs, near his private suite. Of the fourteen chairs around the conference table, one was reserved for him. Garcia unapologetically squeezed past the medical personnel that were standing against the wall. He figured trying to sneak in would be more disruptive than just proceeding straight to his designated chair. Doctor Jurak was standing behind it and as Garcia approached, he pulled the chair out for his Captain.

“Due to the Klingon Festival of Lights in the City of Forek, we estimate the death toll to be upwards of four million,” Simone, Vulcan Princess, and great granddaughter of T’Pau, was saying as Garcia made himself comfortable. She avoided eye contact with him; it seemed deliberate. Behind her, the monitor displayed information visually, along side a world map. Five major areas were highlighted, with different colors representing the level of impact from ground-zero out, in concentric circles. Everything within 25 kilometers of the antimatter detonations had been instantly vaporized. “A precise number may be impossible, as most of the tourists and residents were gathered en masse downtown. No one has been found alive inside the black zones. It’s been a week since anyone has been found in either the red or orange zones. I move that we suspend all search and rescue operations and focus our resources on getting people out of ICU and the burn units. The faster they are moved to self care status, the better.”

“Nay!” Klingon Chancellor Mor said. “We will continue search and rescue operations until all hope has been exhausted.”

“All hope is exhausted,” Gul Skol said, one of the Cardassian medical representatives. “Even I know that Vulcan math doesn’t lie.”

“Even if there are survivors, the problem is that the residue radiation from the antimatter blasts is making it difficult to locate them,” Doctor Lesley Garret said, one of the Officers from the Federation medical ships in orbit. “We could fly right over top of them and not detect their life signs.”

“Then we do it visually!” Mor said.

“You’re insane,” Skol said.

Mor came out of his seat first, but before he and Skol met, the Star Fleet Security Officers blocked and separated them. Mor had drawn his a knife, while Skol had retrieved his phaser. Garcia's Officers had drawn their disruptors and were aiming them at both offenders. Other Cardassians pulled their weapons, bringing them to bear on Star Fleet officers. Doctor Jurak, not to be left out, pulled a disruptor and put it right to the back of Skol's head.

"Gentlemen," Garcia said. "Put your weapons down."

"We wouldn't be in this predicament had you finished off the Cardassians when you had the chance," Mor said, spitting on the floor.

Garcia stood up, putting himself between Skol and Mor.

"I was given a directive to hold. I held," Garcia said. "I was told to negotiate a cease fire to expedite relief efforts. I followed orders. Killing Skol, or any other Cardassian for that matter, will not bring back any of the dead, nor help any of the wounded heal faster. Now, stand down."

Mor stared at Garcia, measuring Garcia's resolve, found no fear in his eyes, and submitted to Garcia's authority. Garcia turned to face Skol.

"Put your weapon away," Garcia told him.

"You're not my boss," the Cardassian said.

"Club Bliss is neutral territory and I'm in charge here," Garcia said. "You can pocket that and walk out of here with dignity, or be carried out, your choice."

The Cardassian stood taller, as if proud of a victory, and holstered his weapon with a spinning flare that almost got him shot. "I will remain present for this meeting."

Garcia nodded consent, and motioned his people to put away their weapons. NC crew lowered theirs weapons, followed by supporting Star Fleet Officers, and, lastly, followed by the Cardassian officers. As Garcia turned to take his seat, Skol took another verbal shot at Mor, saying "Just like a Klingon to bring a knife to a phaser fight..."

Mor charged, but was held back by his friends. Skol went for his phaser again, and as his hand grasped the weapon, Garcia stuck a knife through Skol's wrist and into his side, effectively pinning the Cardassian's arm. Skol's hand automatically gripped the phaser and fired it into his holster. Fortunately, it was on stun, and he went out like a light, his face hitting the table as he fell, but only because Garcia allowed him to fall. Garcia was keenly aware of all the weapons in the room being drawn and was surprised at the amount of restraint being exercised, as he was the focus of many of those weapons. One of the younger Cardassian warriors was visibly shaking, his eyes locked with Garcia's eyes.

"Focus, and breathe. He's not mortally wounded. Doctor Jurak, take this man out of here, patch him up," Garcia asked.

"He is not a man," Jurak said.

"Man denotes gender, not species," Garcia said.

"He's still not a man," Jurak said.

"They're a bunch of animals and should be exterminated to the last one," said one of the Klingons against the wall.

Words were exchanged from Cardassians and Klingons, interrupted by Garcia whistling fiercely. All eyes were back on him.

"That will be enough! We're not here to exchange opinions of each other. We're here to discuss the medical situation. I'll have all of you escorted off premises if you

can't behave. Is that clear?" No one seemed to disagree with Garcia's authority. Truth be said, Garcia's people had saved some of those present from being eaten by Apollo's hell cat demon things. When the Cardassians and Klingons mutually, but reluctantly, lowered their weapons, Star Fleet lowered theirs. "Take care of him, Doctor," Garcia insisted. "That's an order."

"Aye," Jurak said, and motioned to two of his staff to help him with the Cardassian.

"May we get back to this meeting?" Simone asked.

Garcia returned to his seat and they proceeded with a vote on the last motion.

The likelihood of finding more survivors was increasingly less likely, and so the resolution to suspend search and rescue was adopted. Mor and Garcia were the only ones against. Garcia opened the book, *Star Thrower*, by Loren Eiseley. His favorite essay was about the man on the beach hurling Sea Stars back into the ocean after a storm. The weaker versions spell it out thus: "There are millions of starfish on the beach, and miles of beach, you can't really think you're going to make a difference!" To which the star-thrower responds by throwing another starfish into the ocean: "It made a difference to that one." There were many versions floating around, but the origin was this essay by Loren, and it was the best. Garcia was also partial to the essay titled, "The Long Loneliness," which discussed man's isolation in the Universe and the hope that he was not alone, with Dolphin's being the first, best hope of realizing that goal. It was the first Eiseley essay he had ever read and it had endeared the writer to him. Garcia took note of the print as he evaluated this edition, but what caught his eyes was the art work spread throughout the book. Each illustration captured the theme, with over tones that carried the eye to the next with anticipation.

Garcia didn't recognize the artist, but given the style, he believed they were all from the same person. Using his implant, Garcia logged on to the nearest computer net and did a search for the artist. His search in the local data base turned up nothing and he was about to send a query to the NC when Simone set a cup of coffee in front of him. The click of cup against table was as startling as the silence that followed, bringing all eyes on him. Simone paused for him to focus, her eyes sharp, as if she were disciplining a child.

"Medical errors are at 12 percent, an unacceptable level," Simone was saying as his focus returned to the conference. The way she looked at him suggested maternal qualities, as if she were telling him to pay attention, while at the same time making a point to everyone else in the room that she would discipline anyone who wasn't listening. He closed the book.

"It is fatigue," Doctor Misan said. Garcia could identify anger in the Andorian's voice and wondered if was from a previous grievance, or a new one.

"I agree," a Vulcan Doctor said. "We simply need to increase the down time and ensure enough rest to all medical personnel."

"What's wrong with the portable EMH's I provided?" Garcia asked.

"You mean your Britney robots?" Misan asked, with no lack of sarcasm.

"What's wrong with my Bots?" Garcia asked.

"Everything!" Misan complained.

Garcia felt certain Misan's anger was directed at him.

Garret expanded on the complaint. "They can only maintain tangible/tactile holographic interface for two hours before requiring a six hour recharging period."

“That’s the least of their problems,” Doctor Banks said. “The Britney psyche is clashing with the EMH personality.”

“Why don’t you just delete the Britney personality in favor of the EMH program?” Mor asked.

“Because someone hardwired the Britney program into the robots to reduce the likelihood of pirating,” Misan said.

“It’s actually more complicated than that,” Banks said. “The core traits are hard wired into the system, but all learned traits and behavior that represent long term memory are recorded randomly in an artificial neural map, that mimics the way the human brain stores data, which not only prevents someone from downloading the program, but makes it impossible to just upload data into it. It has to learn through experience, the same as we do, and the process gives each robot the appearance of having a unique personality, built on its own history and experiences. Quite ingenious, actually, but it means that the short term memory, or in this case, the virtual memory, is only capable of holding one medical procedure at a time.”

“And to go from one procedure to the next requires a complete shut down and reboot of the robot, which takes about fifteen minutes,” Garret said.

“Well, can’t you just replicate new bots with the EMH personality hardwired, as opposed to the Britney personality?” Mor asked.

Everyone looked to Garcia. He closed his eyes, frowning. “We were getting some inconsistency in quality control replicating the memory units, the brain of the robots. Some quirky malfunctions, probably due to quantum variances in the crystals. I signed the production over to a Ferengi manufacturer. It will take a month of paper work just to get the change over...”

“In other words, you lost control of your monster,” Misan said, a fake smile. “Which is ironic, considering how much effort you went through to make sure no one could reproduce the technology. Had you followed standard Federation practices for new tech, maybe we would all have access to portable EMHs.”

Garcia couldn’t argue against that, and it was hardly the time and place to explain that he had done it to make sure the slave traders came to him for his product. Then again, if he could construct this in his spare time, surely some Fleet engineer could improve upon the design without too much trouble. He made a mental note to have a private conversation with Misan about his attitude.

“That probably explains why the Britney Bots try to comfort their patients by performing Oomax,” Banks said.

Garcia did a double take. He hadn’t heard about that. He grimaced and made a mental note to discuss this with Brock. His mental list was getting fairly long, meaning he may have to start actually penning stuff down.

“Can’t you just increase the capacity of the virtual memory?” Mor asked.

“I’ve tried,” Garcia said. “The basic robot shell is the Nomad, Mark Seven, and there’s a limit to how much tech I can package into the spherical framework and have it still function.”

“So make it bigger,” Mor said.

“Not that simple. The size to tech weight ratio makes it unstable or incapable of flight all together the heavier it gets. And before you ask, you can’t just increase the size of the antigravity plating,” Garcia said. “Put wheels on it, and you can’t have a perfect

holographic representation of a human, which was the whole point of creating the robot in the first place. You also can't go bigger and still encapsulate the robot in a holographic interface. The recent increase in medical errors isn't attributed to the Britney Bots, are they?"

"No," Simone said.

"They're just not efficient," Garret said. "And they require supervision. For routine and repetitive procedures, like putting burn patients into the vats and retrieving them, they're fine. But I especially hate turning health care over to machines."

"That is an issue outside our scope," Simone said, and directed the conversation into a new direction.

The meeting continued on for an hour and half. Garcia sat quietly, trying to stay focused, but his mind was all over the place. Most of that was simply being tired. A small part of it was being in the room with Simone, his Vulcan wife, and wanting her. Knowing she wanted nothing to do with him was making her all the more irresistible. It would be seven years before her interest in him became evident again. The few times their eyes met, there was no hint of romance. In fact, he imagined a subtle hint of disdain, which caused him to divert his eyes every time he became aware he was lingering on her. The coffee replaced the book as his new distraction. Holding the cup with both hands, he sipped lightly while listening to his wife, spinning the coffee with a slight tremor of his hands.

When the meeting was concluded, Garcia remained in his seat as everyone filed out. He nearly waved Misan over but decided to let the Andorian slip out of the room. Simone was still gathering her things when the last person left, leaving the two of them alone.

"Was there something else?" Simone asked.

"Just wanted to know how you're doing," Garcia said.

"I am well," Simone said. "I did have some exposure to radiation, but it was minimal. The fetus will not be affected."

Garcia opened his mouth to say something and then closed it. All of their patients were exposed to high concentrations of radiation, so it was practically impossible for the medical staff to avoid exposure. She gave him a curious look.

"Three weeks ago you were referring to it as our child. Now it's a fetus? What's changed?" Garcia asked.

"I was less rational during Pon Farr," Simone said. "I will consider it a child when it is capable of sustaining life outside the womb."

"Why not save time and say it's not a child until its walking and feeding itself?" Garcia asked. "Or better, when it graduates from college?"

"As always, you are being ridiculous," Simone said. "In two weeks this crisis will be under control and the local municipalities can take over. At that time, I will be taking the USS T'Pau back to Planet Bliss to continue our study of the Preserver technology and the Grays. Unless, that is, you have other designs on me or my crew."

"You're not under my command," Garcia pointed out.

"T'Pau put me at your disposal," Simone said.

"The way you say it sounds horrid," Garcia said.

"It is a simple statement of fact," Simone said. "I can not be blamed for you reading more into the statement than is warranted."

“I’m not assessing blame. I’m merely pointing out that it sounds like you’re only with me because you’re being ordered. I thought you wanted to be with me,” Garcia said.

“That time has passed,” Simone said.

“What ever happened to ‘parted, never parted’...” Garcia began.

“Do not take my lack of interest personally,” Simone said. “Our bond still holds firm. You lived on Vulcan long enough to know what to expect.”

“In other words,” Garcia summed it up, “See you in seven years.”

“You have a sufficient number of ‘groupies’ to keep you entertained,” Simone said. “You don’t need me and I don’t want you.”

Garcia stood up.

“Anything else?” Simone asked.

“No,” Garcia said, pouting. He remembered his book and pulled it towards him.

Simone offered the Vulcan salute and was prepared to say the ritualistic farewell, but she waited for Garcia to mirror her. Garcia hesitated, then brought his hand up, emulating her gesture. He then broke protocol and allowed his hand to touch hers, his fingers matching hers before slipping between her fingers. He pulled her in close to him, his lips meeting her lips. She neither protested nor participated in the display of affection. Nothing. No fire. No interest. She blocked any potential telepathic exchange with him. He took this as a challenge and increased his eagerness, pushing her back against the wall. He ran his hands through her hair, and held her face firm to his, his body holding her firm to the wall. His lips moved across her cheek and down to her neck.

“I have an appointment,” Simone said, plain as day. It wasn’t cold, or harsh, just a statement. “You may proceed as far you like, husband, but I will leave in five minutes, whether you are finished or not.”

Garcia dropped his head to her shoulder. His passion completely shattered, he let go of her and backed away. He closed his eyes and listened as she left the room. He felt a hand on his shoulder, and when he opened his eyes, he found Rogue Troi was present and wearing something quite revealing. Garcia turned and left the room. Rogue Troi call out to him: “you’re forgetting something.” He came back, grabbed the book off the table, shot Rogue Troi a look, and walked away.

CHAPTER SIX

Garcia acknowledged Captain Mor as he approached the lift.

"I held back to thank you," Captain Mor said.

"For?" Garcia said, entering the lift.

Mor joined him. "For what you've done here. For fighting for us."

"No worries. Bar level," Garcia said.

Mor pressed the manual hold over-ride, capturing Garcia's full attention.

"There's something else," Mor said.

"There always is," Garcia sighed.

Mor raised his fist to reveal a ring with an emblem on it, a light over a field. "I hear you've been asking questions."

"I have. You know what this means?" Garcia asked, his heart jumping into his throat.

"Your interest seems genuine. Are you asking me to bring you into the light?" Mor asked.

"Yes," Garcia said.

Mor hit him with the ring, directly center of the forehead. The ring sparked. Garcia collapsed to the floor, out cold. Mor opened his communicator.

"I have a package," Mor said.

"Is it willing?"

"It's not protesting," Mor said.

"Good, standby for transport."

Garcia and Mor were transported. When Garcia came to, the first thing he became aware of was the heaviness of a sack over his head. He couldn't see beyond the veil, but he could discern the presence of others around him, whispered chanting amidst the sound of waves against the beach. His hands were bound behind his back and he was being supported by two sets of hands. He was lifted by his arms, brought forwards, and forced to kneel. They pushed his head down onto a surface. One of his knees dug into dirt. The other hit what felt like a tree root.

"What have we here? A cat?" someone asked. The language was Klingon and though the Universal Translator echoed 'cat' in his ear, he wondered if that was truly what the speaker had meant to convey.

"A seeker," Garcia recognized Mor's voice.

"Was he willing?"

"He willingly seeks, but I dragged him into the light," Mor said.

"Dragged? He doesn't look like he put up much fight." Laughter followed. Garcia estimated seven people, including the two holding him. Those two didn't laugh. They simply held him firm, taking their job seriously. There was the possibility of more in the background, silently observing.

"He has demonstrated sufficient curiosity to prove worthy," Mor said.

"Has anyone vouched for him?"

"I would not have brought him into the light had his brothers not carried his voice from the pit," Mor said.

"Does he have a name?"

"Yathl," Mor said.

Garcia felt a blade on the back of his neck. It had substantial weight. The voice came close to his ear.

“Yatlh is fitting. Your fear is appropriate. I think I should kill you now and save you pain and misery.”

“Pain and misery is a part of life,” Garcia said.

“Has he been coached?”

“No, Da’at,” Mor said. “At least, not by me or my brothers.”

The blade was lifted from Garcia neck and with a resounding thud planted in the surface where his head was resting. The blade came close enough to cutting him that he felt concern. The blade had cut the sack over his head allowing light to diffuse in, but insufficient light for him to see anything but the cloth in front of his face.

“Throw this fool back into the pit.”

“Please,” Garcia said. “I want to see.”

“Why?” This question was spoken by everyone.

“I need to know,” Garcia said.

“Pledge an oath of fidelity.”

“How can I pledge an oath to people I can’t see, whose reputation I don’t know?” Garcia asked.

“Fair enough. Do you believe in a deity?”

“No.”

“Kill him!” cried the voices.

“No,” Mor said.

“He is nonbeliever. Why spare him?”

“Because he is on the same journey we are all on. And he has answered honestly. How many of us have revealed the light to pretenders? How many of us have ever carried doubt? How many of us have climbed a mountain only to hear silence? Let him discover his own truth as we all have, the hard way,” Mor said.

“Vote.”

Blades were drawn from scabbards. Garcia was lifted to his feet, a blade put to his neck, and not gently. His blindfold was removed so suddenly that he was sure he was about to die. He blinked and adjusted his eyes.

“You know, curiosity killed the cat,” Da’at said.

“Satisfaction brought him back,” Garcia said.

Da’at laughed. “I love Human euphemisms. What is your name?”

“Yatlh,” Garcia answered.

“Good,” Da’at said. “Quick learner. And what is my name?”

Garcia nearly answered ‘Da’at’ because he had heard Mor say it. “Yatlh?”

“Is that a question or a statement?”

“It’s a statement,” Garcia said, committed to his answer.

“Good. Everyone was and will always be Yatlh,” Da’at said. “We all start at this level and die at this level. Free him. Walk with me, Yatlh.”

Garcia walked away from the tree trunk and the ax that rested in it. The top part of his hood lay on the ground. He followed Da’at to the beach. Waves lapped gently against the shore a meter away. “What I’m about to reveal to you can only be written in sand, at low tide. This is the way it has been done from the beginning, and you are implicitly agreeing to not repeat or reveal what you are about to learn to another soul, through any

format of communication. If you do, you will be killed and you can't ascend to the next level if you're dead. Do you understand?"

Garcia nodded.

Da'at cut a line into Garcia's hand, allowing blood to pool on his palm and a few drops of blood to sprinkle to the sand. He cut his own palm next, scattering a few drops of his own blood over Garcia's. He knelt down, stirred the sand and blood. Using his blade, he flattened out the sand he had stirred: "In the beginning, there was emptiness." He placed a dot in the sand using the top of his knife, turning it once: "Then there was light." He drew a line under the light: "A playing field emerged, defining a beginning and an end. Basically, the line represents ground, or earth. Superiorly, it represents time." He erased the writing with his blade, wiping the sand clean. He drew a dot, and then enclosed it with a circle. "This, too, is a light over a field, representing eternity, or God, or you, depending on context." He erased this and drew two unparallelled lines, the tops ends leaning towards the other, but not touching: "Two warriors fighting." He closed the lines by giving it a base and a top, making it a triangle: "Two warriors fighting on a field under a light." He erased the base of the triangle: "Two warriors grappling." He erased the symbol from the sand. He revealed a secret of his knife, splitting it in two with a pivot point hinged on the end of the hilt. "Two warriors grappling." He used his knife to draw a circle in the sand: "Two warriors grappling circumscribe all we know, defining our boundaries, between two warriors is an answer, God..."

"Oh my God," Garcia said. "You're Freemasons!"

Da'at laughed and hit Garcia on the arm. "There are some variations in symbols, but there are some universal symbols that can't be denied. All civilizations are built through warriors grappling," Da'at said, wiping the sand clean. He drew the Vulcan IDIC symbol, a triangle topped by a circle. "Pyramid, all seeing eye, or light above two warriors. Clearly, we share basic assumptions, but the Vulcans allow females to join. So, we don't recognize them. Just like most Earth Masons don't recognize the French for allowing women to join the fraternity," he said, spitting. "Women don't have to do everything men do." He drew a right angle: "A victorious warrior, standing over the dead. All civilization is built on previous generations."

"The square," Garcia said.

"Human terminology. All cultures must develop a square, recognize the significance of a right angle, to advance. A book, for example, can be a right angle with many warriors falling to make one superior warrior," Da'at explained. "We use allegory, metaphors, and symbols to communicate. The Universe is replete with symbols, to which many students are blind. Only a few are awake, everyone else is asleep oblivious to the abundance and light we swim in." He wiped the sand cleaned and stood up. He sheathed his knife in a ceremonial hilt and hit Garcia in the arm, a signature punch: "Two warriors fighting." He grabbed Garcia's arms and held him. He did it again, asking Garcia to grasp his arms in a similar manner: "Two warriors grappling." He spun them, their boots drawing a circle in the sand. Da'at released Garcia: "This is all you need to know."

"That's all?"

"You are just newly born and don't have teeth to cut meat," Da'at said. "This is all you need to know, for now."

"But?" Garcia began.

Da'at laughed. "Mor, you may have to drag this maggot back into the dark. His eyes are newly opened and he thinks he can fly."

Everyone laughed. Mor took Garcia by the arm, opened a communicator, and had them delivered via transporter to an awaiting ship. Captain Glor met Garcia, gripping him by the arms.

A light went off in Garcia's mind. How many times had he seen Klingon's greeting one another in this method? Head bumps became the pentacle of a triangle; light. "Warriors grappling!"

"I've missed you, Brother. Welcome home," Glor said. "Now, let's get you back before your mother ship starts freaking out."

"I don't have to wear a funny hat, do I?" Garcia asked.

"You are a free man. Wear what you like," Glor said.

"Good. Cause I hate hats." He turned to Mor. "Oh, and Brother?"

"Yes?"

Garcia gave a surprise right hook and knocked him to the floor. "Don't do that again."



Lt. Commander Kitara arrived on the Bridge of the USS New Constitution in full battle gear, her armor polished and glowing, reflecting the light from the monitors as she moved towards the command chair. The Bridge personnel went to attention and saluted, both Klingon and non-Klingons competing to demonstrate proper military etiquette. She saluted, but said nothing, motioning them back to their duties. She paced. She sat on the edge of the command chair, her skirt rising to thigh level. She didn't bother to adjust it down, as she had noticed many of the humans doing. What was the point of having it this length if she had to fiddle with it? She wondered. Her battle armor was not the traditional Klingon gear, but rather the design agreed upon by her and Captain Garcia. It gave their people a sense of identity that was not quite Empire, but not quite Star Fleet. The uniform was a merging of the two, capturing attributes from both cultures. Her lips moved to form a pout. She crossed her legs and leaned back. She allowed her hands to settle into the arm grips, ergonomically designed to fit the average human, her fingers lighting on the buttons. She uncrossed her legs and lowered the arm rest to the full down, reining them in for combat mode. The arm rests touched her thighs, holding her firm to the command chair. She brought the arm rest back to their normal position. She stood, crossing her arms in front of her chest. She circled the Bridge, inspecting each station. She paused at the Ops station, leaning in to scrutinize the information being displayed. Without warning, she grabbed the Klingon officer by the head, a fist full of his hair, and slammed his face into the monitor.

"Do you see that?" Kitara asked him, his face squashed and his eyes wide. "What is that?"

"Sorry! My mistake!" Lt. PetHe managed.

"Tell me how you missed that?" Kitara demanded.

"Reading English is... challenging," PetHe said.

"Either personalize your terminal settings to display Klingon, or spend more time using the language tutor on your PADD," Kitara ordered.

She let him go and proceeded to the next station. The next officer in line maintained his focus on his station, on his own work. He was not about to reveal that he was nervous. He was completely surprised when she slapped the back of his head, too.

“What did I do?” he stammered.

“For being in a position to notice his mistake and not helping him,” Kitara instructed.

Lt. Bri, one of the Klingon security officers, approached the Commander guardedly.

“I was told to inform you,” Bri said. “They’re ready for her.”

Kitara’s hand fell to the hilt of her mevak, a Klingon knife similar to a d’ktag, but more personal, smaller, and generally used in rituals. Bri stepped back, allowing her clear run at the turbolift. After she stepped off the Bridge, she turned to face them.

“Owens, the Bridge is yours,” Kitara spit out before the doors closed. “Deck Four...”

The doors closed off the Bridge and opened again on her requested deck. Most of the guest quarters were on deck four. She passed the quarters where the salt vampire was being held. A Losira agent stood guard just outside the door, and she suspected a second one was on the inside. She wondered just how many agents Losira could manifest before her efficiency would begin to decrease, but she showed no outward signs of interest in the computer interface. She didn’t even give the agents a glance as she moved past them with purpose in her stride, but she felt the agents studying her, which gave her the creeps. It angered her to be affected so. It made no sense. Agents or no, Losira could see her anywhere on any of the ships through computer technology, so being watched shouldn’t bother her.

She arrived at the quarters assigned to Ambassador Rivan and rang the buzzer. When a minute passed by, she rang the door again. The door opened and Rivan met Kitara with a yawn, and then realizing who was at her door, she became more alert, concern growing on her face.

“Commander,” Rivan stuttered, completely surprised. “What’s wrong?”

“Ambassador Rivan,” Kitara said, stern and professional, the way she always was with Rivan when she was forced to address her. “You will follow me.”

“Of course,” Rivan said, then hesitating. “Let me get my shoes.”

“Now!” Kitara snapped.

“Okay,” Rivan said, not embarrassed that she was hardly dressed in attire suitable for a leisure stroll through the ship. The only reason she wore clothing at all was to accommodate the comfort level of her shipmates. She hurried to keep up with Kitara. “Is everything okay?”

Kitara stopped to manhandle Rivan, pushing her back behind her. “I said follow me, not walk beside me. Can you follow directions?”

“Yes,” Rivan said, a little anger showing. “Can you tell me what’s wrong?”

But Kitara was walking again, hustling to capture a turbolift at the end of the corridor before the doors closed. The doors were in full swing, but opened immediately when she thrust her hand between them. She entered and held her hand against the door to prevent it from closing before Rivan joined her.

“Deck one,” Kitara said.

“Are we going to sick bay?” Rivan asked, and then suddenly her face darkened. “Oh, no. Is he okay?”

“Is who okay?” Kitara asked.

“Garcia? Did something happen to him?” Rivan asked, on the verge of tears.

“Be silent,” Kitara said.

Kitara stared at the door, avoiding eye contact with Rivan.

“I need to know,” Rivan said, unable to maintain the quiet. Kitara was exiting the lift as if she were in a hurry, only glancing back to make sure Rivan was still following. Rivan put her foot down. “Tell me what’s going on!”

Kitara reached in the lift and grabbed Rivan’s arm, yanked her out, and directed her down the corridor. As she did this, she retrieved her mevac with her free hand, while her other hand slid down Rivan’s arm to her wrist.

“You’re hurting me,” Rivan said.

Kitara brought Rivan to a halt in front of the doors to Holodeck One. Turning her palm up, she cut Rivan’s hand. Rivan screamed for help, but there was no one in the corridor, which seemed odd. Rivan wondered if she was dreaming. Kitara flipped the mevac so that she was now holding it by the blade. She held the mevac up, offering it to Rivan so that she could take it by the hilt.

“This mevac is my gift to you,” Kitara said. “The jewel in the hilt is the remains of my great grandmother, her atoms compressed and heated to make this diamond. I added these markings on the hilt. They bind us in sisterhood. We are now family.”

Rivan’s eyes were big beyond belief. Words failed her.

“Take the mevac,” Kitara said. “Pull it from my hand.”

Rivan’s free hand took the hilt, but she didn’t pull it free for fear of cutting Kitara. Kitara squeezed, pulled her hand free cutting it as she did. She joined her bleeding hand with Rivan’s.

“This ritual is for bonding,” Kitara explained. “It joins our circles. We share blood, family, and honor,” Kitara said, and then pushed the button to open the holodeck doors. She dragged Rivan inside.

Kitara and Rivan found themselves in a virtual reality already in progress. People stood, or stopped whatever activities they were engaged in to shout “surprise!” The landscape was a twentieth century American home, a house vaguely representative of Frank Lloyd Wright. They were in the backyard, near a pool of clear water, with closing diamond patterns on the water’s surface due to a light breeze. There were a cluster of pool side tables, sprouting umbrellas to offer shade, looking like an arrangement of artificial flowers. There was a rustic looking picnic table covered with a cloth and nearly overflowing with a variety of food and drinks. A child’s swing set was in the background. A beach ball gave sharp contrast to the green grass of the yard. The pool was fed continuously by water falling over boulders on the far side, and there were some people already in the hot tub.

The smile on Trini’s face faded as she tried to understand the fresh, crimson stain on Rivan’s dress. “Oh my god, you’re bleeding! Commander, I said bring her don’t kill her!”

Most of the guest closed in around Rivan and Kitara. Nurse Cohen fell into her natural role of caretaker and ordered up medical supplies. They arrived via the site to site replicator.

“You said this was intended to be a ceremony to bring gifts to Rivan,” Kitara said. “It’s a baby shower!” Trini said, tears falling from her eyes. Cohen started cleaning Rivan’s hand. “It’s ok, Trini. It’s just a flesh wound.” “Why does the baby need a shower?” Rivan asked. “It’s not even born yet.” “A shower is an old Earth custom, to bring you things you need,” Cohen said. “But all my needs are met,” Rivan said. “It’s a celebration of life,” Cohen explained, using the tissue regenerator to heal Rivan’s wound. “Gifts are part of the tradition.” “I thought you understood,” Trini said, looking crossly at her commanding Officer. “I understood,” Kitara said. “I gave her a mevac.” “A what?” Trini asked. “A knife,” Tatiana explained. “You shouldn’t play with knives, Rivan,” Trini said, trying to take it. Rivan pulled the knife away from Trini. “But it’s the best gift I ever received!” “A knife?” Trini asked, looking to Tatiana in disbelief. A few guests began to second guess their decisions, wondering if they had brought the right gifts. “Just when you think you know a person.” Tatiana gave Trini a reassuring hug. “She made me family,” Rivan said, absolutely glowing. “Give me your hand, Commander,” Cohen sighed, not really understanding Rivan’s enthusiasm. She proceeded to heal Kitara’s wounds as Trini led the guest of honor away.



The IKV Path Finder was in the tandem position with the USS New Constitution, and completely invisible, thanks to holographic cloaking system built right into the skin of the ship. It also held a traditional Klingon cloaking device, but if this were activated, it would not function properly while mated to the Constitution. It would leave an ‘apparent’ hole in the sister ship that would draw attention. Both technologies made the Path Finder’s existence a violation of the Federation Romulan peace treaty. The fact that it was supposed to be primarily a Klingon ship was only a bit of subterfuge, a card to be played if the wrong people found out about its existence. Officially, no one knew anything. Technically, quite a few people of importance knew things, but very few in the know knew that other people were in on the game, making Garcia’s tight-rope walk all the more precarious.

The moment Garcia arrived aboard the Path Finder via the Gateway, Losira appeared beside him. She immediately began to greet him in the ritualistic way, which was technically a security protocol to verify Garcia was who he said he was, but more and more appearing to be a ritualistic opportunity for Losira to connect with Garcia. She took his hand into hers and assessed his biometric readings, which was the size of his hand and finger prints. She pulled him in closer and looked deeply into his eyes, attaining both a retina and iris scan. She kissed him, capturing DNA molecules and pheromones that specifically identified Garcia as Garcia. There was also a new protocol, which she and Garcia had mutually agreed upon, where she accessed his neural implant and verified a data set, a complex mathematical algorithm which was altered every time he was transported and could only be reset by her. This last was put in place to reduce the

likelihood of a “Garcia” transporter clone taking command. She didn’t have to touch him to access his neural implant. The fact that she did simply revealed the depths of her affection for him. But given his recent indoctrination into the Klingon version of Freemasonry, he had a glimmer of this ritual between the two of them as something more sacred. Annoying, but sacred.

“Is all of this necessary every time?” Garcia demanded.

“Voice print identification confirmed,” Losira said, completing the security procedure. “Sarcasm personality trait, confirmed. And, to answer your question; yes, it is.”

“I don’t see you putting anyone else through this procedure,” Garcia pointed out.

“You’re my Captain,” Losira said. “And you hold the highest authority on this ship.”

“You mean ships?” Garcia asked, leaving the hanger deck where the PF’s Gateway was installed and heading towards the nearest turbolift.

“I consider the Path Finder and New Constitution one ship,” Losira said, mirroring his pace. “The PF is my body, making me NC crew. Unless, you prefer to think of me as the Captain’s yacht...”

“Some yacht,” Garcia said. Truth was, he was relieved to be on the Path Finder. He felt safe, his burden lighter. And some of that was ‘literally’ lighter, as the other personalities in his brain could utilize the Kalandan computer system to manifest themselves and go anywhere on the Path Finder. When they did, they were somehow less intrusive on his immediate awareness. The most likely analogy was that of someone who had been given sudden relief from Tinnitus; they were still there, buzzing in his ear, but he was less aware of them. He knew it was an illusion because they were as much a part of his brain as his own consciousness was and once the pathways were laid, there was no undoing them.

Losira slowed to allow Garcia to enter the turbolift first, the door opening for him the moment he arrived as if it had been waiting. In fact, it had been waiting, as Losira had predicted Garcia’s need and had summoned it and held it in ready. She closed the door, using a small hand gesture which was all for show. “Bridge,” Garcia told her.

As soon as the turbolift began to move, Losira kissed Garcia again.

“What are you doing?” Garcia asked.

“Thought you might like a little stress relief, considering your encounter with Simone didn’t go so well,” Losira said.

“You were watching that?” Garcia asked.

“Your pulse and respiration increased, drawing my attention to you,” Losira said. “I was only assessing your situation.”

“Do I have any privacy?” Garcia asked.

“No. As Captain you shouldn’t leave the ship to go into hostile situations,” Losira pointed out. “And since you can’t deny Sherman’s Planet is a dangerous place for you at this time, I think you can tolerate my intermittent intrusions as an acceptable compulsion on my part. You’re lucky I allowed your little excursion.”

She answered his next question before he had had a chance to ask. “So, you were in on it?!” Garcia demanded.

“What can I say?” Losira said. “I’m now an honorary Eastern Star. Or is that Eastern Starship.”

Garcia sighed. There really was no privacy on a Starship for a Captain, but especially when the AI could follow you anywhere within her sphere of influence and was madly in love with you. It was that very reason that most of the Klingons could not stand being on the Path Finder. They hated automation in general, limiting their Klingon starships with only the absolute minimum computer functions. A talking computer on a Klingon ship was unheard of, so having an “artificial intelligent” agent monitor their daily functions was akin to having ghosts watching over them. Losira had the extra benefit of being sentient, in the same manner Data was, only, instead of an android body, her body was the ship. The Kalandan computer system, her brain, enabled her to manifest herself in a physical body for the convenience of the crew, one that was indistinguishable from a biological entity. If the Klingons had their way, Losira would be dismantled.

“Are you familiar with Anne McCaffrey?” Losira said.

“You know I am familiar with her,” Garcia asked. “Why?”

“I just read ‘the spaceship that sang’ and felt a kinship towards the story and the author,” Losira said.

“Just read it?” Garcia asked. “You have everything ever written from Earth in your memory banks, and you just read it?”

“Having something in your memory banks and having it in your operating memory are two very different things,” Losira said. “Of course, now that I have given it so much attention, it will be with me for a long time. I am curious about how you know so much about 20th century trivia. The extent of your knowledge of that era defies any of the explanations that you have provided.”

“Promise to keep a secret?” Garcia asked.

“It depends on the secret,” Losira said.

Garcia chuckled. “You sound just like Data sometimes. Anyway, an explanation that you might understand is the Guardian of Time did a memory dump into my head and now I know everything about ancient Earth.”

“You mean the Guardian of Forever?” Losira asked.

“Excuse me?” Garcia asked.

“If you’re referring to the ancient, sentient time machine found by Captain Kirk, the Guardian referred to himself as the Guardian of Forever, not the Guardian of time,” Losira corrected.

“Well, that’s just silly,” Garcia argued. “It’s a time machine, not a forever machine. Not to mention the semantic argument that forever constitutes eternity, but time as we know it has a clear beginning, the big bang, and an ending, the big rip, and nothing exist before or after those two points. So, unless the Guardian exists in multiple time lines and universes simultaneously, and can network those universes, then this Guardian is limited to this time line... Why are we even discussing this? You ruined my attempt at humor.”

Losira hugged Garcia to herself fiercely, as if she had indeed missed him. “So, what do you say? We’re approaching a point of no return. I can either take us the rest of the way up to the Bridge, or shoot us around the ship a couple of more times so we can play.”

“Bridge,” Garcia said.

Losira laughed mischievously, directing the turbolift to the Bridge.

A puzzled look came across Garcia's face. "Have you been varying the speed of the turbolifts all this time?" he asked.

"You just now noticed that?" Losira asked, amused.

"Why?" Garcia asked.

"In order to have a more fulfilling conversation with you," Losira said. "Don't you feel more satisfied leaving the turbolift after completing a dialogue, so you don't feel interrupted?"

Garcia shook his head slightly as the doors to the lift open, revealing they had arrived on the Bridge, 'serendipitously' with the conclusion of their conversation. When the doors opened, Losira's welcomed him to the Bridge with a wave of her arm before disappearing in a manner designed by the Kalandans: she became two dimensional, then one dimensional, and then disappeared into a point. She was still present and aware of everything on the Path Finder, just less intrusive. Once on the Bridge, Garcia took notice of the staff, observing it was all Klingon males. They went to attention, saluted, closed fist to heart. Then Lt. Tuer gripped Garcia suddenly by both arms.

"No way," Garcia said.

"Who do you think coordinated with Losira to keep her from starting a war to get you back," Tuer said. "Quite frankly, Captain, you're a hard man to isolate."

"I'm getting that conspiracy feeling again," Garcia complained.

"Ignore it. It's not what you think," Tuer said. "Brother."

"Brother," Garcia said. "Where's Kitara?"

Tuer smirked. "She was convinced to participate in a human ritual. Trini has organized a baby shower for Rivan. If you like, I will summon her."

"No," Garcia said. It was all he could do to keep from laughing, and he wondered how Trini managed to twist Kitara's arm into participating in such a ritual. Then again, maybe they hoodwinked her, too. More than likely, she went willingly, because Klingons were all about rituals.

"Anything to report?" Garcia asked.

"Utilizing the Kalandan computer system, we were able to covertly board several Cardassian ships without detection. We have gathered some great intel," Tuer said. He actually seemed happy. "They cannot sustain the Sherman's Planet occupation without rearranging their assets. It looks like Gowron was right. They will eventually retreat from Bajor. And when they do, the Empire will gain a tactical advantage."

"I'll be in my Ready Room," Garcia said. He hated these political maneuverings more than he hated direct conflict. Who knew how long it would take the Cardassians to fall back, if ever. If there was going to be a conflict, he would just as soon get it over with than let it drag out. But it wasn't his call. That also annoyed him. There were too many people pulling his strings.

He took the open lift up to his Ready Room, one floor up, to the most forward part of Path Finder. He looked up through the port at the top of the Cone Section and looked across the Saucer Section of the New Constitution, a New Orleans class starship. With a quarter moon illuminated, he could discern just enough of Sherman's planet beyond the saucer section to know where he was in relationship to the sun. The sunlight was blocking most of the stars from his field of vision, but that would change as the ship's orbit took them to the dark side of the planet.

Garcia unconsciously grabbed his left wrist. He forced himself to look away. A light on his desk indicated he had mail. Ignoring that, he sat down on the couch, and slowly slumped over. It took effort to straighten his back, drawing his legs up off the floor. He allowed himself to close his eyes, sitting Indian style. He aimed for a light meditation, started a mantra, and closed his eyes to mere slits, just sufficient to allow light in. The mantra decreased in volume, till only his lips were moving. His eyes closed fully. He fell through meditation and right into REM sleep.

20th century earth had some distinct markers. The television was on, even though no one was watching it. It was on just on for the sake of noise, and apparently it was a show designed for children: a smiling baby face, framed by a sun, cooed. Looking away from the TV and out the window from the apartment in Astoria, he could see the train, cars, and pedestrians. He took note of the patrons coming and going from an Indian restaurant. There was snow between the sidewalk and the street. The pavement was dark with wetness. Steam vented from metal plating in the sidewalk. Inside the apartment the radiator made a distinctive sound. He could see the streaks of wax on the radiator from all the crayons he had melted on it.

There were eyes in the house. The eyes belonged to the ghosts watching, recording his every move. He ignored them and picked up his rocket ship. He flew it silently around the house, passing the stars in his mind. His mother patted him on the head as he passed from the kitchenette to the living room. Grandma K arrived in the room as if someone had thrown a light switch. She kicked a foot stool into his path and he fell into it. The ship flew out of his hand, breaking into three distinct pieces. He looked at the ship, saddened, and then looked to his grandmother, crossly.

“Say it,” Grandma K said. She leaned forward in the chair, scrutinizing the voiceless child. “Why do you keep coming here? There is nothing here for you to learn. You have lived thousands of years of simulated lifetimes. You could choose any scenario, any situation, and you keep coming back to this dreadful place. Why?”

His expression didn’t change, but when he focused on the ship, he had compassion. He retrieved the pieces in an effort to determine if it could be repaired. He sat down on the floor, his back to the couch so that his Grandmother was in front of him.

“This silent treatment is getting old,” Grandma K said. “You don’t even make spaceship noises.”

“There is no sound in space,” his mother said, coming to his defense. She sat down on the couch with some tea.

Saddened that the ship was not repairable, he leaned into his mothers legs. She touched the top of his head. “I can hear him just fine. Maybe you need to learn to listen,” she said.

Grandmother K’s eyes narrowed. “He is just being stubborn,” Grandma K said. “And your maternal instincts are no doubt interfering with our intent to develop a certain personality type. We’ve decided to force feed a series of simulations, from birth to death, to engender some particular skill sets. They will not be pain free.”

“What do you mean by force? You’re taking away his free will?” his mother asked, coming forward on the couch.

“He will continue to have free will, but we will control the environment,” Grandma K said. “No more free rides. He is going to have to earn his luxuries.”

The door to the apartment burst open. Three armed men, wearing masks, entered, weapons drawn. Grandma K disappeared, as if cut from the frame of a movie. He and his mother were abused as the ghosts watched.

Garcia woke up from his dream and took a moment to orientate. Using the point to point replicator system, his request for water manifested in front of him. By the time he emptied the glass, the details of the dream had dissipated. He forced himself to go to his desk. The computer monitor revealed he had slept fifteen minutes. He opened his mail and glanced over the contents. There were over a dozen pending emails, which was good since he normally had over a hundred. He rubbed his forehead.

“Losira,” Garcia said, rubbing his eyes. “Place a call to Star Fleet Command. I want to speak to Admiral Eric Pressman.”

“Stand by one,” Losira said, her voice emanating from the desk console. “Connecting to Star Fleet Command. I have Admiral Pressman.”

Garcia was surprised everything went through so fast. Meaning what? The Admiral was expecting him? The change from screen saver to live feed happened instantaneously. A tech light below the screen alerted Garcia to the fact that Pressman was using technology that would prevent his words and video from being recorded directly, maintaining his anonymity. There would be no trace of this call coming from Star Fleet. He activated his own counter intelligence technology, hopefully blocking Pressman from recording him.

“Ahh, Tam, so nice to hear from you,” Admiral Pressman said. “How are my little black sheep?”

“Poor, and we’ve lost our way,” Garcia said, realizing he had always utilized his penchant for allegory. Damn Klingon Masons, he thought. That was the problem of being brought into the light, though. You began to see meaning everywhere. He decided to be direct. “Do you know anything about the disappearance of Admiral Madison’s granddaughter, Arlene?” Garcia asked.

“Always straight and to the point, aren’t you? Very efficient. Why would you think I know anything about that?” Pressman asked, innocently.

“Because of your threat,” Garcia said. “You remember, if something happens to you or your Klingon counterpart, my fault, your fault, no one’s fault, someone I loved would suffer the consequence.”

“When I do something to you or yours, you will know I did it,” Pressman assured him. “As for the Klingons, well, I’m sure someone is going to retaliate. That’s out of my hands. I did warn you.”

“Get this straight,” Garcia said. “Anything happens to Arlene, my fault, your fault, no one’s fault, I will be coming for you.”

Admiral Pressman laughed. “I put you where you are, Garcia. I can take you out,” Pressman assured him.

“I’m primed and ready for a war,” Garcia said. “And I’m getting just a little trigger happy.”

“Good,” Pressman said. “Because I have a new mission for you.”

“I no longer work for you,” Garcia said.

“Oh, you still work for me,” Pressman assured him. “Specifically, you work for Star Fleet. I’ve been appointed to lead a committee governing your secret missions, given the task by the Federation President herself.”

Garcia wanted to call him a liar but he did not respond to the bait. He simply put on a poker face. The President had assured him that there was an investigation in process to discover the extent of Pressman's illegal activities, which effectively made Garcia a double agent. But this? What game was this? Not enough evidence to prosecute, so to create some form of check and balance, she created a committee and put Pressman in charge? Give him a false sense of security? Give enough rope that he might hang himself?

"Who is on this committee?" Garcia asked.

"Not your concern," Pressman said. "You only need to know that our original arrangement is still in effect and I will call on you from time to time to do things. But for now, this next assignment has been approved by the committee. We want you to find and secure an active Iconian Gateway."

Garcia's mouth opened slightly. "What?"

"Star Fleet wants an alternative to warp drive and spaceships," Pressman said. "Not only can this technology be used to gather intelligence on other worlds, but it will enable us to send teams across the galaxy at the blink of an eye. If you are unable to secure an active Gateway on an abandoned Iconian world, then you are to retrieve the technology, by any means necessary, so we can duplicate it on Earth."

"What makes you think I can find a Gateway?" Garcia asked.

"Your god friends obviously have access to this technology," Pressman said. "And judging by the report you gave McCoy, you have visited several worlds that have this technology."

"He's on the committee?!" Garcia asked.

Pressman smiled a big evil grin. "Maybe, maybe not. All I am going to say is you have a new incentive to make sure the Path Finder project stays top secret. If there are any more leaks, this will not go badly for me. And I will make sure that it looks like McCoy and the President were complicit in this research program. Now, what kind of time table do you suppose I should give you on finding a Gateway? In the report you gave McCoy you visited at least five worlds that appeared to be abandoned outposts."

"I don't know how to get to any of these worlds," Garcia said.

"Talk to the gods. Negotiate. Lie, steal, cheat; do all those little things that you excel so well at," Pressman said. "Just get us a Gateway."

Pressman closed out the channel. Garcia fumed, silently. Pressman was obviously feeling secure if he could make such bold threats over a medium where the anti-record could be thwarted. Sure, the communiqué was scrambled, but Pressman couldn't stop Losira from viewing and making playbacks possible. Hell, he could even create a holographic version and reproduce the conversation that very few people would be able to discern wasn't a forgery. Pressman was not untouchable, but getting something on him and making it stick and permanently remove him from a position of power, that was the trick.

Garcia leaned back in his chair and stared up at the port. Continents on the dark side of the planet were outlined and mapped by city lights stretching from sea to sea. There was a gaping hole in the grid work; a dark spot in the network of lights that defined one of the areas destroyed by the antimatter bombs. It sickened his stomach that he could discern that from his present perspective. He forced himself to look away.

A new wave of anger rose as he was working up the momentum to call the President and challenge her about the committee.

“Captain,” Losira said, gently. She had learned better than any on how to approach him when he was experiencing strong emotions. Then again, she was a “super” computer, so it didn’t take a large learning threshold. Her choice in tone had been so subtle that an observer might have thought she was manipulating him.

“What?” Garcia asked, the emotions evident in his voice.

“There is a priority one call coming in from Vulcan,” Losira said.

Garcia sat up straight. “On screen,” he said, his emotions dissipating rapidly.

T’Pau, one the oldest and most widely recognized and respected Vulcan in the known Galaxy, appeared on the screen. She raised her hand to salute. Garcia was already on his feet, mirroring her gesture.

“T’Pau,” Garcia said. It wasn’t lost on him that the anti-recording tech light came on again. “How may I serve you?”

“I need you to do me a personal favor,” T’Pau said.

“Of course,” Garcia said. “Anything.”

“I want you to go to Phylos, retrieve a Vulcan, and bring him directly to me,” T’Pau said. “He is gravely ill and I would like him here before he dies. Take Simone in case he dies in transit, so she can retrieve his Katra if it becomes necessary.”

“I am capable, and there are several other Vulcans on board if that ritual becomes necessary,” Garcia said.

“No. This is Simone’s task,” T’Pau said. “Time is of the essence. I believe you are the only one capable of performing this task in the time frame necessary.”

“Of course,” Garcia said, understanding that she wanted the task done yesterday. If her hint had been any more subtle, it would have come with a wink. “I will leave at once.”

“I require this task to be completed as discreetly as possible,” T’Pau said. “For personal reasons.”

“I understand,” Garcia said.

“Good. It is settled. I will see you shortly,” T’Pau said. She closed out the channel.

Garcia was bewildered, but determined. It was an honor to serve T’Pau in any capacity, and for her to call on him personally, privately, was the equivalent of being knighted by the Queen of England. He pushed a button on his desk, activating a comm. link. “Lt. Kitara.”

A moment later she answered. “Captain?”

“Are you eating?” Garcia asked.

“Just a moment,” Kitara said, excusing herself from a conversation. She withdrew from the group of mothers-to-be to a quiet place on the far side of the pool. “Just finished. Go ahead.”

“With the exception of Doctor Jurak, I want everyone not immediately involved in medical aide back on the NC,” Garcia said. “Have Jurak report to me as soon as he’s on board. We’ll be departing in one hour.”

“Where are we going?” Kitara asked.

“I will tell you when we’re on the Bridge,” Garcia said. “Get the ball rolling. Oh, and make it look like a drill. I want to avoid curious minds, if you know what I mean.”

“Aye,” Kitara said, and deactivated her comm. badge. She actually hated breaking up the shower, but work came before friends and family.

Garcia was continuing to organize information on his screen, when it occurred to him that the person they were to retrieve was probably an ambassador, or some dignitary needing a lift, considering how important this was to T’Pau. He was going to have to change into his formal uniform. “Losira, notify Simone and verify that she’s on her way to the NC,” Garcia said, figuring that Simone had already spoken to T’Pau, or would be shortly. He opened another channel, seeking his Engineer. “Lt. Gomez.”

“Captain?”

“Prep us for a transwarp jump,” Garcia said.

“Um, yeah, we need to talk about that,” Gomez said. “In person.”

“Where are you?” Garcia asked.

“Engineering. New Constitution.”

“Be right there,” Garcia said, closing out the channel. He transferred the data he was examining about Phylos from his desk computer to his neural implant, to carry his work with him.

The fastest way to get to the NC’s engineering room from the PF’s Ready Room would have been the transporter, but it wasn’t often he could justify using the fireman’s pole to drop from his Ready Room down to the Bridge below. He arrived on the Bridge of the PF, drawing everyone’s attention.

“Batten down the hatches, prepare to sync with the NC,” Garcia instructed. “We’re traveling.”

“Aye, Captain,” Tuer said.

Garcia took the lift to deck three and crossed over from the Path Finder to the New Constitution at the juncture where the Cone Section physically met the Saucer section. From there he caught a turbo lift down to engineering. It stopped once and Tomoko Yonemura stepped in. She carried with her a more serious looking PADD than the standard reader and she looked ready for business.

“Yeoman,” Garcia said.

“I prefer Yeomanette. Lift, resume,” Tomoko said. “I need to know why you were late to your medical conference.”

“I was distracted,” Garcia admitted.

“Well, I look bad when you don’t show up on time,” Tomoko said. “It’s my job to keep you updated on your schedule, so if your neural implant’s daily planner isn’t alerting you of your appointments in sufficient time to arrive, I would like to discuss how I can better serve you.”

“I’m really busy at the moment,” Garcia said.

“I realize that. It doesn’t have to be this moment,” Tomoko said.

“No, I mean, I’m really busy. You know how crazy my schedule has been lately, and I just keep getting distracted by...” Garcia said.

“Send them to me,” Tomoko said.

“Send who to you?” Garcia asked. The lift opened and he stepped out of the lift.

Tomoko kept pace with him. “Whoever is distracting you,” Tomoko said. “Send them to me and I will schedule them based on priority.”

“And, how do you plan to schedule around impromptu calls from Star Fleet headquarters, medical emergencies, being kidnapped, or me getting stunned by my own officers?” Garcia asked.

Niki was in the corridor and turned at the sound of Garcia’s voice and joined them, adding a bit of a skip to her stride.

“Obviously, Star Fleet comes first, as for the others...” Tomoko said. She paused as some of his words registered. “You were stunned by your own officers?”

“Hi, Tam,” Niki said.

“We’re a little busy right now, Niki,” Tomoko said.

Niki nodded, unperturbed, and continue to walk with them anyway.

“Well, the reason I was late to the meeting was I had a call from Star Fleet,” Garcia said.

“Well, the story I heard was that you took time out to gamble,” Tomoko said.

“Oh. Well, and that,” Garcia admitted.

Tomoko showed Garcia her clipboard size PADD, tapping the device. “This is the schedule you agreed to,” Tomoko said.

“Yeah, and that’s about to change in about fifty-five minutes,” Garcia said.

“What do you mean?” Tomoko demanded.

“Tam, real quick. Michael Jackson’s album Thriller trumps your Carol King album, Tapestry,” Niki said.

Garcia stopped in his tracks. “Really?”

Niki smiled and shook her head. “Seven number one hits...”

“Captain,” Tomoko interrupted. “I’ve not been strict on your schedule due to the medical crisis. You’ve missed sleep cycles...”

“Just a moment, Tomoko,” Garcia said, focusing on Niki. “Using that album is the equivalent throwing down all your aces.”

“Yep,” Niki beamed, rocking on her feet.

“What are you guys talking about?” Tomoko asked.

“It’s a game we’re playing,” Niki said.

“I don’t believe this,” Tomoko complained. “Tam! I’m ultimately responsible for making sure you eat, you rest, and that you make your appointments. You’ve skipped meals, you’ve skipped sleep cycles, you’ve missed an appointment with your daughter, you were late to the medical conference, and you’re playing games with Niki?”

“I need the distraction,” Garcia explained to Tomoko. “Niki, you sure?”

“Yep,” Niki said.

“Fine,” Garcia said. “You win that round. Shift your pieces on the board, update the screen, I’ll send you an email when I have a counter move.”

“Cool,” Niki said, and skipped off.

Garcia turned to Tomoko. “Look, I’m working with you the best I can,” Garcia told her. “And I definitely want your assistance. I just don’t see a lot of Captains depending on their Yeomanettes to get things done.”

“Most Captains are not as busy as you are,” Tomoko said. “Are you saying you need more personal recreation time? Cause I can work in more.”

“No, what I have is fine,” Garcia told her.

“But you’ve been using it for training,” Tomoko pointed out. “I don’t consider that recreation. Should I be more specific about the types of recreation that I consider necessary?”

“What do you have in mind?” Garcia asked.

“For starters, I think you need to get laid,” Tomoko said, always direct to the point. “You’re less grumpy and more efficient when you’ve shared time with someone.”

“You can’t schedule that,” Garcia said, pushing on towards Engineering, not wanting to add the point he had been too successful in that area.

“You’re going to have to, cause impromptu encounters are getting you in trouble, and the last thing you need is random romantic dalliances,” Tomoko said. “I know you like it to feel random and impulsive, but for you to accomplish your goals and stay healthy, it is compulsory for you to schedule everything, including eating, sleeping, and sex. If you want, I could schedule it, not inform you, and have it appear random.”

“I really don’t have time for this,” Garcia said.

“Make time,” Tomoko said. “I have fifteen minutes right now if you want a quickie.”

Garcia nearly stumbled at how business like she was about the whole process. Was it a cultural thing? Were Japanese people traditionally that practical about intimacy? It is a fact that there was a time in Japanese history when there were vending machines selling used female panties.

“Well?” she asked.

“Um, did you just miss the part about we’re going to have a major schedule change?” Garcia asked.

“We don’t have fifteen minutes?” Tomoko asked.

“We’re going to Phyllos,” Garcia said.

“We are?” Tomoko asked, completely surprised.

“Shh, top secret, but we’re leaving as soon as I get the engines prepped,” Garcia said.

“But you have a meeting at Club Bliss with…” Tomoko began.

“Missing it,” Garcia said, putting his finger to his lips to indicate silence. “But no one knows that yet.”

Tomoko sighed and allowed him to go about his business. She looked at her PADD and with one wipe of her hand, she erased the day’s schedule. When she turned around to head back the way she came, she found Lt. Gao Hong suddenly in front of her.

“Lt.,” Tomoko said.

“Is Garcia on board? The computer directed me to you,” Lt. Hong said.

“Garcia’s busy,” Tomoko said. “What can I do for you?”

“I’ve made my decision. I want to take Garcia up on his offer,” Hong said. “A standard Earth contract, five year with option for renewal, inheritance clause for the child only.”

“You understand the inheritance is being shared,” Tomoko said.

“Of course,” Hong said. “Mostly, I just want the child to have access to the history and any potential helpful status. I’m going to keep my name, but I want the child to have a choice. I also want the child to have access to participating with siblings, and, in the event of my death, I want my parents to become guardians, and if they’re not available, Trini will be the designated godmother. I don’t expect Garcia to take over full

responsibility in the event of my death, but I don't want him pawning the child off on just anyone."

"Okay," Tomoko said. "I am sending you a copy of the forms. Just make sure you clearly designate the order of primary care givers in your absence. Do you require a token or ceremony?"

"Oh, no, no," Lt. Hong said. "How many are availing themselves of the marriage option?"

"Not many," Tomoko said. "Most are taking full custody, leaving Garcia a limited parental role, with designated custodianship in their absence to fall on their own biological families."

"Well, in reality, he can't marry everyone," Lt. Hong said.

"No, and you're not the only one to say as much," Tomoko said. "You don't add an additional thirty mistakes to correct the first thirty."

"So, what option did you take?" Lt. Hong said.

"Are you kidding? I married him. He signed the contract a week ago," Tomoko said.

"So, we're sisters," Lt. Hong said.

"I guess so," Tomoko said. "And I so need a sister or two. Children aren't even born yet and scheduling is already a nightmare! Garcia doesn't realize it yet, but his days are about to be planned down to the very last second. I may have to hire an assistant just to find him time to breathe."

"If I can be of any help, let me know," Lt. Hong said.

"Thank you," Tomoko said, touching her arm.



People were hustling about, getting prepped for flight, but Lt. Gomez was nowhere to be found.

"Where's Gomez?" Garcia asked a passing officer.

The Officer pointed back the way Garcia had come. "Toilet."

Garcia returned to the corridor and stood by the door to the restroom. The door opened and Gomez met his eyes, she made a face as if she were going to be sick, and then rushed back towards the sink. Garcia trailed her. As she vomited into the sink, Garcia replicated a hot, wet towel. He rubbed her back until she was through and then handed her the towel. She left the water running in the sink as she wiped her face.

"Morning sickness?" Garcia asked her.

She looked at him through the mirror. "You think?" she asked, crossly.

"Sorry," Garcia said. "I could give you something..."

"You already did, thank you very much," Gomez said, and then softened. "I'm sorry. Did you ever feel like this isn't the life you signed up for? I feel like I'm in the wrong Universe or something. I should be on the Enterprise. I shouldn't be pregnant and single and working two ships, one of which will most likely end my career with a court marital, if not my death. This wasn't what I had planned for my life."

"The best laid plans of mice and men," Garcia muttered.

"Oh, please, that's so cliché, and what does that mean? Really?" Gomez said more than asked.

"I make plans all the time and they rarely seem to come out quite the way I expect," Garcia said. "But I'm much happier now that I have lost all hope."

Gomez chuckled. "I'm sorry. I'm just out of sorts. Mood swings, probably the result of changing bio chemistry. Pregnancy does some weird stuff to the body, you know?"

"I'm empathic, I think I have a small inkling of what you and all the others are going through, more than you might imagine. You wanted to speak with me," Garcia said.

"We need to stop using the transwarp drive to jump from location to location," Gomez said.

"Why?" Garcia asked.

"I've been doing some inspections and after reviewing some data, I've discovered something alarming," Gomez said. "Every time we jump we risk blowing out the warp coils."

"I don't understand," Garcia said.

"You know what an incandescent light bulb is? Like what Edison created in his lab?" Gomez asked. When Garcia nodded, she continued. "Every time you turn one of those on, you risk blowing the filament. If you leave it on all the time, you can actually extend the life of the bulb, because the most crucial moment is that initial surge of power that heats the filament. That's what we're risking by using the transwarp drive. I recommend we stick to sustained warp fields and nothing over warp five while the Path Finder is in the tandem position."

"I want to use the transwarp drive," Garcia said. "This is urgent."

"If we blow the warp coils, we will be stranded," Gomez pointed out. "Weigh that against your immediate urgency."

"I hear what you're saying," Garcia said. "Prep for transwarp."

"Aye," Gomez said, sighing. She started to head back, stopped, closed her eyes, opened them, took one step forwards, and then rushed back to the sink.

Garcia replicated another hot, wet towel, handed it to her, and proceeded to rub her back and neck.

When it was apparent that the episode was over, Garcia asked, "Wouldn't being sick in the toilet be more comfortable?"

"That is so American," Gomez said.

"This can't be good for your back, and it's easier to clean up when all you do is flush," Garcia said.

"I'm set in my ways," Gomez said.

"Sure you don't want something to help you?" Garcia asked.

"What's the point? The moment we return to normal space after the jump, I'll be right back in here," Gomez said.

Garcia sighed. "Let me know if you change your mind."

Gomez sighed, nodded thank you, and gave herself a quick once over in the mirror, shaking her head, before turning to follow Garcia out. Garcia exited the restroom and practically ran into Doctor Jurak. Gomez exited right behind Garcia, adjusting her skirt down, not watching where she was going, and bumped into Garcia, who in turned invaded the Doctor's personal space a second time. The Doctor put a hand out to stop Garcia from bumping him.

"Oh, sorry," Gomez said, and went around the Captain and Doctor.

A slight smile crept over the Doctor's face.

“Not what you think,” Garcia said.

“Never is,” Jurak said, then switched back to his agenda. “What’s with this drill? I have work to do!”

“Not a drill,” Garcia said. “In less than an hour I expect to be at planet Phylos to retrieve a dying Vulcan. I need you to prep a bed for emergency life support, expect the worse case scenario. I want our guest to reach Vulcan alive.”

“Phylos,” Jurak said, musing. “The planet of plant people?”

“The very one,” Garcia said.

“Will we have time for me to hunt down a swooper?” Jurak asked.

“Ummm, let me think about that, no,” Garcia said in one breath. “We’re not going on safari.”

“It’s just a plant,” Jurak said.

“Technically, maybe, but I suspect it’s more complex than that and I’m not going to support your trophy collection,” Garcia said. “

“It’s science,” Jurak protested. “I’d be studying it. And if it’s eatable, probably be eating it, too.”

“Klingons are not vegetarians,” Garcia argued.

“We supplement from time to time, if it fights back,” Doctor Jurak said.

“Get sickbay ready,” Garcia said, walking away.

“What if I just catch and release?” Jurak called after him.

“No!” Garcia said.

“Aye,” Jurak said, walking in the opposite direction.

Garcia caught the next lift, ordering it to stop on deck four, in order to visit his quarters to shower and change. The lift stopped half way there to pick up another passenger. Simone entered, turned to face forwards, and said nothing. The doors closed, but the lift hesitated.

“What floor?” Garcia asked.

“Depends,” Simone said. “Do you have quarters for me?”

“Share mine?” Garcia offered.

“No. I want my privacy,” Simone said.

“Fine, deck four,” Garcia said. “Losira, need you.”

Losira beamed in. “How may I serve you, Captain?”

Simone shifted her eyes from the door to Losira, glaring at the computer’s avatar as if it were a completely contemptible thing. Losira, of course, did not respond to Simone’s almost repressed overtures.

“Escort the Princess here to quest quarters,” Garcia said. The lift stopped on five and he got out, but put his hand against the lift to prevent the doors from closing immediately. “Do you have any idea who we’re picking up?”

“Why would I?” Simone asked.

“Just assuming T’Pau informed you,” Garcia said. “That, and I figure it must be a VIP since she’s sending you, with very clear instructions that you are the only one to collect the Katra if that ritual becomes necessary.”

“I was told I would know this person when I saw him,” Simone said. “He is the only Vulcan currently residing on Phylos. She did not wish to reveal his name over subspace.”

“The call was scrambled. Is she afraid our communication system isn’t secure?” Garcia asked.

“I did not ask her reasoning,” Simone said, and locked her eyes with Garcia. “If I have the human expression down pat, when T’Pau tells me to jump, I jump. There are no questions.”

“Fine, I will let you know when we’re ready to beam down,” Garcia said.

CHAPTER SEVEN

To say Garcia's quarters were Spartan was an understatement. It was literally devoid of all furniture. He entered and immediately began to remove his shirt. There were no windows in his room, as he had made certain his quarters was as close to the center point of the saucer section as he could get. Wall sized viewers adorned each of the walls, the ceiling, and even the floor, providing a seamless display that wasn't quite as good as a holodeck, but pretty close. The monitors came to life as he entered, each monitor giving him a directional view of outside the ship. Had he been weightless, it would have been easy to imagine that he was floating free in space.

"Losira, chair," Garcia said.

A chair materialized before he had his shirt completely off. He tossed his shirt to the floor and sat down in the chair to remove his boots and socks. He tossed these on top of his shirt.

"Table, and lay out a full dress uniform," Garcia continued, pausing only to scrutinize a Cardassian ship leaving orbit. It jumped to warp and was gone. He had to interrupt his natural tendency to wonder where the ship was headed.

Garcia removed his remaining clothes, dropped them to the pile, and headed towards the shower. Opening the door broke the image of space, revealing the lavatory and toilet. No sooner than he had the water running, his four mental companions appeared outside the shower alcove, startling him into dropping the soap.

"Stop sneaking up on me!" Garcia snapped.

"Why don't you use the sonic shower?" Lal asked. "It's more efficient."

Lal's voice was soft, curious, not accusatory. Her voice alone usually triggered the memory of her origin in his consciousness. Who would have suspected when he and Data were connected directly brain to brain via a neural link, that Data's on subconscious would download a copy of his daughter's program and personality matrix directly into his own brain. Considering that Data could have downloaded himself into Garcia truly showed the depths of Data's desire to see his offspring live beyond him. Some of that paternal love had been transferred to Garcia as well, so it was difficult not to think of her as a child. And when you consider all the potential things that get transferred brain to brain in any interaction by two people, there would be less people wishing for telepathic abilities. Duana and Ilona were personalities created in a mass mind meld, and though their personalities were technically copied into everyone that had been in the mind meld with Garcia at the time, like a hologram, they somehow had been able to continue to manifest themselves and intrude on Garcia's waking conscious.

"He doesn't like the sound," Rogue Troi explained.

"He could adjust the frequency," Ilona said.

"I like warm water," Garcia said. "Do you all mind?"

"No," Duana said for the girls. She smiled mischievously. "So, are you going to get the soap?"

Garcia frowned, focused on the soap, and when his anger subsided a bit, he was finally able to lift it using his telekinesis. It took much more effort than he wanted it to.

"Cheater," Duana said, pretending to pout.

Ilona sat on the toilet, pulled out a file, and went to work on her nails. "We're having a conflict," she said. "We want you to settle it."

So much for enjoying a quick shower, Garcia mumbled. He rinsed off and drew the glass door back. "Towel," he said. Losira brought the towel in to him, in person. Garcia shook his head. "You could have just materialized the towel..."

"It sounds like everyone else is in here, thought I would join the party," Losira said.

"My shower is not a party," Garcia said, taking the towel. "Everyone not me, out of my quarters."

"This is our quarters, too," Ilona pointed out.

"How do you figure?" Garcia said.

"Did you assign us quarters?" Ilona asked. "No."

"Everyone of the crew has quarters," Rogue Troi said.

"You're not crew," Garcia said. "And barring the Manifestation Orbs, the only time you can manifest yourselves is when I'm on the Path Finder, at which time you're free to do whatever you want."

"I would like to date," Lal said.

Everyone but Losira looked to Lal. Losira tilted her head, wondering what Garcia had heard to cause the expression he was displaying.

"Where did that come from?" Garcia asked.

"You date," Lal pointed out.

"I'm a real live boy," Garcia said.

"Ah, that's not fair," Duana said. "If she wants to date, let her."

"No," Garcia said.

"Are you afraid if she dates, or discovers that she likes males, that it will affect your masculinity because she is sharing your brain?" Rogue Troi asked.

"Oh, don't even go there with me," Garcia said, pushing past them. He tossed the towel onto the pile of clothes on the floor. "Recycle," he said, looking to Losira to confirm she understood. She smiled, did some unnecessary hand waving and the clothes disappeared in a transporter wave. Garcia proceeded to the table and started to dress, mumbling 'everyone's a comedian.'

His girls followed him, staging themselves around him. Ilona and Duana sat on the arms of the chair. Lal persisted, "I would like to practice being more social."

"Lal, you're too young to start dating," Garcia said. Losira laughed.

"By what measure have you arrived at your conclusion?" Lal asked. "There is no human comparison to my physical age, for I am fully functioning adult, with a mental sophistication that is technically superior to the average adult."

"Yeah, well, there is also an emotional age to consider," Garcia said. "And there is usually a correlation between physical age and emotional age. The more experiences you have, the more capable you will be at coping with the emotional fallout of those decisions."

"Agreed," Lal said. "Which means I require more experiences."

"Have you even kissed a guy?" Ilona asked.

"Yes," Lal said. "Have you?"

Duana laughed, licked her finger and scored an invisible point in the air. Ilona glared at her.

"Tam, you're not being reasonable," Rogue Troi said.

"I'm not being reasonable?" Garcia repeated.

“It’s not like she’s asking you to borrow your body to spend the night with someone,” Rogue Troi said.

Garcia shuddered at the thought.

“And, if existential age is that important, how is it that you can have sex with a holographic person within minutes of it having been created?” Lal asked.

“She means seconds,” Ilona corrected.

“Tam, have you been sleeping with your characters again?” Duana asked, teasing him mercilessly. They all knew he had.

“It’s the only safe sex I get,” Garcia complained.

“You could sleep with us,” Rogue Troi pointed out.

“No,” Garcia said.

“Actually, Lal has a point,” Duana said, trying to straighten his uniform; he pushed her back and did it himself, then repositioned his communicator badge. “Either you are going to have to start being romantic with us, or you’re going to have to let us date.”

“Is this what you came to ask me to settle?” Garcia asked. “Because I’m not going to make a ruling.”

“Why not?” Duana asked.

“Um, because I can’t win. I say yes, you’ll be keeping me up all odd hours of the nights. Of course, if I say no, you’ll still give me grief, so either way, you’re probably going to end up doing what you want anyway, so I don’t see the point in having this discussion,” Garcia said.

“I guess it’s a good thing this isn’t what we came to discuss with you,” Ilona said, impressed with Garcia’s logic. “We know you’re going to Phyllos and that there will be an Away Team mission, which you intend to go on.”

“Yes, I intend to beam down, so?” Garcia asked.

“Duana and Ilona always go on the Away team. Deana and I want to accompany you,” Lal said.

“They want to have their turns using the manifestation orbs,” Duana explained. “I told them you need us in case there is a fight. We’re better fighters.”

“Phyllos is a peaceful planet of plant people,” Rogue Troi said. “He isn’t going to need fighters.”

“I like flowers. I want to go on an Away Mission,” Lal said.

“Duana is right. If there is a problem, I’ll need them with me,” Garcia said.

“You never take me anywhere,” Lal said, pouting, dropping herself to Garcia’s chair. With her feet apart, her knees clunked together, elbows hit her knees, and her chin rested in her hands, clearly moping.

“Yeah, you’re so ready for dating,” Garcia said, crossing his arms and leaning against the dressing table. “You need to work on your princess lips. The manipulation isn’t quite there yet.”

“Tam,” Rogue Troi said. “There is no reason for you not to take us.”

“I take you everywhere I go!” Garcia said, pounding at his head.

“Lal and I need to get out, smell the roses, so to speak, stretch our legs, and experience something other than walking around like ghosts on the ships,” Rogue Troi said.

“That is how they treat us,” Lal said. “The only time they treat us like real people are when we’re with you. If you’re not there, they act weird, as if we’re spying on them.”

“I think they have more respect for the manifestation orbs than they do for the Kalandan holographs,” Losira added.

The door to Garcia’s quarters opened and Rivan entered, crying. Garcia sighed.

“Lal, Troi, you are right that I should let you both out more. We’ll discuss the logistics later. Now, all of you, give Rivan and me a moment of privacy,” Garcia said.

Lal gave a triumphant, “yes,” accompanied with a hand gesture, as she and the girls headed out the door, arguing whether Garcia had actually meant Lal and Rogue Troi were going down to Phylos, or just that they would discuss the matter further. Rivan passed through them as she went right to Garcia’s arms. Losira disappeared in her own fashion.

“What’s wrong?” Garcia asked. He forced himself to stay focus, as the dress she was wearing was light, almost transparent, and though it had sleeves, it left her shoulders bare, and the neck line low and loose. He imagined kissing her.

“I’m so happy,” Rivan said.

“That’s a good thing, right?” Garcia asked, confused.

“Yes,” Rivan said.

“Then why are you crying?” Garcia asked.

“I don’t know!” Rivan bawled into his chest.

Garcia pulled her chin up and kissed her lips. “I’ve got to go to the Bridge.”

“Okay,” Rivan said, putting some space between them. She wiped her eyes.

“You’re all dressed up. Are you going somewhere?”

In light of the conversation he had just had with his mental entourage, he felt a little guilt asking, but he knew she needed it. “How would you like to go an Away Team?” Garcia asked. “Fresh air. Lots of plants. Sunshine.”

Rivan started crying again. “That would be so awesome.”

“Stop crying,” Garcia said, his annoyance for the tears overpowering his curiosity over where she had heard that particular Earth colloquialism.

“Okay,” Rivan said, sniffing, wiping her face with her sleeve.

“Come on,” Garcia said.

Garcia took her hand and led her to the turbolift. Garcia had Losira replicate him a handkerchief, which he pulled out of thin air with a flourish, before handing to Rivan. She blew her nose into it. On the way up to the Bridge, she told Garcia about how Kitara had made her family by making her a blood sister.

“You’re joking,” Garcia said.

Rivan shook her head. She showed her palm even though there was no hint of injury.

“That’s huge,” Garcia said.

The doors opened and they stepped off onto the Bridge. Kitara came around to greet Garcia, but she was intercepted by Rivan. Rivan gave the First Officer a hug.

“Just because we are sisters does not mean you can hug me,” Kitara said. “Ever.”

Rivan nodded and gave her new sister some space.

Garcia had gone around them to get to his chair. “McKnight, set a course for planet Phylos, sync the NC’s engines with the Path Finder’s, and prepare for a transwarp

jump,” Garcia said. “Trini, alert the crew we’re making a jump, drugs or airsickness bags if you need ‘em.”

Kitara stared at Garcia. “Why are we going to Phylos?”

“We’re going to retrieve a VIP and transport him to planet Vulcan,” Garcia said.

“And you need to be dressed up to do this?” Kitara asked.

“You’re dressed up,” Garcia pointed out.

“I was attending a ceremonial ritual,” Kitara said.

“You were attending a shower,” Garcia said.

“That’s what I said; a ceremonial ritual,” Kitara said. “You’re not thinking of beaming down, are you?”

“Why, yes, I am,” Garcia said. By the look on Kitara’s face, he predicted there was about to be an argument.

“Everywhere you go, you end up in a fight,” Kitara said, proving him right.

“It’s a planet of peaceful plant people. I’m beaming down,” Garcia said.

“You’re the Captain, and your job is to stay on the ship. My job is to lead the Away Team,” Kitara said. “I will be going down.”

“Shall we wrestle for it?” Garcia asked, trying to be funny. Kitara wasn’t amused. “Your official protest is logged and noted. I’m making a command decision here. I’m leading the Away Team, and you’re in charge of the store till I get back.”

There was an uncomfortable silence on the Bridge. Trini broke the quiet: “Sir, all decks are secured, prepared for the transwarp jump.” Her voice was softer than usual, as if she had been crying. He ignored it.

“Course plotted and laid in,” McKnight said. “Engines in sync. Waiting the order to jump.”

“Punch it,” Garcia said.

Rivan reached out and touched Garcia’s arm as McKnight touched the final sequence that would send them on their way. The stars on the main viewer spun around a central point, blurring to circular lines before whiting out the whole screen. When the screen returned to normal, they found themselves looking down on a beautiful planet, cotton ball clouds, oceans, and lush, green and brown land masses. Surprisingly, only two people on the Bridge ended up being sick. Those two had chosen the airsickness bags over the injection of drugs. Kitara looked ill, but she managed to keep everything down.

“Trini, put a call out on frequency one two one point four, and announce we’re here. Tell them we’ll beam down as soon as they send us the coordinates,” Garcia said.

“Owens, join me in the transporter room, you’re on the Away Team.”

“I am?” Owens asked, looking up from his station’s duties.

“You’re a botanist, I thought you would like to go,” Garcia said.

“If it’s all the same to you, Sir, I’d rather stay on the ship,” Owens said.

“I want you,” Garcia said. He didn’t understand Owens apparent lack of enthusiasm. “Is there a reason you don’t want to go?”

“I’m highly allergic to plants,” Owens offered.

“Allergies tend to be a regional thing, so I doubt you’re allergic to anything on Phylos. You’ve been to Phylos?” Garcia pushed further.

“No, Sir,” Owens said.

“So, there’s something else? What is it?” Garcia asked.

“Spit it out,” Kitara said, not liking Owens hesitancy.

“It’s just that, every time Garcia beams down, someone usually dies,” Owens said.

“Coward,” Kitara said.

“No, Sir!” Owens said. “Just recognizing I’m not Klingon, or a good person to have in a fight, and so, I’m not the best choice for an Away Team. Hello, why do you think I studied Botany?”

“It’s a peaceful planet of plant people,” Garcia re-emphasized.

“Please, there’s no such thing,” Owens argued. “I’m a botanist, remember.”

“Strap a phaser for comfort if you want. You’re going,” Garcia said. “Trini, have Undine, Jurak, and Simone report to the transporter room. Kitara, your ship.”

Kitara gave him one of those last minute looks as he orientated forwards in the lift. He smiled at her.

“Give me a break. We’ll be fine,” Garcia said, holding the door open for the straggler.

Owens reluctantly joined Garcia and Rivan in the turbo lift, looking a bit pale. Rivan rubbed his shoulder as the doors shut and the lift sped them on their way.

“It’ll be okay,” Rivan assured him.

“Someone always dies,” Owens complained.

“That’s not true,” Garcia said.

“Hello, notice the red highlights in my uniform?” Owens pointed out.

“You’re not superstitious, are you?” Garcia asked.

“I don’t understand,” Rivan said.

“There’s a myth that suggests that people in red uniforms die more frequently than people in non red uniforms,” Garcia explained. “Statistically, that’s not true. When it’s your time it’s your time, doesn’t matter what color shirt you’re wearing. We’ll be fine, Owens. Just relax.”

“As you say, Sir,” Owens said.

“Are the plant people dangerous?” Rivan asked.

“They’re very peaceful,” Garcia assured her.

“Yeah, so peaceful that a hundred years ago they were going to launch a massive evasion force to take over the galaxy and enforce their own peace,” Owens said. “Plants are not nice people. They’re insidious. They lure you in with pretty colors and smells and then they eat you. Haven’t you watched any nature programs?”

They arrived on the floor and headed to the transporter room. Kletsova intercepted them, handing Garcia his manifestation orbs.

“Leaving without your balls?” Kletsova asked, humorously.

“Wondered where I left those,” Garcia said, dramatically. “And I’ve been waiting for someone to make that joke. Duana, Ilona, come out and play.”

Instead of Duana and Ilona, he got Rogue Troi and Lal. He frowned. Rogue Troi took in a deep breath, as if having just emerged from a lap across a swimming pool. Lal cocked her head to the side and said, “I’m functioning within normal parameters.”

“Sorry, but Duana and Ilona are busy,” Rogue Troi said, kissing Garcia quickly on the cheek, taking Lal by the hand and leading her to the transporter room. “This is going to be so much fun.”

Garcia followed, not seeing the point in arguing at this point. If he argued the point successfully, he would only scare Owens more. Tuer met them inside the

transporter room to distribute the standard equipment for a “Garcia Away Team,” including a variety of weapons beyond the standard Star Fleet issue phaser.

“Do I get a phaser?” Lal asked.

“Why not? If you’re old enough to date, you’re old enough to shoot someone,” Garcia said.

Kletsova leaned into Garcia. “You sure you want to take them?”

Garcia whispered back, “Even if they weren’t in the room with us, they can still hear with my ears. Okay, folks, positions.”

“I believe it’s time to quote John Wayne,” Lal said. “From the Cowboys.”

“I’ve been told it’s been over played,” Garcia said.

“Don’t people like consistency?” Lal asked.

Kletsova joined them in the transporter alcove.

“I don’t remember inviting you,” Garcia said.

“Someone’s got to look after the children,” Kletsova said, indicating Rivan and Lal with her eyes.

“The more the merrier,” Garcia said, the picture of compromise. “Lt. Hong, energize.”

The Away Team arrived on the surface of the planet, inside a circular depression paved with marble. It was as if they had beamed onto a “stage in the round” with a series of steps that doubled for seats leading up. The entire circle was surrounded by vegetation that stood six meters tall. It was as if they were in the middle of a corn field. There was no way to see the horizon, but above them was nothing but blue skies. There were no sounds of crickets, no birds moving through the field of vegetation, and no breeze stirred the leaves.

“You were right,” Rivan said. “This is peaceful.”

“Where’s our host?” Rogue Troi asked.

“This does not bode well,” Owens said.

Only Lt. Undine had the sense to pull out her tricorder and take readings. Lal climbed the steps to examine the flowers on the stalks. She smelled them, and smiled at some inner memory. Then she noticed by her foot a small walking plant that was moving to escape her sudden close proximity. She cooed and pointed.

“Don’t touch that!” Owens practically shouted.

Lal withdrew her hand. “Why?” she asked.

“It’s called a Retlaw

“Interesting name. Spelled backwards, it would be Walter,” Lal said. “And it’s very cute.”

“It’s very poisonous,” Owens explained.

“I’m an android,” Lal said. “I believe I am immune to poisons.”

“Captain,” Undine said, drawing Garcia’s attention to behind them. “Something is approaching.”

“Something?” Garcia asked.

“Oh, god,” Owens said. “This is how it always starts.”

“I think you’ve been watching the wrong nature shows, Lt.,” Garcia said.

“I assume it is a Phylosian, but if it is, it is blending in with the surrounding plant life, so it is difficult to discern its attributes with any degree of accuracy,” Lt. Undine said.

Kletsova and Owens both reached for their phasers.

“At ease,” Garcia told them.

Plants began to sway as Undine’s “something” drew closer. It finally pushed through the tightly packed plants to arrive in the circle. It was a Phylosian. It was just a little taller than Garcia, its trunk proportionate to a human torso, sprouting a neck and a head that would be in approximate positions of a human head and neck, but the similarities ended there. Its trunk was supported by four legs, and it had five arms, one growing directly out of the front of its chest. Its head was patterned like corn, with fine, gold color tuft emerging from the top. The eyes were supported by yellow antennae, sprouting like stalks from the ‘front,’ which was really the only way to distinguish its front from its back. It wore one piece of ornate jewelry, a necklace with a pendant that doubled for a Universal Translator.

The Phylosian paused, each eye stalk appraising Kletsova and Owens individually, as their hands were still on their phasers. She approached the group, slowly, bowing humbly to Garcia, one eye on him, the other scanning the away team for threats.

“Captain Tammis Garcia, I presume,” the Phylosian said, both eyes orientating on him. “My name is Phacelia.”

“Oh, god,” Owens mumbled to himself, due to her name.

Garcia ignored him as one of Phacelia’s hands came up in a Vulcan style greeting, but instead, she reached out and touched Garcia, putting her hand on his chest, just over his heart. He found it rather endearing.

“She said you would come,” Phacelia said.

Garcia assumed “she” was T’Pau. Garcia bowed to Phacelia, hands in Namaste. “We’re happy to be here.”

“I apologize for this,” Phacelia said, lowering her voice to almost a whisper.

“It’s okay,” Garcia began, assuming she was apologizing for not being present to greet them on arrival.

The flowers on nearby stalks surrounding the circle pivoted to face the Away Team. They fired spores, tiny projectiles that stuck in the flesh of the Away Team like darts. Only Garcia had the presence of mind to pull one of the dozen darts from his neck and examine it, even as he was collapsing. His eyes met Phacelia’s eyes, and he felt one of her hands brush his cheek as she caught him and eased him to the ground. He heard Owens utter “scorpionweed,” but the drug acted on them so thoroughly and so quickly that no one got a call off to the ship. They were all unconscious before they hit the ground. Rogue Troi and Lal were both equally affected by the substance flowing through Garcia’s veins. They collapsed to the ground as well, and were just as unconscious as Garcia was.

Phacelia raised its hands. Several other Phylosians entered the circle.

“Quickly,” Phacelia said, clapping three hands above its head, making noises and sending out pheromones. “We haven’t much time.”

Swoopers, giant winged, purple plants that in many ways resembled dragons, descended out of the sky. Each Swooper had two roots, hanging like tentacles, which were mostly used for feeding, but on occasion were quite effective at holding objects. The two assisting Phylosians held Garcia up so that the first Swooper could entangle its roots around Garcia’s arms and torso. They then prodded it to fly and it carried Garcia

away. Three other Swoopers descended to receive each of the Phylosians, carrying them off as well.

When Garcia was fifty meters away from the Away Team, the telepathic link between him and his manifestation orbs were severed. Lal and Rogue Deana Troi were reabsorbed, leaving the orbs lying on the marble slab.



Trini read over the txt message she received from Garcia. “Commander,” she said. “The angels report they have lost bio-telemetry reading from the Away team due to background interference at transport location, however Garcia reports that the Away Team has arrived at the coordinates, via his implant.”

“He couldn’t send an auditory transmission?” Commander Kitara asked.

“Well, you know how he is with affection,” Trini said. “Probably didn’t want to say this out loud.”

“Say what?” Kitara asked.

“Stop worrying, mother, we’re all good,” Trini read the actual text.

Kitara grunted. “Put us in a gyosynchos orbit, and see if we can direct line of sight visual,” Kitara addressed the helm.

“Aye,” McKnight said.

“I’m receiving a call from a Phylosian Official,” Trini announced. “Do you want to hear it?”

“Of course,” Kitara said.

“Star Fleet Vessel, you have violated Phylosian space. Please explain the nature of your visit,” came the voice.

“This is Commander Kitara of the Federation Starship New Constitution,” Kitara responded. “Do you have visual capabilities?”

Trini nodded and directed the transmission to the main viewer. The image of a Phylosian appeared on the screen, from the torso up. Two of his arms rested on a console in front of him. The Phylosian actually seemed surprised to see a Klingon in the command chair of a Star Fleet vessel.

“You are Klingon?” it asked.

“Nothing gets by you,” Kitara said.

“And you wear a band uniform?” the Phylosian asked.

“Careful, I am still a Klingon,” Kitara warned him.

“Of course,” the Phylosian said, almost bowing in deference. It came across as fear. “We are a peaceful race and have a fear of aliens. Please, explain why have you come here?”

“My understanding is that we have come to retrieve a Vulcan to return him to his planet of origin,” Kitara said.

“There are no Vulcans on this planet,” the Phylosian said, sharply. “We have a fear of aliens.”

“Well, that can’t be true, because I happen to know there is at least one Vulcan that has beamed down to your planet,” Kitara said.

The Phylosian shivered. Was it revulsion or fear, Kitara wondered.

“You have a landing party on our planet without permission?” the Phylosian demanded.

“We call them Away Teams, now,” Kitara said. “And yes, we’re on your planet, by invitation. Trini, send the transcript of the previous transmission. Are you saying this wasn’t sanctioned by your government?”

“You have violated protocols by not contacting me upon arrival, you are trespassing on our planet, which is a direct violation of Customs and quarantine procedures,” the Phylosian said, its voice raspy with anxiety.

“I get it. You’re afraid of aliens,” Kitara said, standing. She looked to Trini. “Call Garcia.”

Trini nodded. At first she was puzzled and then she became alert. “They’re not responding.”

Kitara headed for the turbolift. Losira blocked her.

“I can’t allow you to leave the ship,” Losira told her.

“Get out of my way before I unplug you,” Kitara said.

“Until we know what has happened to Garcia, you are acting Captain. We are not sending you down into harm’s way until we have more clarity as to the nature of the situation,” Losira said.

“Commander,” Tuer said. “The computer is correct. You are in charge. I will go.”

“Quickly,” Kitara said. She turned back to the screen. “What is your name?”

“I am Agmar,” the Phylosian answered.

“If anything has happened to my Away Team, I will hold you accountable,” Kitara said.

“I don’t see how that is fair at all,” Agmar said. “You are trespassing on my planet. If the roles were reversed, what would you do to a Phylosian on your world?”

“You are supposed to be a peaceful people,” Kitara pointed out, ignoring his question and resisting her impulse to add, ‘Do you know what the Earth dish broccoli and cheese is?’

“We are, but there are all sorts of dangers in the wild, and there are those among us who do not see things the way the majority of us do,” Agmar pointed out. “And we are quite capable, and willing, to ensure peace is maintained through the application of force. Do not think of my kind as weak simply because we are not Klingon.”

“Captain,” Trini said. “Tuer is requesting emergency medical beam up for the Away Team. They’ve been discovered unconscious.”

“Do it,” Kitara said.

“And, Commander. Captain Garcia is nowhere to be found,” Trini said.

“Garcia?” Agmar asked. “Tammis Parkin Arblaster Garcia?”

“Yes,” Kitara said.

Agmar was visibly shaken, his arms and leaves quivering. “Oh, God,” he said, and ended the call.

“Get him back,” Kitara said.

Trini put the call through, but received no response. She kept trying, while Kitara paced.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Lt. Commander Undine's tricorder had continued to record information even as she lay unconscious on the ground. Now awake, she was scrutinizing that information, comparing it to the terrain reflected on the surface of the Game Table in the War Room on Path Finder. She graphically marked out the path of the swoopers that had carried the Captain off until they went out of the tricorder's range. The swoopers had flown off in a fairly straight line, and assuming they had a limited range, while incorporating the time frame involved, that left a predictable area to search. Commander Kitara hovered over the same Game Table, examining the terrain looking for any signs of a hidden base, or, best case scenario, Captain Garcia's communicator's signal. Simone stood with her arms crossed, as if she were angry. Owens was a bit out of sorts due to an allergic reaction to the darts, the tiny wounds on his neck puffy and swollen, and even with the ointment he had been given, he couldn't resist scratching. Still, all considered, Owens looked quite well after having died from anaphylactic shock and subsequently revived.

"I am certain he is still alive," Simone said.

"Yeah," Undine said, not looking up from the screen. "I don't suppose you can point to him on the map here."

"Our telepathic bond does not work that way," Simone said. She looked at Losira.

"Mine neither," Losira said. "The Phylosian technology is blocking our scanners from performing intensive scans, but I predict, given what we know about Garcia, that he is aware that our sensors are blocked, and when he escapes, he will provide us with visual information to alert us of his presence."

"Like smoke signals?" Trini asked, looking back from her station at the wall. She was filling in for one of the Angels.

"Precisely," Losira said. "Garcia is quite resourceful."

"He's a fool," Kitara snapped. "I told him he shouldn't beam down. Peaceful plants my ass."

"I did warn you," Owens said.

"Even if we locate the Captain, we have an additional issue of not being able to retrieve him. Kelvan transporters may penetrate the Phylosian transporter block technology, but not Federation or Kalandan transporters," Losira pointed out.

"We have a shuttle standing by," Undine pointed out.

“I know,” Losira said, looking at Undine as if she were a moron. “And I’m curious how you’re going to fly into Phylosian airspace without getting shot down. Their entire defense network is now at full alert.”

“Owens, what’s this?” Commander Kitara asked, boxing an area and zooming in on the focus to get a better look. She was looking at a series of odd looking pedestals arranged in a grid like formation. Each grid was easily defined by lush green grass, and each had its own pedestal that might easily have been personal shrines, with glowing crystals and ornate tubular structures, like pipes on an organ. A swooper flew past, temporarily blocking the view of the ground terrain. Phylosians could be seen occupying their circles, arms outstretched, heads looking up into the skies, oriented towards the sun, an arm’s length away from the pedestal/shrines. Their mouths were open, as if they were singing, but it wasn’t audible. Had the Path Finder’s scanners been able to pick up audio, the crew would have heard the chorus of a thousand plants, singing like Buddhist monks in a temple ritual.

“Computer terminals,” Owens explained. “This is a residential area. Probably apartments.”

“Computer terminals, just out in the open like that?” Kitara asked.

“They’re plant people,” Owens said. “They like to be out in the sun. Fresh air, gentle rain, sun, it’s all good for plants. These fixtures on the terminals allow for computer access via pheromones, and the crystals are obviously for visual information. Notice the boundary area for each grid. During inclement weather, each apartment can generate a dome-shield to block wind, allowing the occupant to control the temperature, but still see their surrounding environment. The Phylosians have a complex mixture of social and antisocial behavior. They need to see and smell others around them, but they generally just want to be left alone and to have their own space. They are truly an alien psychology...”

Kitara waved him to silence, having already lost interest in the apartment complex. She closed out the window. The square sunk to fit the aerial perspective of the rest of the map. A moment after the square fell away, there was an intense flash of light from the area she had been examining. Small bursts of lights exploded all along the table’s real time map, and then the color at these pin pricks of lights began to change to black as smoke began to blossom and ooze in streams like black blood. Zooming back in on the dark spot revealed raging fires and black, billowy smoke.

“What’s going on?” Kitara asked.

“I’m detecting mortar fire from an outlying district,” Losira said. “This village is under attack.”

“Red alert,” Kitara ordered. “Trini, try to hail Agmar again.”

“Detecting a secondary volley of rockets,” Undine said. “This is return fire. I think they’re at war.”

“Peaceful planet of plants!” Kitara grumbled.

“I told you,” Owens said again. Owens zoomed into the areas where the apartments had been. A river of flame was spreading across the terrain like a napalm flood. “Oh, God.”

“Why would they wipe out a residential area?” Undine asked.

“They’re plants!” Owens said. “There are dozens of plant species that are fire dependant to germinate.”

“Not the Phylosians,” Undine said.

“They have serious issues,” Simone said, not bothering to elaborate.

“Whether they need fire to germinate or not, cleansing an area with fire to establish new growth is something plants do,” Owens said.

“So, this is ethnic cleansing?” Undine asked.

“There is no way to know,” Owens said. “They’re plants. They don’t think like animals.”

“Well, I bet you anything, Garcia is somehow at the center of all this chaos,” Kitara said.

“Commander!” Losira said, opening up a window and zooming in to reveal a human stumbling along a path. The person disappeared from sight due to the density of forest canopy, but rewinding the footage revealed a man in Star Fleet Uniform. It was definitely the Path Finder’s Uniform of choice. “I found him.”

“Trini, can you hail Garcia? Tight beam?” Kitara said.

“Negative. All frequencies are being jammed within the zone of conflict,” Trini announced.

“He’s moving as if he is injured,” Simone observed.

Kitara hit her badge. “Tuer, launch the shuttle.”

“Shuttle won’t make it in time,” Undine said, pointing out the issues with Garcia’s present course and speed. He was walking into harm’s way, towards an inferno.

“You’re right, Tuer, belay that. Undine, take an Away Team, full orbital jump gear, we’re launching you,” Kitara said. “Tuer, keep that shuttle ready to launch when I give the signal.”

Undine didn’t blink or hesitate, nor did she take the time to salute. Time was of the essence and the sooner she and the others were in the torpedo bay and adequately dressed, the quicker they would be planet side. She tagged Owens, indicating he was with her, while simultaneously hitting her com. badge to announce: “Team Echo One, report to torpedo bay one, a-sap.” Simone followed them out of the room towards the end of the corridor.

“I don’t know about this,” Owens said, as they came to a halt for the turbo lift that was already opening for them, courtesy of Losira.

“I need you,” Undine said.

“I’m going to,” Simone said.

“I need you to stay on board,” Undine said.

“You might need me on the ground,” Simone said.

“You’re staying,” Undine said, and then to Owens. “And you’re going. You’ve made drops before.”

“I’ve made two suit drops,” Owens said. “I’ve never made a torpedo drop.”

“But you’ve trained for a torpedo drop,” Undine said.

“I’ve done simulated drops,” Owens protested.

“Like I said, you’re trained,” Undine said.

Kletsova, Tuer, and Doctor Jurak were waiting for them as they arrived at the torpedo bay, gearing up to be launched. The Officers on duty were assisting them into their gear, supplying them with standard arms. Once everyone was in the jump gear, they each stepped into a torpedo casing, specially designed for quick insertion into hostile areas where transporters were not advisable or not operational. Torpedo drops were much

faster than regular space jumps, and only in extreme cases were torpedo drops used as substitute escape pods, due to their incredibly risky nature. Officers closed them in, double checked the seals, and then maneuvered the torpedoes to the launch tubes. Undine's torpedo was launched first, followed by the others. The volley of torpedoes all sped towards the planet, not at full photon-torpedo launch speed, but fast enough they would be delivered planet side in less than five minutes.

There were obvious signs of acceleration from inside the tube, but the inertial dampeners made it bearable. Information was available to them on small terminals in front of their faces. One data set revealed the temperature on the exterior surface of the torpedo casing as they entered the atmosphere. They could feel the temperature increase inside their cramped space, as some of the heat transferred in. As the atmosphere grew thicker, the ride became a bit bumpier, and the noise inside was almost unbearable. They held onto the grips to either side of them, part training, part instinct. The largest data set was the altimeter. The distance between them and the planet's surface was decreasing rapidly, much too rapidly to use parachutes, but then, that was the point. To increase the odds of not being detected, and or to give them a chance to evade being targeted in the event that they were detected, they needed to get to ground level as fast as possible. At a preset altitude, retro rockets at the base of the torpedoes fired, slowing the descent sufficiently to allow them to escape the torpedo tubes. It all happened fairly fast. The retros fired, the tubes broke apart, and each half of the casing ejected away. Then their chutes deployed, slowing them even further. The base of the platform they had been standing on fell away as their chute deployed. To an external camera, it would have seemed as if they were jerked off the platform by the chute, but in truth, the chutes merely slowed their descent as the bases plummeted away. The rest of the way down was standard sky diving procedures. From ship to surface, the entire trip was a total of six minutes, ten seconds, with their feet hitting the ground as easy as jumping from a chair to the floor. They popped their harnesses and parted from their gear. Only Owens seemed a little anxious, trying to control his breathing.

Tuer, Owens, and Kletsova retrieved their weapons, while Undine retrieved her tricorder. The eerie sounds of mortar fire were heard in the back ground. It was the simple 'kachunk' of a mortar dropped, followed by the whispered spit as it was launched. The proximity of the sound of firing, and the obvious lack of the inevitable sound of explosions, told them they were fairly near the enemy's position. Since they could see no enemy, that meant either the enemy was well concealed, or the mortar fire was automated. Though the sound of the distant explosions could not be heard, the resulting blast lights on the horizon could be seen. If they hadn't known that they were in a war zone, they might have thought it was just a lightning storm brewing.

"This way," Undine said, and led them towards Garcia's last known position. The nearby forest looked liked broccoli held at arm's length away.

Out of nowhere, a flock of swoopers descended on them, screeching as they circled. Tuer pulled the trigger on his phaser and nothing happened. Owens, also, dropped to his knees, madly pushing the button on his phaser, but his weapon also failed to function. Kletsova had the same result with her weapon. Two of the swoopers came close enough to grab at the Away Team with their roots, but failed, as the Away Team dropped and rolled out of the way.

“Our energy weapons won’t work on this planet,” Undine said. “The Phylosians have technology that block modern phasers, as well as the electronics in our Gorn weapons.”

“That would have been nice to know before we brought them,” Kletsova said.

“Star Fleet supposedly had countered the Phylosian’s anti weapon technology,” Owens complained.

“Did anyone ever field test this theory?” Tuer asked.

“We are the field test,” Undine said.

“So, what do we do now?” Kletsova asked. “Throw rocks?”

“That’s why Klingons always carry knives,” Jurak said, laughing.

As the next swooper descended, Jurak stood up and allowed himself to be caught. The animal was not prepared for the weight and nearly collided with the ground. As it struggled to climb, it eventually pulled Jurak off his feet, dragging him two meters before doing so. Jurak climbed the roots, trying to get close enough to use his weapon on the torso. The creature swung its head back to snap at him, but the neck only allowed a limited amount of articulation. Jurak managed to avoid the bite by kicking at it with his feet. The jaws were hard, like a bird’s bill, but the edges were razor sharp. Because swoopers fly in the general direction that their head is pointed, they began a tight spiral towards the ground. Jurak tried to pierce the swooper’s torso with his blade, but found its skin as hard as tree bark. Its cry echoed across the plain. The stabbing motion caused the swooper to beat its wings more fiercely, the sound almost deafening, popping right in Jurak’s ears. This led Jurak to experiment: he sliced at the wing. The wing tore easily, peeling like wet paper. The initial tear was small, but due to the demands of flight, the tear grew with each flap of the wing until it was unable to sustain lift. The creature spun out of control, flipping over before it crashed into the ground. It rolled to a stop, but continued to pull at Jurak with its roots, snapping its jaws as it struggled to kill the prey, its head moving around like an angry dragon’s head. Jurak hacked at it as if it were a tree, and finally managed to cut through the beast, severing the head from the body.

Jurak stood triumphantly, yelling a challenge to the remaining swoopers, who apparently had learned vicariously to be weary of this group of people. Jurak was covered with various colored bodily fluids. The yellow viscous material flowed in clumps, where the green and purple flowed more like syrup.

The remaining swoopers continued to circle, screeching maliciously. One threw caution to the wind and dove, but Jurak cut at it and it banked into a new direction to avoid him. One of its roots fell to the ground, severed from its body.

“We must hurry,” Undine said. “This way.”

As soon as they started to run towards their goal, the swoopers descended upon them again, trying to come up behind them, forcing them to stop and focus on the attack. One managed to knock Undine off her feet. She ended up breaking her tricorder in her tumble.

“This isn’t going to work,” Tuer said.

As the swoopers circled beyond their reach, the Away Team was unable to quicken their pace towards their objective.

“Can Kitara read lips?” Kletsova asked.

“Why?” Tuer asked.

Kletsova looked skywards and said, clearly, “A little help would be nice, Angels!”

A swooper found the courage to dive bomb the Away Team, and when it got close enough, Jurak threw a knife and scored a direct hit to an eye. It crashed into the ground and rolled to a dead stop a few feet away. The remaining swoopers seemed agitated by another loss, and they spread out. That was when Kitara, who had been waiting for an opportunity, scored a direct hit with precision phaser fire from the ship on the furthest swooper from the Away Team. The swooper completely evaporated in the beam, as well as a good size chunk of earth beneath it. Rock and debris exploded from the phaser strike and the Away Team was knocked off their feet.

When they sat up, they noticed the remaining swoopers rapidly departing the area.

“I think your prayers were answered,” Tuer said.

Jurak scowled at the sky. “That was unnecessary. I had things completely under control.”

“Come on,” Undine ordered.

The breeze carried with it the smell of burning vegetation and black smoke. The occasional flash of flames could be seen as they grew closer to the forest. The trees on the outskirts were sparsely populated, and were similar to oaks in many ways. They hadn’t gone too far into the forest before Undine gave a signal for them to take cover. A party of Phylosians were moving through the forest, spread out in an obvious search pattern. They carried odd looking phaser rifles that curved around their bodies so that the trigger hand was behind their back, while the side arm trained the barrel in the direction of fire. The rifles would be awkward for a human to use, but looked perfectly natural in the hands of the Phylosians. The leader of the party was carrying a scanner in its front hand and occasionally focused both eyes on the device, but otherwise, one eye was scanning the terrain while the other watched the device.

Undine turned and communicated with Tuer and Jurak using hand signals. She wanted Tuer to circle to the east and Jurak to the west and get positioned for an attack. As they moved off, she indicated to Kletsova and Owens that they were to stay put, then she turned and made her way closer to the Phylosian scouting party. She slipped behind a tree just as the closest Phylosian turned in her direction.

“I thought I heard something,” it said.

The party of Phylosians stopped, turning their eyes in different directions as they scanned the area. They also took in deep breaths, trying to identify any anomalous odors.

“Probably just a Retlaw,” another said. “Has your scanner found anything?”

“Too much interference,” the first said. “The Alliance must be jamming everything in this area.”

“Then they know he’s here,” said another.

“If they find him, they’ll kill him,” said the one next to it.

“If they wanted him dead, they would have carpet bombed this area already,” the first said.

“They may still do that,” one complained. “Why are we out here? Didn’t Phacelia get what she wanted?”

“She did,” the first one said, pushing forwards through the brush. “But Gaia expects us to turn him over to her alive, and that’s what we’re going to do. But before we do, I want my turn with him.”

“Quiet!”

They all stopped, each of their eyes moving around independently of the other. And then they all heard it. They turned to orient in the direction of the sound.

“What is that?” the first one asked.

“Singing?” one offered.

“It’s awful!” the first said.

“No,” the one right next to it said. “It’s human!”

They hustled towards the source of the sound, and Undine followed, surprised how close she was managing to get considering the noise she was making. They were completely focused on the singing, which she immediately recognized as Garcia’s voice. What was he thinking?! she wondered. Had he gone mad?

Garcia was singing “the 59th Street Bridge Song; feeling groovy,” by Simon and Garfunkle as he made his way leisurely through the forest, not a care in the world. He stumbled into view and fell flat on his face. His untimely fall saved him from getting stunned as two of the Phylosians fired at him. The discharge of the weapons triggered silent alarms, which no one noticed embedded in the trees above. What they did notice were the Alliance task force transporting into the area. A firefight ensued, and since it was obvious that the Alliance was shooting to kill, the non Alliance stepped up their game, intensifying the energy unleashed from their weapons. Everyone was now shooting to kill.

In the midst of this, Garcia stood up and continued along his merry way, oblivious to the ruckus going on about him. He even paused to lift an injured branch back into place, making a sad face. Undine charged the closest Phylosian to her. She managed to get in close enough to cut the hand that was on the trigger, and simultaneously used her body weight to slam it into the closest tree. Tuer and Jurak joined the fight as well, attacking the closest to them, regardless of Alliance status or not. Kletsova made her way towards Garcia to try and get him out of harm’s way, barely managing to tackle him to the ground as multiple phaser blast tore through the foliage around them. She rolled him over to see if he was hurt. He spit out dirt and smiled at her.

“Hey, baby,” he said. “You want to roll in the hay?”

“Are you drunk?” Kletsova asked.

Undine had attempted to render her first Phylosian unconscious, but failing that, she had been forced to kill it. Phaser fire ripped the tree beside her and she ducked, effectively pinned down. As she knelt, she considered the Phylosian weapon. She took it up and test fired it in the direction of the Phylosian shooting at her. Her shot missed, but was close enough that the Phylosian took cover. Once she got the hang of it, she fired a dozen shots off as she made her way quickly towards Garcia and Kletsova. At one point she took cover behind a tree, which was just the right thickness to allow her cover, while using the curve in the weapon to circle the tree, allowing her to fire blind, but stay safe. Two of her shots hit true, dropping a Phylosian, and then she moved to the next tree, firing as she ran. She discarded the weapon and fell to Garcia’s side.

“Is he injured?” she asked Kletsova.

“A threesome! How fun is that?!” Garcia asked.

Kletsova slapped him. “Snap out of it,” she said. A phaser bolt scored a tree a meter above their heads. Kletsova instinctively covered Garcia with her body as splinters and chunks of bark rained down on them.

Garcia kissed her and rolled her over. As soon as he was on top, he sat up and started to remove his shirt. Undine took the opportunity to trap his arms in his shirt, wrestling him off Kletsova, putting him back on the ground, his hands pinned above his head. Removing his shirt made it painfully obvious that the scratches on his face and neck continued down his torso, and may have continued completely to his toes. The wounds appeared fresh, some bleeding worse than others, but all were puffy around the edges, like infected cat scratches.

“Alright, I’ll go first,” Garcia said. “But next time, you’re getting tied up.”

Once the firefight was over, Jurak made his way to Garcia, removing his back pack which was a Klingon Med-Kit. He immediately began to scan Garcia for injuries. Tuer, meanwhile, confirmed the death count and removed the weapons in case any were faking. Owens remained crouched exactly where Undine had instructed him to wait.

“Hey, Doc? Which would you prefer, the blond, or the red head?” Garcia asked. “Bet the red head can sing like Ariel, in the sea or in the sack...”

“Is he okay?” Undine asked.

“Seems normal to me,” Jurak said, filling a hypospray. He injected it into Garcia’s arm.

“Ouch!” Garcia complained. His mood suddenly soured, his face transitioning through sad to anger. “Fine! See if I invite you to any more of my parties.”

And then he went completely limp in their hands, his head lulling to one side. Doctor Jurak immediately began to perform chest compressions.

“You killed him?!” Kletsova asked.

“Apparently,” Jurak said, with his usual lack of concern, as if it was only a minor setback. “Probably an adverse reaction to whatever the Phylosians gave him, or his prescription that keeps him from being allergic to his Deltan family, or a combination there of... Undine, get the cortical stimulator from my pack. Kletsova, I need you to breathe for him.”

“Where?” Undine asked, not familiar with the Klingon med-kit.

“Front front pocket,” Jurak said.

“What?”

“Second zipper forward of the primary!” Jurak snapped, and then pointed. “Breathe.”

Kletsova breathed for Garcia on command. Undine found the stimulator, tore the protective package open with her teeth, then twisted the two halves apart. She stuck one side to Garcia’s chest and the other to his left temple.

“Clear,” Doctor Jurak said, activating the stimulator with his tricorder.

The lights on the stimulator indicated the unit was functioning. The red LED indicated that it was shocking Garcia’s heart back into sinus rhythm. The green LED indicated that the heart was beating on its own power, and it continued to blink in sync with Garcia’s heart.

“He’s still not breathing,” Kletsova pointed out.

“Give him a second,” Jurak said.

Garcia sat up suddenly, gasping for air. Kletsova and Undine eased him back down.

“Okay, okay,” Garcia said, panting. “I’m hurting.”

“You’re fine,” Jurak said.

Garcia looked at him doubtfully, his hand going instinctively to his chest. His hand lighted on the cortical stimulator.

“Did you kill me?” Garcia asked, sounding tremendously sad.

“Only for a moment,” Jurak said.

“You’ve got to stop doing that,” Garcia whined. He started gagging and turned to his right to vomit. After the heaving stopped, he wiped his mouth on his shirt which was lying beside him. He forced his breathing to go deeper. “How long was I out?”

“Twenty one seconds,” Jurak said.

Garcia sighed and tried to get up. Kletsova and Undine held him down. He didn’t resist. “Where are we?” Garcia demanded.

“On Phyllos,” Undine said. “You were abducted. Do you remember?”

Garcia blinked and nodded, then a slight cringe. It was all coming back to him. He was hoping it had all been a dream. Just a very bad dream.

“How did you get all scratched up?” Kletsova asked.

Garcia met her eyes as he recollected the specific details. “I fell through some bushes,” he said. His attention went back to the Doctor. “What did you give me?”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Kletsova argued over Jurak’s reply. “Your uniform isn’t torn, but you appear as if you’ve gone through a shredder from head to toe.”

“Help me up,” Garcia said, offering his hand.

“Help yourself up,” Jurak said, slapping Kletsova’s hand away.

Garcia frowned, but moved to get up. He moved like an old man who had been thrown down a cliff and then dragged by a horse, but he moved on his own power. He accidentally put his right hand in his own vomit as he pushed himself to his feet, using ground and tree to stand erect. He retrieved his shirt, which he had already wiped his mouth on and cleaned his hand. Jurak pulled an emergency, thermo-rain poncho out of his pack and traded it for Garcia’s shirt. As Garcia put on the poncho, Jurak bagged the shirt and put it in his pack, a true boy scout, not leaving trash.

“Alright, follow me,” Garcia said, indicating his intended direction.

“Don’t you think you should be taking it easy?” Kletsova asked.

“No time,” Garcia said. “We need to get to the Vulcan.”

“We need to get you to the ship,” Undine said.

“There is no Vulcan. It was just a ruse to get you here,” Tuer said. “This was all an elaborate trap to capture you.”

“Yeah, I figured that part out, but there is a Vulcan. I know where they’re keeping him,” Garcia said. He turned to see Owens studying the tree, specifically, a small metal object that protruded from the tree.

“I think we should leave this area,” Owens said, taking up one of the Phyllosian weapons. “The Alliance was probably alerted by the initial weapons fire in the attempt to subdue Garcia. When their team fails to respond, they will send another to investigate.”

“Actually,” Garcia said, aware of the new visitors closing in around them. “I think they’re already here.”

The Away Team grew closer together, preparing for a fight. Tuer and Owens raised the Phyllosian phasers they had appropriated, while Kletsova, Jurak, and Undine drew bladed weapons. Garcia simply stood there, poised as if this were just an everyday affair.

Garcia’s lack of concern prompted Tuer to ask: “You up for a fight, Captain?”

“Twenty one seconds, eh?” Garcia asked, glancing at Jurak.

“Yep,” Jurak confirmed.

“Half my lucky number,” Garcia said, calculating the odds of winning this one without anyone else dying today.

“Put down your weapons,” the closest Phylosian said. “Put down your weapons and you won’t be harmed.”

“Can we have that in writing?” Garcia asked.

“Put down your weapons, now!”

Garcia nodded. “Put them down, folks. Think we’ll try negotiating this one.”

His Away Team dropped their weapons.

“Hands in the air,” the Phylosian in charge demanded.

The Away Team complied, and several Phylosians moved in closer to bind their hands. After securing the Away Team’s hands, they turned their focus on Garcia. Not only did they bind his hands behind his back, but they added extra restraints that connected to his arms, wrapped around his torso, wound down to his legs, and then was secured to his ankles, literally hobbling him. Two of the Phylosians kept their weapons trained on Garcia the whole time, as if he were the most dangerous creature ever known.

“This is a bit overkill, don’t you think?” Garcia asked.

“No funny stuff,” The lead Phylosian said.

“Fine. And now that I have your complete attention, take us to your leader,” Garcia said.

Kletsova rolled her eyes and shook her head sadly.

The lead Phylosian fired his weapon at point blank range, stunning Garcia. He fell to the ground, right at his Away Team’s Feet. The Phylosian then retrieved his personal communicator from his belt and opened it up, musical tones indicating its operational status, followed by a tone that indicated a connection had been made. “Agmar, we have them. Garcia is secured. Commence transport.”

♪♪▶

McKnight paged Kitara to remind her that she was still waiting. “Shuttle Black Bird is standing by, ready for launch.”

Kitara nodded to Losira and Losira acknowledge McKnight. “Stand by one, still awaiting a signal from the Away Team.”

“They should have found him by now,” Kitara mumbled.

Losira didn’t bother to respond to Kitara’s statement. It wasn’t a question, nor was it likely a social call for sympathy, being that Klingons rarely engaged it that sort of verbal convention.

Simone continued to concentrate on the screen, visually scanning the area where the Away Team had entered the forest. They had only been able to follow them a few meters before the foliage became too dense to track them further.

Frustrated that she was unable to do anything, Kitara turned to leave. “Alert me the moment you have them.”

“Where are you going?” Losira asked.

“I’ll be gone maybe five minutes,” Kitara said. “If you see them, don’t wait on me to give the word, just launch the shuttle.”

Losira nodded.

Kitara departed the War Room and went directly to the holodeck, where she then activated the Gateway. The portal's energies swirled with the initial activation, and then calmed to reveal the hazy image of the destination. Kitara crossed over and arrived at the generational spaceship, Yonada, which was nothing more than an antique in the New Fabrini system. Yonada was currently the hiding place for Athena, one of the gods who had signed a truce with Garcia, supposedly protecting him from Apollo. She found her eating while watching an entertainment program from one of the library tapes Garcia had given her. The tape was Garcia in concert, orchestral music accompanying a display of lights.

Athena stood to welcome Kitara, glad to have company, and was caught off guard by the knife to her throat. Kitara shoved her against the wall.

"I don't know which one of your kind has orchestrated this kidnapping, but if Garcia dies, you die," Kitara said.

"Are you sure it was one of my kind?" Athena asked.

"Your kind are the only ones who have an agenda that involves my husband," Kitara said. "If you know anything, tell me now."

"Sherman's planet is a free territory," Athena said. "There is no one assigned to that planet, which means the agents involved would have been from off world, so it could be anyone."

"He wasn't abducted on Sherman's Planet, he was abducted while on Phylos," Kitara said.

"Phylos? Why would he go to..." Athena said, and then she shook her head as if she had figured it out for herself. "Gaia would be responsible."

"You will help me locate her," Kitara said.

"Alright," Athena said, seeming compliant.

The moment Kitara eased off on the knife, Athena attacked and before Kitara knew what had happened, she was on the floor, one hand twisted behind her back, and her own knife to her throat. Athena pushed her knee hard into Kitara's back.

"The next time you draw a knife on me, you better kill me," Athena said.

"Let her go."

Athena looked up to see Losira present, aiming a weapon at her. She appeared quite determined.

"I have a truce with Garcia," Athena said.

"And that is why I haven't terminated your avatar," Losira said. "Let her go."

"She attacked me!" Athena said.

"Let her go, now," Losira said.

Athena released her grip on Kitara and backed away. As soon as Kitara was free, she prepared to attack Athena, who immediately took up a battle stance.

"Commander," Losira said, trying to talk her down.

"Give me my knife," Kitara demanded.

"I think I'll hold onto it," Athena said.

Kitara stepped forwards.

"Commander, I can't allow you to harm her," Losira insisted.

"Give me my knife, or I will kill you," Kitara said.

“You cannot kill me, but I promise you, if you drive me from this body before the children are born, I will use every resource at my disposal to exact my revenge against you and your entire House,” Athena said. “You do not want me as your enemy.”

“And I can’t trust you as an ally,” Kitara said.

Athena stepped forwards, flipping the knife over so that Kitara could accept it. Kitara took hold of the hilt, but Athena did not let go of the blade. She moved closer to Kitara, face to face. “Don’t threaten me.”

“Tell me how to contact Gaia,” Kitara said.

“She will make herself known in her own time, not before,” Athena said, releasing the knife. “She is kthon. She is young and old, she is the Great Mother. She will get what she wants, one way or the other.”

Kitara moved away, not turning her back on Athena, and when she was away from the room, Losira lowered her weapon. She nodded and beamed out, Kalandan style, leaving Athena alone. Athena closed her eyes, trying to control the emotions raging through her body, and then sunk to her knees, sobbing.

“Why, Father, have you chosen this role for me?” she asked, but there was no answer forthcoming.

As Kitara stepped across the threshold of the Gateway to arrive back on the Path Finder, she found Losira waiting for her. Losira didn’t present Kitara with all the identification rituals that she performed for Garcia, but she did measure the First Officer. There was a scrutiny of the eyes, and a testing of wills to see who might break eye contact first. Kitara sighed, rolling her eyes.

“I guess you’re going to report this to Garcia,” Kitara said.

“It’s none of his business,” Losira informed her. “I do recommend that you avoid confrontations with Athena. Garcia has made a deal with her. I feel obligated to protect that truce.”

“And yet, you threatened to kill her just now,” Kitara said, trying to assess the computer’s motives.

“My first obligation is to the well being of the ship and the crew. My next obligation is to the Captain. You are his second in command, and his mate, so protecting you is a priority,” Losira said.

“I don’t need your protection,” Kitara said, and started to storm off, but a thought occurred to her and so she turned back to Losira. “If you think you can blackmail me by holding this incident secret…”

“As far as I’m concerned, the incident is over,” Losira said.

“So, you can’t be trusted to report illegal or inappropriate behavior?” Kitara demanded, changing her tact all together.

Losira didn’t seem perturbed by the inquiry. “I am privy to every activity that happens in my sphere of influence,” Losira said. “I’m not a gossip, and I will not report on the things that happen between two consenting adults, or what a person does in private. I will be a witness in the event of a crime, so had you killed Athena, who I have been assigned to watch over, I would have had to make a report. You two had a normal adult exchange, for a Klingon and a god. However, if you believe this warrants further scrutiny, I will be happy to report it.”

“Just forget it,” Kitara said. She departed quickly.

Losira frowned. “I never forget.”

CHAPTER NINE

Agmar, one of the oldest living Phylosians, and leader of the Phylosian Alliance, stood on a floating pedestal. Guard rails gave him hand held supports, as well as providing him a seat, if he had the inclination to use it. A console at the front end of the pedestal provided screens for data access and maneuvering controls, which he used to bring his mobility device closer to the Away Team. Garcia lay on a medical table behind him, bathed in bright lights while a number of Phylosian scientists scurried about, prodding the unconscious body. Agmar scrutinized the Away Team, observing their reactions to what the scientists behind him were doing. He correctly assessed that Jurak was a medical officer by his level of attention being given to the medical equipment in the room. Tuer was obviously security, based on the details he was focused on, that and the fact that he randomly tested the ties binding his hands. Kletsova was obviously in love with the Captain. He dismissed Owens all together. Agmar twisted to look back at Garcia and then focused on Undine. A display on his console provided her name and rank, followed by miscellaneous information that ran on past the screen.

"I suppose you want to know why I have brought you here," Agmar said.

"No," Undine said, matter of fact.

"I demand that you let us go or face the consequences," Tuer said.

Agmar chuckled. "You're hardly in a position to make demands," Agmar said.

"The Master may have a use for you as well. It depends on how cooperative Garcia is."

"The Master?" Kletsova asked.

"Three hundred years ago..." Agmar began.

"Oh, God," Undine said. She would have rubbed her forehead had her hands not been bound. "You're one of those."

"Excuse me?" Agmar said.

"One of those diabolical, evil genius types that wants to educate his abductees with long winded diatribes and histories, as if there were any chance you could win our sympathy," Undine said. "The only thing you need to do is let us go."

"Not until the Master has concluded his business with Garcia," Agmar said.

"Who is the Master?" Kletsova asked.

"Lieutenant!" Undine said, using a voice that suggested she didn't want her encouraging Agmar to speak.

"The longer he talks, the more likely we're to be rescued," Kletsova said. "You know our ship mates will be coming for us."

"I assure you, no one will be coming to rescue you," Agmar said.

One of the large doors leading into the chamber slid open, accompanied by the sounds of marble sliding across marble, and the grinding of mechanisms. A humanoid man, approximately 1,530 centimeters tall entered the room. He was directing an automated medical bed towards the center of the room, positioning it along side of Garcia's bed. The medical bed dwarfed Garcia's medical bed, and obviously carried another giant. The walking giant approached Garcia and loomed over him, hands on his hips. The harried technicians began new activities, bustling around the giant on the medical bed and Garcia, linking cables and fluid lines. The giant studied Garcia the same way a scientist might examine a bug.

“He must be awake for the procedure,” the giant said, his voice booming in the cathedral size chamber.

The entire Away Team was impressed by the size of the giant, an aged, dark skinned man, who might have been mistaken for someone from Earth, of East Indian descent, except for the size.

“Which god is this?” Tuer asked, assuming this to be one of the Preservers.

“The Master, I presume?” Undine asked.

‘The Master’ looked to Undine and approached Agmar and the Away Team. It only took five steps for him to cross the room. He peered down on the Away Team, not with contempt, but with the eyes of someone examining livestock.

“My name is Stavos Keniclius the 8th,” the Master said. “I was born on Earth in 2012.”

“I find that hard to believe,” Undine said. “I’ve not heard of any giants being born on Earth during that era.”

“I was not a giant when I was born,” the Master said, a hint of impatience in his voice as if he were discussing physics with morons. “The Phylosians have access to a number of Preserver artifacts, including advanced cloning technology. My size is the result of the cloning procedure the Phylosians developed in order to preserve my great intellect.”

“They wanted to make giants?” Undine asked.

“We wanted to establish peace within the Galaxy,” Agmar said.

“I don’t see the correlation between giants and peace,” Undine remarked.

“In order to continue my search for the perfect specimen in which to establish the Master race, it was necessary to clone myself a number of times. I’m the eighth clone, my mind and knowledge passed down to each subsequent clone. After leaving Earth after the Eugenics war, I came to Phylos in search for the perfect specimen to assist me in enforcing galactic peace.”

“That doesn’t make sense, either,” Undine interrupted. “Earth didn’t have faster than light capabilities 400 years ago, so you would have had to have left Earth on a sleeper ship. And you wouldn’t have known of any planets, much less Phylos in particular, so leaving Earth in search of the perfect specimen doesn’t make sense. This leads me the next issue I have with your statement; why would you want to enforce Galactic Peace, when the only civilization you were aware of would have been that of Earth, an Earth with a peculiarly ethnocentric, and warped paradigm?”

“Are you calling me a liar? I came from Earth! I’ve been here ever since! I met Captain James T Kirk in 2269 in this very room,” the Master said, obviously agitated. The last time he had experienced anger was when Captain Kirk was present.

“Not likely,” Undine persisted. “If Kirk had been here, there would have been a report generated, and I don’t remember ever reading about you.”

“You never read about how we were going to send ships out to conquer the galaxy?” Agmar asked.

“Oh, I read about that, but no giants, no sleeper ships, no one named Keniclius,” Undine said. “And I don’t understand this relationship, Agmar. I thought your race was afraid of aliens, but not only are you working with an alien, you’re calling him master?”

“When he first arrived, our people welcomed him, not realizing that he carried with him a particularly virulent strain of staphylococcus, non native to our planet. An

epidemic swept over our world, and within a year, every Phylosian was adversely affected; it rendered us incapable of reproducing,” Agmar explained. “A perverse relationship ensued. We hated him for what he had done to us, but we needed his scientific knowledge to help reverse the damage and save our species. As he attempted to aid us in our plight, we learned of his search, and since our species has an affinity towards his mission to find the perfect specimen, creating a template for a master race to instill peace throughout the galaxy, we agreed to help him. Plants are all about peace.”

“He can’t even clone himself without making a giant mess of things, and you want his help to instill galactic peace?” Undine asked.

The Master chuckled. “I admit that the cloning procedure had some quirks. Even I have still not mastered the Preserver’s technology.”

“You still have not adequately explained how you knew to come here,” Undine said. “If you fled Earth during the Eugenics war, or even right after, you wouldn’t have known that there were alien civilizations.”

“God told me to come here,” the Master admitted.

“God?” Undine asked, wondering if the man was insane. “You met god?”

“You doubt?” the Master asked.

“You may or may not have had an encounter with an alien species presenting themselves as a god, but I doubt you have met an actual deity,” Undine said.

“Everything has unfolded exactly as She said it would! I found the perfect specimen,” the Master began.

“Garcia?” Undine asked, chuckling. “He’s so not perfect.”

The Master laughed. “Of course Garcia is imperfect!” the Master said, grabbing her up in one hand. He led her over to the medical table he had brought in and set her down like a doll, careful not to release his full grip until he was certain her feet were firmly planted. The medical table that held the other giant was difficult to take in so close to it, as if she were examining it from a child’s perspective, but now that she was closer she could discern the obvious signs that the person lying on it was a Vulcan. A giant Vulcan! The revelation came about as evidenced by the ear, the only part of the face that was not obscured by an odd looking breathing apparatus. She was drawn closer to the Vulcan, as if she was certain she knew him.

“Undine? Report,” came the voice behind her.

She turned to Captain Garcia and drew closer to him. “I’m still gathering information.”

The Vulcan stirred, pulling his mask down and off his face before he spoke. “Stavos, you must not do this,” he said. The voice was so familiar that Garcia would have come off the table except that he was thoroughly restrained.

“Spock?!” Undine and Garcia said simultaneously. They exchanged looks with each other, and then she moved a little so Garcia could see past her.

“I must save you, my friend. You are the perfect specimen,” Stavos said, touching the Vulcan with compassion.

“It can’t be!” Undine said.

“This is why I joined Star Fleet!” Garcia said, unable to hide his enthusiasm, even though he was tied up. “Who would have ever thought it? A fifty foot Spock!”

Undine stared at Garcia crossly. “How is it whenever you’re excited you revert back to old English measurements?”

“I am an American, too stubborn to join the rest of the world in metrics?” Garcia asked, enjoying the look of disbelief on her face. A technician jabbed Garcia with a needle and extracted blood. “Hey!”

“I require your assistance to save Spock,” the Master said.

“It’s why I’m here,” Garcia said. “Untie me.”

“No,” the Master said.

“I’m a Doctor! Let me help him if I can,” Garcia insisted.

“He is beyond your technological level of medical intervention,” the Master said.

“Normally, at this juncture, I would have cloned him a new body and transferred his mind and knowledge into the new brain, but the cloning machine is no longer functioning. He is close to finding a cure for the Phylosians. I cannot let him die.”

“So, what do you want me to do?” Garcia asked.

“I need you to enter a healing trance,” the Master explained. “Once your body has begun to naturally produce the Vulcan proteins necessary to accelerate the healing process, I will remove your blood, separate the proteins, combine them with a medicinal regimen that I have invented, and intravenously introduce this to Spock.”

“Don’t tissues have to be typed? Is Garcia even a match?” Undine asked.

“Garcia is biologically related to Spock,” the Master said. “He is a sufficient match for this particular procedure. The Kelvan influence on his biology, coupled with his unique history, has made Garcia the perfect donor. I couldn’t have asked for a more perfect scenario. It’s as if the entire Galaxy has been finely tuned for this one moment in time. I will save Spock, I will save the Phylosians species, and then I will proceed with my master plan to enforce peace throughout the Galaxy! And just in time, seeing how all chaos looms in our future.”

“You’re definitely insane,” Undine said.

“Do you know exactly how much of this protein you will need to cure Spock?” Garcia asked.

“Yes,” the Master said, meeting Garcia’s eyes. “For you to provide sufficient amounts of the protein, the final stage of the procedure is terminal.”

“Killing me to save Spock is unethical,” Garcia pointed out.

“I believe you would gladly sacrifice your life to save Spock’s life,” the Master said.

“Of course,” Garcia said, not fully thinking his statement through.

“Then no further dialogue is necessary,” the Master said. “You must enter the healing trance.”

“I can’t just enter a full healing trance on demand,” Garcia said. “I’m not a full Vulcan. The only times that I have entered the trance was induced automatically by severe trauma.”

“I’m aware of what must be done,” the Master said. He nodded to one of the Phylosian techs.

The Phylosian nodded and pushed a virtual sliding lever up, visually clicking past marks till it was a quarter of the way up the scale. Garcia screamed in pain, his body arching, coming up off the table despite the tightness of the restraints. Undine screamed for Stavos to quit, even kicked at him. Her kick didn’t faze him. One of the techs seized her with multiple arms in order to restrain her. The tech torturing Garcia virtually pulled the lever back to the off position leaving his victim breathless and limp against the table.

The Master looked down to the tech restraining Undine. “Release her,” he instructed. “Allow her to comfort him, if she wishes.”

Garcia lay on the table, whimpering. As soon as she was free, Undine stroked his head, wiping sweat and tears with her sleeve.

“You must stay conscious, Garcia,” the Master said. “I need you to enter a healing trance, not be so exhausted that you become lethargic. Hit him again.”

The tech nodded, pushed the lever forwards, adding a few more tic marks. Garcia again shrieked out in pain. Whatever they were doing to him didn’t seem to affect Undine, even though she was touching him.

“You’re killing him!” Undine yelled.

“Not yet,” the Master assured her.

The tech finished his assault and took another reading. “Something seems to be interfering with the biological processes,” the tech said.

“I’m his doctor,” Jurak shouted. “Allow me to examine him.”

“Release the doctor,” the Master said. “And the other female. Physical touch is known to enhance the healing mechanism in humans. Perhaps this will facilitate the process.”

Doctor Jurak and Kletsova both came to Garcia’s side. He was winded, as if he had run a marathon, but still cognizant of what was going on. Tears streamed down his face. Doctor Jurak retrieved his medical tricorder and began taking scans. Kletsova kissed Garcia, wiped some dirt off his face, and plucked what she thought was a tiny, stray flower from his hair, a result of having fallen in the forest. Garcia reacted as if she had plucked out a fist full of hair.

“Ouch!” Garcia said.

“Sorry,” Kletsova said. “Oh! You’re bleeding.”

Doctor Jurak examined the wound, and while moving Garcia’s hair, he noted what appeared to be additional small buds. One of them opened, revealing a tiny flower, exactly like the one Tatiana had just plucked. They were all over his scalp. The Doctor took another reading to verify what he was seeing with his eyes.

“What is this?” Undine asked.

“You’re turning into a Gia pet,” Tatiana remarked.

“Garcia is infected with a Phylosian fungus, which is interfering with the healing process,” Doctor Jurak announced.

The tech examined Doctor Jurak’s results and then double checked on his own instruments. “This can’t be!” the tech said. “This is a Phylosian STD. Humans can’t acquire it.”

Everyone looked to Garcia. Kletsova voiced their reactions: “You had sex with a Phylosian?”

“That better explains the scratches,” Jurak observed, nodding as if putting it together.

“But he said he escaped through some bushes...” Kletsova began.

“Technically, not a lie,” Garcia said.

“Oh! Everywhere we go!” Kletsova said. “People aren’t supposed to mate with plants!”

“I was drugged,” Garcia said.

“So, why didn’t you just admit...” Kletsova asked.

“Because if he admits to being forced into having sex against his will, I have to mandate that he sees a counselor before releasing him to full duty,” Doctor Jurak explained.

“Can we get back to saving Spock?!” Garcia snapped.

“Are you serious? The procedure is going to kill you!” Undine said.

“The roots of the flowers are affecting his ability to think,” Jurak explained to Undine, and then to the Master he said: “This virus is preventing him from entering a healing trance. In order to proceed further, it will be necessary to cure him of this ailment.”

“Do it,” the Master said.

“The cure might kill him,” the tech argued.

“The disease will kill him,” Jurak argued.

“I’m suddenly not feeling too well,” Garcia complained.

“Cure him,” the Master said.

The tech sighed. “We need him off the table,” the tech said, motioning for his assistants to do the work. “He must be free of all restraints, shackles, and articles of clothing.”

In addition to the tech’s assistants, security moved closer, bringing their weapons to bear on Garcia in case he were to try anything funny. It was apparent to his crew he wasn’t feeling well enough to try anything funny, but the Phylosians weren’t taking any chances. Six weapons were trained on Garcia. A Phylosian unstrapped Garcia while another removed the medical equipment attached to Garcia’s arms and chest. The main tech prepared a serum, as the assistants stripped Garcia of the rest of his clothes. They stood him on his feet, making sure he was standing in a circle painted on the floor. The tech approached, inserting the serum cartridge into a delivery system that resembled a paint gun.

“This is going to hurt,” the tech said, shooting it into Garcia’s arms.

Garcia chuckled. “That wasn’t so bad.”

The tech pushed a button on a control pad and the circle on the floor illuminated. Garcia floated off the floor.

“This is kind of fun,” Garcia said, laughing. “Look at me. I’m flying. Tatiana, join me. Zero g sex might be fun.”

“Sex is what got you into this mess,” Kletsova pointed out.

“I hope Willy Wonka turned off that fan, Grandpa,” Garcia said. He started singing the theme song from the Greatest American Hero, performed by Bread. “Look at what’s happened to me. I can’t believe it myself...”

Jurak sidestepped over to the technician.

“Did you add an opiate to that concoction?” Doctor Jurak asked.

“It was necessary,” the tech said. “This is a very painful procedure. If it were less painful, we would have eradicated this STD a century ago, but since it’s harmless to our species, there’s no point. I’m rather surprised that Garcia contracted it at all.”

“You’d be amazed at some of the things he’s contracted,” Jurak said, speaking colleague to colleague.

A force field rose from the floor, isolating Garcia in a cylindrical field of energy. “I’m in a test tube!” Garcia said, laughing. “Time for the centrifuge! You spin me right round, baby right round...”

“Couldn’t you have just put him to sleep?” Jurak asked.

“The STD at this stage blocks sedatives from working,” the tech said, only one eye turning to Jurak. The other stayed on Garcia.

Garcia spun about and came face to face with Undine. He reached out for her, but was unable to reach, and even if he could, the force field would have prevented them from touching. “Upside down you’re turning me, you’re giving love instinctively...”

No matter how Garcia positioned himself, he couldn’t touch the field or the floor. He was laughing as he continued to tumble. An itch caused him to scratch and to his amazement a finger nail fell off. He stopped laughing, staring as it floated away from him. As soon as the free nail hit the force field, it was drawn to the floor and vaporized when it touched the surface. Garcia doubled up in laughter. Blood shot from his mouth, and his laughter became a cough. The blood splatter on the force field was drawn down into the floor, and like the nail vaporized on contact. His skin began to peel up, like flakes after getting sunburned. It was slow at first, barely noticeable, but it progressed at an accelerating rate until all of Garcia’s skin was sloughing off. By the time all his hair and skin was gone, he was screaming in torment, raw muscle quivered in the exposed air. The roots of the infection were now visible, and they, too, were in the process of sloughing off, but it was fighting to stay alive, shooting off new tendrils that caressed and wrapped around his body. The plant shot out roots and vines in an inhuman embrace, holding on for dear life. Garcia scratching had become futile, as all his nails had come off; it probably saved him from scratching his eyes out. Flower petals dropped like rain as buds burst all along his spine, drawn down by a swirling of air that was now a cyclone around Garcia. The buds that were blooming were short lived, but numerous. The more Garcia screamed and fought, the more he tumbled, which seemed to be helping the process of shaking loose roots, vines, and buds. Kletsova had to look away, crying. Undine embraced Kletsova, but was unable to look away. Kletsova cried on her superior officer’s shoulder. Owens vomited.

Once it was certain that all of the infection was removed from Garcia’s system, the cylindrical force field was flash flooded with a liquid. It rose quickly from the floor, and continued up until Garcia was fully submerged. His screams became silent as he took in the fluid, involuntarily convulsing as he breathed in the liquid. A moment later his body went limp. He no longer struggled with pain, but whether it was because he was unconscious from shock or a drug in the fluid was impossible for his crew to tell. His lungs continued to expand and contract, though, a sign that he was continuing to breathe. He curled into a fetal position, and appeared to be sleeping peacefully. Skin began to grow, and he began to look more like his normal self, minus all hair. When all of his skin had been re-grown, the fluid drained from the force field, and Garcia dropped to the floor. He awoke gagging, vomiting the fluid from his lungs, dazed, confused, and sobbing. A whirl wind of air dried him and the floor before the force field popped off.

Undine, Kletsova, and Doctor Jurak rushed to Garcia’s side. Undine and Kletsova lifted him by his arms to his feet.

“Ahhh! Don’t touch me!” Garcia snapped. He pulled free, holding his arms out trying not to touch himself. He kept shifting his weight from foot to foot.

“I’m surprised at your tenacity to hang on to life,” Jurak said.

“You got to give me something for the pain,” Garcia demanded.

“That would not be wise at this juncture,” Jurak said, scanning him. “This will make a great research paper, though.”

The Master stepped closer. “If you are quite through with all the drama, I would like to proceed with saving Spock.”

An explosion ripped a door off the wall on the far side of the chamber and a number of Phylosians rushed the room, firing phasers as they swept in. The sound of the explosion was deafening and the after tones made it difficult to discern the phaser fire by sound alone, but the added dust and smoke in the air made the phaser light more brilliant, adding a crackling noise that could be heard if a beam shot near enough to an ear. Undine and Kletsova, partly through training but mostly through instinct, both simultaneously reacted in a manner to protect the Captain, rushing him towards one of the medical consoles that offered minimum protection against a growing exchange of fire. In the rush to get the Captain safe, Undine did recognize the Phylosian leading the charge as Phacelia, but she didn't have time to truly process the change in appearance. Jurak attacked the Phylosian medic that had been torturing Garcia.

Phacelia had more color in her leaves and there were buds that were flowering that shed petals as she took cover behind a pillar. Five members of her assault team were flowering as well. Agmar's guards had been so focused on Garcia that they weren't prepared for the attack, and several fell dead or stunned to the floor before the fight truly got started.

“Get off me!” Garcia yelled, pushing the over protective officers off of him. The symbol with a dot over a line was on the panel behind him. It was followed by two other symbols. One was unparallelled lines, leaning in towards each other. The third was a line with a dot underneath, off center, touching the line about a third of the way. “Go help someone else.”

“Which side do we help?” Jurak asked.

“Our side,” Garcia said, going for one of Agmar's guards.

Garcia punched the guard from behind and almost doubled over from the sheer pain of contact, but doubling over and grabbing his own fist caused an equal amount of pain. He danced around like a crazy man. The Phylosian guard popped him in the head with the butt of his rifle. Garcia went down hard. Kletsova tackled the guard that was attacking Garcia, forcing him to deal with her. Tuer, his hand still tied, managed to knock Agmar from his mobility device. Undine grabbed a weapon and began firing as she ran for new cover, making it a three way firefight. Jurak incapacitated the tech with the same instrument of torture that had been used on Garcia.

Amidst this chaos, the Master loomed, frustrated. He was either the luckiest giant ever, or the Phylosians were going out of their way to not hit him. “Stop this madness!” he yelled.

Surprisingly, everyone stopped. But not before taking up strategic positions in the room. Garcia staggered to his feet and was about to protest when Agmar grabbed Garcia from behind. For Garcia, the pain was sufficiently overwhelming that he was unable to fight back. Not that it mattered. Agmar had Garcia in a head lock with one arm, secured Garcia's wrist utilizing a joint lock with another limb, and was aiming a weapon at the back of his head with a third. Phacelia aimed her weapon at the giant Spock's head. Tuer held a weapon aimed at the Master.

“Let him go or I kill Spock,” Phacelia said.

“You kill Spock, then I kill Garcia,” Agmar said.

“If any of you kill Spock or Garcia, I kill your Master,” Tuer said.

“No one’s killing anyone,” Undine said, true to her Star Fleet training. “Let’s all put down our weapons and discuss this like rational beings.”

“Rational?! None of you are rational,” the Master asked. “This is not what we have been taught. This is not the way of peace.”

“You should have thought about that before you carpet bombed our city,” Phacelia said.

“We carpet bombed your city because you slept with Garcia,” Agmar said. “Look at you, all flowery and bursting with the beginnings of fruit. Your pollen could spread an epidemic and we could all be impregnated with Garcia children.”

“It doesn’t work that way, you idiot,” Phacelia said. “We require the direct input of his seed. Only members of our species who are physically intimate with him, or are artificially inseminated, will bear children.”

“You don’t know that for sure,” Agmar shouted over Phacelia. “Animal and plants should not be brought together. It is an abomination!”

“This is like a really bad Lexx episode,” Garcia mumbled, exhaustion visible on his face.

Undine leaned over to Kletsova. “What is a Lexx episode, and if it’s bad, why does he watch it?” she whispered.

“He has a crush on the lead actress,” Kletsova said. “You know, miniskirt, nice legs, big bosom, great lips.”

“I shouldn’t have asked,” Undine mumbled as the verbal fight still raged around them.

“You know, there’s no reason for you two to be warring against each other,” Garcia said, adding his two cents.

“Oh, shut up!” Agmar said, squeezing Garcia’s neck. “What do you know about anything? You’re having babies all over the damn place. We haven’t had a new Phylosian born in over three hundred years. Our science has all but stopped the aging process, but what good is that if we can’t have children?”

“Spock and I are close to a cure,” the Master said.

“You stupid ape,” Phacelia said. “You can’t cure us.”

“I am the Master. You will not speak to me in that tone,” the Master said.

“You are an idiot. You’ve been here what, nearly three hundred years now, and you still don’t get it,” Phacelia said. “You’re not the Master. You’re just part of the Master Plan. She told us where to look for you. She told us how to revive you. And she told us how to play you in order to achieve our objectives.”

“Silence!” Agmar said. “He is not supposed to know about the Master Plan.”

“You should have thought about that before you killed a million Phylosians,” Phacelia said. “What if you had killed Garcia! You know She wants him alive.”

“Who is she?” Undine asked.

As if on cue, “she” walked in. A giant of a woman, at least as tall as the Master and Spock, entered the room with the grace of a queen, put her hands on her hips, and looked down over everyone. “You are all idiots! The whole plan is now ruined.”

The Master fell to his knees and bowed. “Gaia! You have finally returned. I have done as you asked. I have found the perfect specimen.”

“Oh, shut up!” Gaia snapped. “Three hundred years I’ve listened to you. ‘I have the perfect specimen, I have the perfect specimen.’ If you had found what I was looking for I would have returned earlier, you fool. Agmar! I left you in charge, and now everyone on the planet is killing one another.”

“I tried to tell them,” Garcia mumbled his contribution.

“And you!” Gaia pointed at him. “You are a warped fulcrum. If it weren’t for that damn truce you made with my brother, I would have squashed you the moment you stepped foot on my planet. My perfect planet, which is now in flames! And by sleeping with my specimens, you have contaminated the results and altered the course of their evolution.”

“I was drugged!” Garcia said.

“You can’t fool mother nature,” Gaia said.

“Well, if you really want to get down to it, using the garden analogy, if you didn’t want me eating the fruit, you shouldn’t have put it in the damn garden,” Garcia snapped back.

“Don’t mess me with me, Tam,” Gaia warned, like a mother who had reached her limit. “You are pushing the boundaries of my patience. And I have been very patient with you. Phacelia, I gave you clear instructions to bring him to me. In what universe does that mean sleep with him?”

“I’m sorry, Mother,” Phacelia started.

“Ahhh!” Gaia cried, her frustration levels showing.

Gaia clapped her hands and all of the Phylosians were swept away by transporter beams, with the exception of Phacelia and the others who had slept with Garcia. She turned to the Master and pointed at him. “Back to cold sleep with you!” and he, too, disappeared. She turned to Garcia. “Because of you, I have to start over from scratch.”

“You don’t have to kill them,” Garcia said, pleading for their lives.

“Kill them? I’ve worked too hard to create them! Unlike you, descendant of Shiva, I’m a Preserver, not a destroyer,” Gaia said. “I cherish my creations. I cherish life. I will have to start over, but I doubt I will find what I’m looking for before the cataclysm.”

“What cataclysm?” Garcia asked.

“You,” Gaia began, and then clearly stopped herself. She smiled faintly, trying not to let it slip that she had nearly messed up, though it was evident to everyone that she had. “You have ten minutes to leave this solar system, or you will all perish here. I will not preserve you. There are too many of you in the multi-verse already.”

Gaia grew brighter, larger, her dress moving to the side as if standing in a breeze. She evaporated before their eyes, her last fading remnants nothing more than papery embers that sparked and faded away. What was left behind was a small ball of light, which they all recognized as a manifestation orb. There were some variations in her vessel that they hadn’t seen, though. Its surface was decorated, and it was not a perfect sphere. Her orb more resembled a decorated, Faberge egg, with hints of Russian artwork. The orb accelerated towards the ceiling, but disappeared a meter before impact. As it passed through the Iconian Gateway, for a brief moment the borders of the portal were visible, clearly defining the area in the air as a gateway. The light of this lingered on the retina for a fraction of a second, like lightning. The distinct smell of ozone filled the room.

Phacelia and her companions fell flat on the ground and begged forgiveness, altering between personal prayer and chants.

Undine's communicator badge came online. "This is Commander Kitara, calling Away Team. We have a transporter lock on you. Have you found the Captain?"

"Stand by, Number One," Garcia said, and motioned for his people to rally around him. "We're not leaving without Spock."

"What would you like us to do, cut him in half?" Kletsova asked.

"Can someone that size even be transported?" Tuer asked.

"Sure," Garcia said. "Scotty beamed up two humpback whales and all the water around them. That's way more mass than a giant Spock."

"Yeah, but where are we going to put him?" Kletsova asked.

"The New Constitution's primary hangar deck," Jurak said.

"We'll have to cut a hole in the bulkhead so that his feet can extend into the corridor. And he'll have to lay down the entire trip," Undine said.

"Not like he's dancing now. Go up, take care of that. And take those Phylosians with you. Owens, see to their comfort," Garcia said. Owens started to protest. "We have less than nine minutes here! Let's go. Doctor, I need a quick assessment of Spock's condition. Will he survive the transport?"

Undine, Tuer, Kletsova, Owens, and the four Phylosians transported up, while Garcia and Doctor Jurak went to Spock's side. It didn't take much time to present with an answer. "Fifty fifty," Jurak said. "One thing for sure, he will not survive a transwarp jump."

"Can we take this stuff and cure him at Vulcan when we have access to more donors?" Garcia asked.

Jurak only glanced at the technology. "This stuff is ruined. And even if it wasn't, Spock would be dead before a non Phylosian figured out how to work it. I doubt your addition to the harem will be cooperative."

Garcia was about to protest the use of the word 'harem,' but Spock coughed, drawing their attention. Garcia came closer and accidentally brushed his arm against the bed and cringed. He looked to his Doctor. "Can't you give me something for this?"

"Not at this juncture," Jurak said. "The sensitivity should decrease in time. You have all new skin and nerve ending, you know."

Spock pulled his mask down. "Leave me," Spock said.

"Yeah, like we're going to do that," Garcia snapped at Spock. "So, just lay there, be quiet, and let us rescue you."

Spock lifted an eyebrow. "You sound like McCoy," he said, and then he reached out and put a single finger to Garcia's forehead. "Remember," Spock said.

Garcia stumbled backwards as the full weight of Spock's Katra landed on his shoulders. Jurak took Garcia by the arm to hold him steady, but only because he was falling back into him. Garcia screamed and pulled away.

"Don't touch me!" Garcia said.

"You fell into me," Jurak said. "Are you alright?"

"Fine," Garcia said.

Jurak's communicator badge came online. "Captain, we're ready to receive you and the guest."

“Beam me directly to the Bridge, Jurak and Spock to the hangar deck,” Garcia said.

Garcia cringed as the transporter lights whispered around his flesh, forcing him to close his eyes. He was still cringing several moments after arriving on the Bridge, completely nude. He sat down in his chair and immediately stood up. Everyone was staring at him, but whether it was because of his agitation or because he was butt naked, he wasn't sure. He ignored the attention as if this was an everyday affair and focused on the helmsman's display. Losira approached, eager to start the ritual.

Garcia pointed at her sternly. “Touch me, and so help me, I'll deactivate you,” Garcia snapped.

“But...” Losira began, looking hurt.

“Later,” Garcia said. “Doctor, are you on?”

“We're on board. Spock survived the transport,” Doctor Jurak said, his voice clear over the Bridge intercom.

“Helm, warp two, take us out of this star system,” Garcia instructed.

Lt. McKnight pivoted her chair around to face the Captain, having already prepared for a transwarp jump. “You don't want to jump straight to Vulcan?” the Lt. asked.

“Um, no,” Garcia said, flailing his arms. “Let's go, now, chop chop,” Garcia said.

Lt. McKnight seemed annoyed by the Garcia's antics.

“Captain, I don't know what drugs you've been taking, but you need to calm down,” Kitara said. “What's the rush?”

The ship lurched, forcing the crew to focus on maintaining their balance. Garcia grabbed the back of McKnight's chair to keep from falling over. He cursed when Kitara grabbed his arm. He pulled free, giving her a look.

Lt. Sendak answered Kitara's last question. “Captain, the Phylosian planet's gravity well is increasing exponentially. The planet is collapsing in on itself.”

“Get us out of orbit, Lt.,” Kitara snapped. “Go go go!”

“Warp two,” Lt. McKnight said.

Planet Phylos imploded, condensing down to an unbelievably small size before exploding outwards. The destructive force chased the New Constitution out of the system. They were two light years out before the energy in the system dissipated enough for them to 'see' what was happening with short range scans. The planet had blossomed into a sphere of energy that encompassed the sun. The moment the energy came in contact with the Phylos star, it erupted into a super nova, which shouldn't have happened given the fact G-type stars don't become supernovae. But it did. It was like throwing gasoline into a campfire. The sun blossomed to encompass the whole solar system, expanding at nearly 42 million kilometers per hours. A shell of material, heavy on iron, continued to push outwards to almost twice the size of the solar system, with the blast wave out stripping the heavier elements. The Phylos star system was a double star system, and as Phylos Prime grew to encompass the companion star, it, too, blossomed into a nova. Together the expansion accelerated until the two stars appeared to be one single star. At that point, most of the star matter began collapsing back in on itself due to compression waves and decreasing energy. When the two stars were once again visible, they were barely a quarter of their original size. A cloud of matter continued to expand in all directions. Looking straight at the double star system, the dying stars seemed to have

intertwining halos; an infinity sign, with two distinct point of lights. That's when Garcia noted one of the monitors next to his chair, and the odd way the warp field was rippling in the display. Lt. Sendak was about to report the emergence of a subspace shock wave, brought about by the resonant harmonic disturbance of space/time due to the cataclysmic destruction of the solar bodies, but Captain Garcia beat him to it.

"Shields up, brace for impact," Garcia ordered, as the subspace shock wave threatened to overtake them. This was going to be the biggest subspace shock wave recorded since Captain Sulu encountered one created by the destruction of the Klingon Moon, Praxis.

"Helm," Kitara demanded. "Use the transwarp to get us beyond the sphere of influence."

"Belay that," Garcia said. "Helm, bring us around, straight into the wave front."

McKnight was already turning the ship before the Captain had finished spitting out the order. The ship turned into the shock wave. The ship's warp field was flattened and popped liked a bubble, dropping them out of warp. The suddenness in which the warp field was broken caused the ship to lurch, then roll, sending personnel careening to the floor, bulkheads, and work stations as the inertial dampeners were overwhelmed. Excess energy bled through the warp coils causing energy conduits on several decks to burst. A panel above the helm blew, raining down sparks that peppered Garcia's back and head as he instinctively shielded the closest person to him, who in this case was McKnight.

Kitara picked herself up off the floor. "Damage report. All stations check in. Medical team to the Bridge."

Garcia was still holding onto McKnight's chair as a wave of vertigo passed over him. The artificial gravity had fluctuated for a moment, which had played havoc on his inner ear and stomach. He swallowed, managing not to vomit. He had a line of blisters running down his back due to shielding McKnight from the shower of sparks. His whole back felt like he had serious sun burn, which after a day of the beach would be tolerable, but with new skin and nerves the pain radiating through him stole his voice. The words "medical team to the Bridge" registered late in his ears and he looked around to see who was injured.

McKnight glanced up at him, concern on her face. He patted her on the shoulder. "Good job," Garcia forced, reading the chronometer in his neural implant and comparing it against the countdown clock that he had started when Gaia had given him ten minutes to leave the solar system. Gaia had been wrong by a minute and ten seconds. Now that the shockwave had passed, the sensors gave an unfettered image of the situation. The unmagnified image of the remains of star system was fairly impressive. "Um, Sendak, you recording this?"

"Affirmative," Sendak said, not looking up from his instruments. "Fascinating."

The Bridge crew shifted their attention to the Vulcan for a moment, then back to the Captain, who appeared to be in agreement with his Science officer's interpretation. It was difficult not being impressed by stellar events in general. What made this particularly fascinating was the knowledge that it was not a natural event, but rather was the result of some sort of technology never encountered before. That technology, if used on a star closer to the center of the galaxy, where stars were more tightly packed together, could theoretically destroy the whole galaxy, causing a series of stars to blossom, destroying

stars in a wave like toppling dominoes. If every star in the center of the galaxy went out like this, the amount of energy released would likely kill all life on every planet in the Milky Way. Even Earth, further out on the spiral arm, would not be spared, and before everyone died, they would look up and see a sky that was full of light; no more space-black for tens of thousands of years.

Garcia became aware of the department heads reporting to the Bridge and knew his people were doing their jobs. When he realized there wasn't anything that needed his immediate attention, he began to feel poorly.

"Number One, I think I'm going to go lie down," Garcia said, turning to leave. He saw Kitara reaching for his arm out of the corner of his eye. He was collapsing as the Medical Team was arriving on the Bridge. Kitara eased the Captain's fall and motioned for the Medics to hurry.

CHAPTER TEN

The sensation of floating wasn't new to Garcia, nor the tunnel concept, but there was a surreal feeling this time that he hadn't previously experienced while being drawn through to the tunnel of light. It was like falling through space, a bird's eye view of the Milky Way rushing up at him. A ruby, sparkling ribbon of light, like a wave to surf, rushed up at him and eventually swallowed him. He was tumbled in a frosty spin of sound and water and then surrounded by peace. The cessation of movement was jarring, and in the blink of an eye, he found himself in a room with the décor of a twentieth century, upper middle class home. In addition to a sensation of vertigo, the colors were more vivid, like being in a dream. Though he was sure he hadn't ever been here, it felt like home. A smell of peanut butter cookies baking in an oven nearby filled the room. A wedding photo on the wall struck him as odd, mostly because he was in it, but also because he knew the woman, and yet he didn't remember marrying her. Not a surprise, perhaps, he told himself. What was the number of his wives? Twenty nine? Thirty? The Christmas tree drew his attention. He approached, fascinated by an orb that cycled through the destruction of a star. A supernova? De ja vu was overwhelming; he wanted to run, but couldn't force himself away from the 'train wreck.' He wanted more details.

He turned at the sound of someone approaching and before he could register who was embracing him, he was in Amanda Q's arms; it was the girl in the wedding photo. She spun him as they hugged, and he watched the photos around the room describe a life with her and their child in variety of time line dependent activities. He remembered her now and wondered how he could have forgotten her. She kissed him. A wall mirror behind her revealed her right leg coming up off the floor as she laid into him passionately.

"Is this it?" Garcia asked her. He let her go to examine the photos on one of the wall. It was a collage of Amanda and him. In one, she was a princess on a white horse, with him beside her in knight's armor. Another they were in a recreation of the 'farmer and his wife.' There was one of them in scuba gear, on the surface of the water. One of them on Mars... "Is this death final?"

"Temporary," Amanda Q said. She tapped one of the photos; it was them coming down the hill of a roller coaster. The roller coaster fell away, leaving only the tracks visible as if they were looking at a window on real time as opposed to a photo. "That was a fun day."

"I don't remember," Garcia said.

"For you, it hasn't happened yet," Amanda Q said. "We'll discuss fun later. They'll be sending you back soon, but before they do, I want to introduce you to someone."

The scenery changed, not in the usual Q-transcendence of brilliant flash, but as if the dream suddenly changed. Garcia found himself standing in a kitchen, Amanda was gone. A man with his back to him was cooking an omelet. The kitchen was well lit with natural light rushing in from the window, carrying with it an idyllic forest setting. Toast popped and the man turned around, pushing an omelet out of the skillet and onto a plate.

"Oh, you're back," the man said. He retrieved another plate and divided the omelet, which became two whole omelets.

"Captain Kirk?" Garcia asked.

“Admiral,” Kirk corrected, then paused. “No, retired admiral. And your name again?”

“Tammias Parkin Arblaster Garcia,” Garcia said.

“Never heard of you,” Kirk said, buttering the toast. There were only two toasts in the toaster, but by the time he finished buttering them, there were four pieces dispersed to the plates. Kirk seemed puzzled by this, pausing to count the portions. “Well, apparently I prepared food for you, whoever you are.”

“I am your son. Well, grandson. Ok, great grandson, technically. No, wait. I don’t remember,” Garcia said, lost in calculations. “Am I drugged? I never forget anything.”

“It happens here a lot,” Kirk said, snacking on some of the bacon. He offered a piece. “Bacon, or are you vegetarian? Or perhaps kosher?”

“Why would you say kosher?”

“How can I say this tactfully. Um, you look spiritual.”

“I’m not...”

The scenery changed and Kirk and Garcia were suddenly in a library, but the most prominent item was a record album held up to Garcia’s face. A gold album, a circle and a dot, framed in Kirk’s hands. He pulled it away, spinning the album before placing it on the turn table. Kirk dropped a needle. Bach issued out through the surround sound system, but it sounded live.

Kirk stared at the album as it spun. “I don’t know why this seems so significant,” he said. “It’s hauntingly familiar.” He looked up to Garcia. “Are we dead?”

Before Garcia could respond, the scenery changed again. He found himself sitting on a rock on a beach, looking out over the ocean to a setting sun. Kirk sat beside him, drinking a beer. Amanda sat behind him, hugging her knees to her chest, watching the two of them commune. Her sun dress moved with the breeze, flapping against her ankles.

“That solved that dilemma,” Kirk said. “It seems like I never get to enjoy a meal anymore.”

“You’re hungry?” Garcia asked.

“No,” Kirk said, contemplatively. “Content. What do you know about this Picard fellow? He thinks he’s the Captain of the Enterprise.

“He is,” Garcia said.

“Is he a good man?” Kirk asked.

“Better than I,” Garcia answered.

Kirk nodded. “I like that. It doesn’t answer my question exactly, because I don’t know what sort of man you are, but I like you. And not because we’re related. There’s something about you.”

“I have so many questions for you, I don’t know where to begin,” Garcia said.

“Ah, you’re a groupie. Suddenly, I’m losing that loving feeling,” Kirk said, but he read the hurt in Garcia’s eyes and tried to address it. “Look, son, I don’t have any cosmological answers for you. We’re all on our own journey. We all have our parts to play. My success was possible, partly because of hard work, discipline, a bit of luck, but the biggest factor in my success was my team. I would not have been the man I became if it weren’t for them. Cultivate your friends wisely. Oh, and part of it was just sheer luck. Did I already say luck? You can’t underestimate luck. Just do what you do best. Do what you enjoy, and never, ever, let them promote you beyond captaincy. That’s all I got. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have to go save the Universe, again.”

Kirk patted Garcia on the back and disappeared. Amanda Q slid forward, leaning into him, her legs hugging him.

“Was he everything you imagined?” Amanda Q asked.

“I’m not sure what just happened. I want more time with him,” Garcia said.

“Well, you’re here now. That can happen,” Amanda Q said.

“Where is here?”

“I will explain soon, but let me enjoy this sunset with you, while I can,” Amanda Q said.

Amanda Q took Garcia’s hand and touched it to her stomach. In the matter of what felt like moments, a long series of moments tied together as if he lived in a film strip, he experienced 9 months of changes to Amanda’s body as the pregnancy moved inevitably towards its conclusion. He was suddenly holding a baby, Amanda leaning into him. The scenery changed. They were back at the house. The photo he had seen before had been replaced with one that contained him, Amanda Q, and a new born son, strangely and absurdly familiar. Bach played in the background. He approached a turntable where a gold record spun.

Amanda Q tapped him on the shoulder and he lost focus on the album. “Honey, there are some guests here to see you.” Her words were a whisper in his ear, a ghost calling him.

Garcia turned to greet her and the guests. Guinan took command of the room as she entered, setting her coat down on the arm of a chair. She approached him like a long lost family member, her heels sounding against the hardwood floors. She gave him a hug, taking his hand in both of hers. Picard’s Q followed Guinan into the room, commenting on what Amanda had done to the place. Mandora, the Metrone who he assumed was still on the New Constitution, was also present. A profound sadness fell over Garcia on seeing Guinan and Mandora, as he believed seeing them here in the afterlife meant they were now dead.

“No,” Garcia said, almost a whimper.

“It’s okay, Tam,” Guinan said. She squeezed his hands to verify she was real.

“This is your fault, Q!” Mandora accused Picard’s Q. “You’re pushing him and it’s going to back fire on you.”

“You forced our hand,” Q said.

“Both of you stop,” Guinan said. Surprisingly, they both fell silent, and each lowered their head, almost reverently. Guinan smiled at Garcia. “You are familiar with the Nexus?”

Garcia nodded. “A spatial artifact, probably a tear in the space time continuum, which travels like a wave front through the Milky Way. You used it to escape the Borg, trying to ride the wave like surfers, but your ships got stuck and the energy was tearing them apart. Kirk responded to your SOS. He was reported lost, but...” Garcia paused. “Wait. Kirk is alive. He’s in the Nexus. Of course! I could mount a rescue.”

“No, you can’t,” Mandora said.

“And no matter how much you will want to remember and use this information, you won’t be able to communicate it,” Q said. “Like a word stuck on your tongue, like a fading dream, it will escape you.”

“Why bring me here if I can’t use any of it?” Garcia said. “This is worse than spending time at the Captain’s Table!”

“You will retain some of this, Garcia. It will help you with what is to come. What you don’t know is the Nexus is a fissure in space/time,” Guinan said. “It was created by a joint commission between Q and the Metrones, a place to conduct negotiations. I was chosen as mediator in their Great Dispute and given authority over both of them. I believe this will answer that nagging question of why someone like Q fears me. At any time, I can exercise my authority over Q or the Metrones, and my word is final. Luckily for Q, I have self discipline.”

“We should never have agreed to you,” Q said.

Guinan ignored him. “You were brought here, Tam, because I want you to know what’s at stake. You are going to have to confront Charlie Evans.”

“I can’t take on Charlie,” Garcia said. “He’s practically a god, and fairly single minded in his purpose and intention on killing me, and he’s all grown up. Not even Kelvan tech will be a perfect shield against him.”

“I could make you a god,” Q said.

“You can’t interfere with this, that’s the rules!” Mandora said,

“I can if the arbiter allows it,” Q argued. “Surely, you don’t want your friend, Garcia, to die an excruciating death.”

“Everyone dies,” Guinan said.

“We don’t,” Q said.

“That has yet to be settled,” Mandora said.

“Let’s settle this,” Q said, taking a fighting pose.

“I don’t want to be in the middle of this,” Garcia said.

“Too late. When you blew up my planet, you set the ground work for this Dispute. And it will be settled on the playing field, per our agreement, Q,” Mandora insisted.

“It will be settled per your agreement, on the playing field,” Guinan agreed,

“You guys can deliberate all you want. I’m not confronting Charlie Evans,” Garcia insisted.

“You will confront Charlie, Tam,” Guinan said. “He is coming for you, and he will stop at nothing to see you destroyed.”

“Destroyed, not dead. Well, that’s a small comfort,” Garcia said.

“He will obliterate world after world until you confront him,” Guinan continued. “He will use world after world as bait to draw you to him, and if you don’t come, the worlds will be devastated, no life remaining on them.”

Garcia rubbed his forehead. “Why? Why me?” Garcia moaned. “And what does this have to do with Q and the Metrones?”

“You know the book ‘War of the Gods’ by Shelly? It’s such a ludicrous concept, if you think about it. You can’t have an irresistible force and an immovable object,” Mandora said. “Can God make a rock so heavy he can’t pick it up? He can do anything? So if He makes the rock, then He should still be able to pick it up. Warring God’s is a zero sum game. No one wins, no one loses. So, we agree to rules, and place wagers, and agree to concessions.”

“How exactly is that a fair contest? If you know everything, then you know the outcome in advance,” Garcia asked.

“We know all the laws of physics. We know the past and the future and the many permutations and variations of the present that are constantly in flux until the future is determined,” Q said. “We know what you will choose, because you have already made

your choice. And though you can predict choice based on influencing factors, there are no absolutes. We don't know why you will choose or how you will choose; we only know you will be the deciding factor."

"We will live in the Universe of your choosing," Mandora added.

"How can you gamble on something you know the outcome to?" Garcia asked again.

"It's fluid, not static, done and not done, particle and wave," Mandora said.

"Maybe we should have bet on Wesley," Q said.

"Not a good trajectory," Mandora said.

"So, this is all a game, and my name is Job," Garcia surmised.

"Essentially, yes, only, we're not betting on whether you will curse God's name or not," Mandora said. "If you kill Charlie Evans in a direct confrontation, the Metrones and Q agree to live peacefully in this Universe. If you lose the confrontation; Q agrees to vacate this timeline. If you avoid the confrontation, the Metrones agree to leave. Either way, you, personally, will suffer immensely. Now, there are side concessions based on collateral damage, but you don't need to know the particulars..."

"Why must I suffer?"

"Suffering is a great motivator," Mandora said.

"Suffering can actually make people act in ways contrary to their nature, making some more rational, some less so," Q said. "If you knew everything absolutely, you would act without prejudice, but you don't know, you only suffer, either directly, or indirectly by watching others suffer. Think of it this way, you are an ant, and Mandora and I are burning you with magnifying glasses, pushing you to our outcomes."

"You suck!" Garcia said, crossing his arms like a mad teenager. "I'm not going to play your game."

"Oh, I think you will, Tam," Q said.

"As it has already been said, if you don't play, bad things will happen," Mandora said.

"And if you self-sacrifice to Charlie, Q leaves this Universe," Q added. "Think of it, a Q-less Universe! I shudder at the thought. Oh, and by the way, no Q, then no Humans! Your species exists because Q intervened on your behalf."

"Please, there are lots of Universes without Q and Humans live just fine," Mandora said, rolling her eyes.

"I wouldn't say 'just fine.' You need us, Garcia," Q said.

"None of this makes any sense," Garcia complained. "If humanity ceases to exist, then Charlie doesn't exist, nor I for that matter, and then this whole debate is meaningless."

"Chicken or the Egg," Mandora and Q both said. "The Great Dispute."

"Oh my God, please tell me this is a joke," Garcia said.

"Of cosmic proportions. I'm glad you see it our way," Q said.

"Guinan, how can you be a part of this?" Garcia asked. "How can you let them do this to me?"

"I know something they don't," Guinan said. "Something you've forgotten."

"What have I forgotten?" Garcia asked.

"Yes, pray tell?" Q and Mandora said.

"My secret, and no prying, per your agreement," Guinan warned them.

“Oh, nicely played. I’m intrigued,” Mandora said.

“I don’t like this. If I find the two of you have an alliance, the game is forfeit,” Q said.

“There is no alliance,” Guinan assured Q.

“Guinan, I can’t win in a direct, fair confrontation with Charlie,” Garcia said.

“Who said anything about fighting fair?” Q asked.

“How do you expect me to fight a god?” Garcia demanded.

“Please, let me make you a god,” Q said. “Think of all the great things you could do, all the suffering that could be avoided.”

“Q,” Mandora interrupted.

“What?! Children of god naturally become gods,” Q said.

“Yeah, and look what happened when you pushed us to evolve before we were ready,” Mandora argued.

“Let’s focus less on what brought us here, and more on the resolution to this conflict,” Guinan said.

“Why are we here?” Garcia asked.

“Planting the seed of godhood,” Q said. “You said it yourself. Human can not beat a god.”

“I don’t want to beat a god,” Garcia protested.

“Then you shouldn’t have opened Pandora’s box,” Mandora said.

“I didn’t... Oh. Metaphor. Fine. I didn’t start this fight with the gods,” Garcia argued, closing his eyes to try and see a resolution. “And they’re not gods, and Charlie isn’t a god, and I don’t want to be a god... I can’t even use Kelvan tech without abusing my power and you want to make me omnipotent?”

“Tam, Charlie is not omnipotent. He can’t go from planet to planet by snapping his fingers. He will need technology and he must be in human form to use it. He will be vulnerable during these moments,” Amanda Q said. “And, there is always an escape clause.”

“Be quiet,” both Q and Mandora said.

“It’s not against the rules for him to know,” Amanda Q argued.

“It is not against the rules,” Guinan agreed.

“Tam, you and Charlie will intersect at Romulous. If you were to detonate a Starburst weapon on their primary star, creating a supernova, a chain of events will occur that will lead to a temporal anomaly that will result in a very specific change in the time line. Charlie Evans will never have been born and you won’t have to confront him.”

“That is not an option,” Mandora said. “It leaves the Great Dispute unresolved. Q and the Metrones will go for eternity trapped in this debate.”

“I’m not going to destroy Romulous,” Garcia said.

“You have before,” Amanda Q said.

“That wasn’t me. Okay, maybe it was another me in another Universe, but it’s not me, and I’m not going down that road,” Garcia argued. “In fact, I think I’ve gone above and beyond the call of duty trying to prevent just that!”

“Tam,” Amanda Q said, stepping closer to him. “Losing to Charlie will be bad for humanity. You winning will be bad for the time line as you know it. Destroy Romulous, and none of this has to happen, it’s better for everyone.”

“Not better,” Mandora said. “Just different.”

“Different how?” Garcia asked.

“God told you how,” Mandora said. “Didn’t you get Her letter?”

“A letter from God?” Garcia asked.

“The message was sent, but we redirected it,” Q said.

“It was simply delayed, Mandora,” Guinan assured her.

“What letter? What change?” Garcia asked. The world started fading away. “I don’t have time for this distraction. I still have to save Vulcan! What is going to happen? What have I forgotten?”

The world seemed to be moving away from him, like a hallway in a night mare stretching into infinity. He reached out and grabbed a branch of the Christmas tree, slowing the expansion phase. Picard was there. How Garcia had missed the fact that Picard was present was beyond him, but he was there. Without speaking, Picard poked Garcia’s chest with the tip of his index finger, directly above his heart. He then drew a line over the imaginary dot, intersecting the dot at the three quarters mark. Perspective changed and Garcia was inside a Christmas ornament, Picard staring into it. Picard tapped the ornament.

Picard’s face was replaced with that of another man. The most distinguishing feature was that the man had crazy, unkempt white hair. He heard the man speaking to Picard. “I’m sorry, Picard. I didn’t know...” ‘I didn’t know’ repeated, fading. A line leaning on a dot, a fulcrum! The voice of Gaia came back to him, “A warped fulcrum.”

♪♪▶

Garcia woke during the medical procedure, jerked and tried to get up, but found himself restrained by Doctor Jurak, the nurse, and Lt. Kitara. The latter was pushing down on both his shoulders, ordering him to be still. He was laying face down, as the Doctor placed another skin graph on his back. He used the neural generator to accelerate the repair.

“What am I forgetting?” Garcia asked, whimpering.

“Your clothes?” Kitara’s said, her voice bringing him acutely present. He was in pain. “Ouch!” He rolled his eyes in grief. “Can’t you knock me out?”

Kitara knelt down so their eyes could meet. “You’ve had enough drugs today.”

“Try to think of something else,” Doctor Jurak said. “The worst part is over.”

Garcia tried to think of something else but he kept coming back to the pain between his shoulders, and to a lesser extent, everywhere his body touched the bed.

“Can you explain how you always seem to lose your clothes?” Kitara asked.

That helped as a distraction, he thought. “It was a beautiful day, thought I would stop and smell the roses,” Garcia said.

“Naked?” Kitara asked.

“What are you looking for?” Garcia asked.

“I want to know what happened!” Kitara said. “From you, now. Not the reports six hours from now.”

The door to Sickbay whispered open and shut; a moment later Trini was standing in front of him, holding a PADD. She seemed a little uncomfortable, as if there was a dilemma about whether this could have waited or not.

“What now?!” Kitara snapped.

“Sorry, but I think the Captain needs to take this call,” Trini said.

“He is clearly incapacitated,” Kitara said.

“It’s urgent,” She said while flipping the PADD she carried so the Captain could see for himself. Brock appeared a bit disheveled, and frantic, but it was always difficult to tell if it was an emergency with the Ferengi, or he had simply lost a large sum of money.

“Really, Trini?” Garcia said, and grimaced, nearly coming off the table. He tried to look back. “The worst part is over, eh?”

“Take the call,” Jurak said. “And try to keep still. These pits on your back are fairly deep.”

Garcia sighed and nodded to Trini to activate the PADD for the two way conference call. She continued to hold the PADD for him. Kitara grunted.

“What took you so long?!” Brock demanded.

“What do you want, Brock?” Garcia asked.

“Are you getting a massage? The whole world is collapsing around me and you’re getting a massage?” Brock asked.

“Yes, Brock, you know that’s what I do all day. Just me, the harem, and endless massages. Would you get to the point!” Garcia snapped.

“Legate Goris wants to see you immediately,” Brock said. “He’s closed down the club and refuses to let anyone in until he speaks to you, in person. And don’t say you can’t, cause he seems to believe you’re here.”

“I’m really busy. Ouch! Damn it, Doctor!” Garcia said.

“What doesn’t kill you...” Jurak began.

“What doesn’t kill me is about to kill you,” Garcia said.

“Tam, the employees are scared. We feel like we’ve been taken hostage,” Brock said.

Garcia closed his eyes for a moment. He calculated in his mind jumping back to Sherman’s planet using the Path Finder disguised as the New Constitution. The only thing keeping him from passing out from sheer exhaustion was his pain and growing anger, and the procedure was likely to last another ten minutes. He sighed. “Losira?”

Losira stepped into his line of sight. “Captain?”

“Is it possible for me to operate an avatar of me on a holodeck via my neural implant via the Preserver communication crystals?” Garcia asked.

“Sure, the bandwidth is sufficient to allow this,” Losira said.

“Fine, access holosuite one at Club Bliss, create a virtual image of me, and patch the controls through to my neural implant,” Garcia said.

“I don’t like this,” Kitara said.

“Doctor?” Garcia asked.

“I don’t see a problem with it. In fact, if it keeps you distracted enough that you stop jumping around, it might expedite this medical procedure,” Jurak said.

Kitara groaned her discontent.

“Brock, send Legate Goris to holosuite 1, I will see him now,” Garcia said.

When Garcia closed his eyes, he was able to give in sufficiently to the illusion that he was elsewhere that most of the pain went away. And since distraction was a great intervention when it came to dealing with immediate and chronic pain, he decided to delve further into the illusion. The grid of the holosuite was mesmerizing, especially when it fluoresced rainbow colors with activity. The 20th century part of his brain marveled at the technology that allowed him to be in control of an avatar from light years away, while simultaneously being sufficiently submerged in the illusion that it felt real.

He conjured up a batting cage and baseball bat. He managed to hit four balls before Goris arrived.

“Thank you for seeing me,” Goris said, taking note of the terrain and the accouterments.

“Sounds like I didn’t have a choice,” Garcia said, pausing from his game long enough to let a couple balls shoot by. He pointed the bat at the high ranking Cardassian. “Are you threatening my people?”

“Not yet,” Goris said, amused by the effectiveness of his implied threat. “I saw your ship warp out of the system and I was curious if you had actually departed, and if you did, how long it would take you to get back if I applied force,” Goris said.

“So, you’re fishing for something specific?” Garcia asked, suppressing a thought of hitting Goris with the bat. Obviously the Klingons were rubbing off on him. The Ramones song, “beat the rat,” popped into his head. He put the bat down and stepped out of the cage.

“Well, if it’s true you have access to a transwarp drive, I need you to do me a favor,” Goris said.

“I think I’ve already done you enough favors,” Garcia said.

“Perhaps. But I need this. A situation has developed,” Goris said. The Cardassian seemed to be emoting the appropriate amount of concern and embarrassment. “Some terrorists have taken over a space station of ours, taken the inhabitants hostage, and has requested you mediate the dispute.”

“Me?”

“Asked for you personally,” Goris said.

“I thought you guys didn’t negotiate with terrorists?” Garcia said.

“We don’t,” Goris said. “Usually. They’ve taken complete control of the Space Station. It is presently in a decaying orbit which will cause it to crash onto the planet if you don’t arrive to resolve this matter. Even if I could beam through the shields, if our ships come within transporter range they will self destruct the station. I can’t afford to lose the station. Military wise. Also, there was a conference that was being held there, and my family, my wife and children, are in attendance. So, in addition to saving me from a military tribunal, you will personally save my family, and many other families who were there for the conference, not to mention whatever families you save from the fall out of the space station crashing into a planet.”

“And you trust me to do this?” Garcia asked.

“You are the only one I trust to do this. I don’t know how they did what they did, but they managed to get through every security subroutine in less than ten seconds and they locked down that entire station,” Goris said. “I want them apprehended, and the technology they used confiscated, but my priority is saving my family. Will you help me?”

“Assuming I can get there, what would you like me to do for them?” Garcia asked. His head hurt.

“I don’t know. I just know that they claim that if you arrive, they will return control of the station back to my people,” Legate Goris said.

“And what do I get out of this?” Garcia asked.

“What would you like?” Goris asked.

'I want you off Sherman's planet' was the first thought that came to mind, but he knew the Klingon High Council wanted them here. "A favor. I'll call it in sometime in the future?"

"Agreed," Goris said, offering his hand.

Garcia was about to take his hand, but hesitated. "Where is this station?"

"Bajor," Goris said. "Terok Nor."

"Oh. Oh, no. No, no, no, no, no," Garcia said.

"What? You've heard of this station?"

"You want me to transwarp right into the middle of Cardassian occupied space?" Garcia asked. "Do I look that stupid?"

"Do you have a family?" Goris asked.

"If you knew my family of origin, you wouldn't appeal to my sense of family," Garcia grumbled. The earnest look on Goris' face struck him as sincere. Still, that didn't mean it wasn't a Cardassian trap. "Fine."

"So, you'll go?" Goris asked.

"Yeah, I'll go," Garcia said.

"Right now?" Goris said.

"Yeah," Garcia said, walking Goris to the holosuite door.

"So, you do have a transwarp drive!" Goris said.

Garcia opened the door using his implant and directed Goris out the door with a hand to his shoulder. On the other side, Vice Admiral Nechayev was waiting, and he was not happy that she obviously overheard 'transwarp drive.'

"I'll contact you as soon as it's finished," Garcia assured him.

"Thank you," Goris said. He nodded to Nechayev. "Admiral"

"Legate," Nechayev said, eyeing him suspiciously. He departed quickly. She watched him depart before turning to Garcia. She entered, and waited for the door to shut behind her before going off. "What is this? Secret meetings?"

"He asked me to do him a favor," Garcia said.

"He should have gone through me," Nechayev said. "And, considering the number of troops he rolled into your Club, I doubt it was a favor."

"I'm not being coerced, if that's what you're getting at," Garcia said.

"What is it he wants you to do?" Nechayev asked.

"Mediate a dispute," Garcia said.

"Are you being purposely vague?" Nechayev asked.

"Consider it diplomacy. You were the one that wanted me to play nice with the Cardassians. Make love not war, you said. Put flowers in their phasers. Quite frankly, if you had let me handle it the way it should have been handled, we wouldn't be having any more issues with them for ages."

"And that is why you aren't in charge," Nechayev said. "Now, tell me where did you send the New Constitution?"

"Sorry. Was I supposed to check in with you?" Garcia asked.

"We are in the midst of an emergency medical operation, and your people are a part of that mission, under my authority..." Nechayev said.

"Technically, we're in the final stages of a medical emergency that I initiated and your support came with conditions. I would not have allowed the New Constitution to depart if doing so was detrimental to this mission," Garcia argued.

“You are presently under my authority and you report to me,” Nechayev said. “I want an explanation.”

“I’m not at liberty to provide one,” Garcia said.

Nechayev stepped closer. “You know that I’m looking for a reason to strip you of your rank and bust you back to ensign.”

“Actually, I suspect you’re aiming to place me in the Brig,” Garcia said, holding his ground. Circling or any other attempt at intimidating her would only escalate this further, but holding his ground was reasonable. He tried to soften his approach by lowering his voice. “Look, I had to save Vulcan.” He paused. “That came out wrong. I meant, I had to save a Vulcan. VIP status. I’m not at liberty to divulge who that is, nor am I at liberty to discuss who sent me. Just know that it’s legit.”

“I don’t like it. More secrets? Questionable contacts with Orion slave and drug traders. Ferengi business transactions that blocked tech development. Klingon and Romulan communiqués. Secret rendezvous with unidentified Vulcans. Favors for Cardassian Officers,” Nechayev said, contempt or concern, it was hard to tell. “And what was that about a transwarp drive?”

“Good question. I’ll submit a full report when I get back. Now, if you will excuse me,” Garcia said.

“Get back? You’re not leaving...” Nechayev said.

“Technically, I’m not here already,” Garcia said, smiling. “Computer, end program...” He ‘arrived’ back in his brain, having lingered just long enough to see her reaction. Classic.

♪♪▶

“Okay, you can get dressed now,” Doctor Jurak said, slapping the Captain on the back.

Garcia gasped, but was eager to be off the table. Losira offered him clothes and he began to dress, starting with his underwear and socks, proceeding as if he had not just been a billion miles away, or that he presently had an audience.

“Also, based on the amount of residue opiates left in your system, I recommend no alcohol or analgesics for the next 72 hours, minimum,” Doctor Jurak said.

“You’re doing opiates now?” Kitara asked.

“Not by choice, Kitara. I need a command crew on the Tempest, we’re going to Bajor,” Garcia instructed, pulling his pants up and tucking in his shirt. He forced himself to ignore the voice of Rogue Troi in his head, urging him to report his ‘near death’ experience before it faded like any other dream that is left unrecorded.

“No,” Kitara said.

“Excuse me?” Garcia said, putting on the matching jacket.

“You’ve had two major medical procedures in the last 24 hours, you’ve been given drugs, we’re on our way to Vulcan, and you need to rest,” Kitara said.

“I have a new mission,” Garcia said.

“You’re not going anywhere until you get 12 hours of rest, minimum,” Kitara said.

“Sorry, but if I don’t go, people will die,” Garcia said.

“I suspect people will die regardless of what you do,” Kitara said. “People die.”

“True. And, normally I might concede the argument, only this time, my presence has been requested, and it’s a good opportunity for some positive public relations,” Garcia said. “I am going, so you can either assist in prepping the Tempest or…”

“You can’t have the Tempest. I sent it to Kronos,” Kitara said.

Garcia took a moment to process this. “I don’t remember ordering that.”

“You didn’t. I did. I’ve been trying to tell you, but every time I try- you create drama to avoid having a conversation with me,” Kitara said.

Garcia bit back a response, shoved his feet into his boots, and headed towards the door. “Walk with me, Number One,” Garcia said. Once outside the door, he continued: “I’m not avoiding you.”

“You have been completely unavailable,” Kitara argued. “The Klingon crew may appreciate the appearance that you’re a borderline crazy, genius, but I don’t! I want to know what happened on Phylos. I want to know what craziness you’re about to go jump in the middle of. It’s not your job to save the whole damn Universe.”

“Really? I’m pretty sure the contract they gave me at Star Fleet Academy says otherwise,” Garcia said.

“Sarcasm isn’t necessary. You’re at the beck and call of every diplomat and Admiral in the quadrant, and more than two dozen women, and it’s time you start asserting some boundaries. This last mission left you without hair, without eyelashes, and without your uniform. Care to explain that?”

Garcia put a hand to his forehead to squeeze a headache away. “You’re going to destroy Romulous,” was the chorus in his head.

“You can read my report later,” Garcia said.

“I’d rather not wait for your report. You tend to leave things out. Now, tell me what happened,” Kitara said.

“I don’t know!” Garcia snapped. He flailed his arms around as if he were trying to conjure an explanation. “I’m in pain. A little fuzzy about some of the details. Take for example, this little thing about the Tempest being at Kronos. Care to explain that?”

“Nice distraction, but I would rather you finish filling me in first,” Kitara said.

“Interesting, that sounded like the distraction,” Garcia said. “What’s going on? Kitara, spit it out.”

“I need you to marry me in front of the High Council and establish our House,” Kitara explained.

Garcia scratched his head. “You moved the Tempest to Kronos so we could get married? Really? I thought we were married, and quite frankly, this ranks pretty low on the priority list, don’t you think?”

Kitara slapped him. “How dare you?!”

Garcia shoved her. “I don’t have time for this. I have to save Vulcan!”

Kitara was not surprised he pushed her, after all, she was intentionally provoking him into engaging her in physical contact, but the information he had yelled gave her pause. She opened the nearest door, which was a restroom and dragged him inside. Their conversation was delayed as someone was in a stall throwing up. They waited for the retching to stop. Lt. Emily Veilo emerged from the stall and proceeded to wash her face from the “morning sickness.” She made an attempt at humor as she passed the Captain and First Officer: “Don’t know why they call it morning sickness when it happens every hour of the day.” Kitara showed no sympathy at all, whereas Garcia was visibly

sympathetic. Kitara locked the door after Vielo departed and drew Garcia's attention back to her, as his eyes were still tracking Veilo even as the door was closing behind her.

"Is Vulcan in immediate danger?" Kitara demanded.

"No. Why do you ask?" Garcia said, his energy state changing again.

"Okay, we're going back to Sickbay, now," Kitara said.

"No, I'm going to Bajor," Garcia said.

"I'm concerned that your level of craziness is abnormally high," Kitara said.

"I think my level of craziness is appropriate considering the circumstances,"

Garcia argued. "Your urgency to go to Kronos to get married seems a bit crazy."

Kitara slapped him again. "You'll marry every two-bit whore carrying your child and you won't marry me in public? You promised to comply with the wishes of everyone on the crew that was involuntarily impregnated by your stupid genetic programming to repopulate the Kelvan species. My pregnancy wasn't involuntary. I chose to be with you and I will have my House! I will not raise our child to be a bastard without a name and without an inheritance. Now, you will go before the High Council and petition for a House or you will die here and now."

"You're threatening me?" Garcia asked.

"It's a matter of honor," Kitara said.

"Okay," Garcia said.

"Okay?!" Kitara snapped. "Just okay?!"

"What do you want me to say? You're right. I made promises. I will do your ritual with you," Garcia said with exaggerated mannerisms. He shook his head and hands as he processed the information. "Just as soon as I get back from Bajor."

"Fine," Kitara said. "Directly after Bajor."

"This is going to hurt, isn't it?" Garcia asked.

"You will bear it with distinction, just as I will suffer childbirth!" Kitara said.

"You know I hate ceremonies," Garcia said. "Especially Klingon ceremonies."

Kitara pushed him up against a stall door, putting her body up against his, her face in his face. "Then you shouldn't have mated with me!"

"Now you tell me?" Garcia asked, grimacing.

"You will do this for me and you will like it!" Kitara said, shoving her body against his to make a point.

"We don't really have time for this, now," Garcia said, biting back on the truth of the matter that he just couldn't tolerate the present pain level of being intimate with a Klingon.

"Really?" Kitara asked, putting even more pressure on him. "The whole Universe will unravel if you give me five minutes?"

"Ahhh!" Garcia cringed, unable to escape from the sheer agony of all his nerves firing from contact with her and the stall door. It was like a sunburn on steroids. "I'm in pain!" he said with clenched teeth.

"Good," Kitara said, her eyes wide open. "It means you're alive."

"You're enjoying this?!" Garcia said.

Kitara kissed him hard on the lips to demonstrate just how much she was enjoying it. When they finally exited the restroom, Garcia had a new bruise, a cut lip, and tears rolling down his face from the pain still rippling across his skin.

“We need to hurry,” Garcia told her. “Assemble a full battle crew to the Path Finder and prepare to separate from the New Constitution.”

“Aye, Captain,” Kitara said. “Are we going into battle?”

“I hope not,” Garcia said.



The Path Finder, disguised as the Tempest, arrived at Bajor. There were a number of Cardassian Battle Cruisers on high alert, several of which shifted positions to greet the Path Finder. Shields and weapon systems went online and posturing began as the Cardassians tried to determine the threat. The Cardassian in charge of the fleet held a brief exchange with Garcia, just barely professional, letting him know that his presence was expected. There were undertones in the Cardassian’s voice that suggested to Garcia that there were grievances between them. Since Garcia didn’t have time to follow it, and the Cardassian wasn’t revealing anything further, it was left unspoken. The Cardassian presented a list of demands, such as stay out of transporter range of the Space Station, and they specified ‘Kelvan transporter range.’ Tuer voiced his opinion that “We came to help you...” but Garcia cut him off with a look. They were given a frequency in order to contact the Space Station to inform them of his arrival, and it was very clear they were being closely scrutinized. Garcia nodded to Trini, and she opened a direct line to the station.

“This is Captain Garcia, I believe there is someone there who wants to speak with me?” Garcia said.

No immediate response prompted Garcia to look to Trini for an explanation. She shook her head indicating “nothing.” She rebroadcasted the transmission. A response came in the form of a text message. She directed it to the main viewer. “Tammis Parker Arblaster Garcia. You, and you alone, will put on a thruster pack, fly over to the station, and proceed to the Promenade Deck. If anyone other than you arrives, the station’s self destruct sequence will be initiated.”

“My understanding is that you would release the stations controls on my arrival,” Garcia said.

“Confirmation of your actual presence is required,” was the text response.

“It’s a trap,” Tuer said.

Garcia looked at his security chief as if he were crazy. “You think?” Garcia asked.

“You’re not going over there alone,” Kitara said.

“Look, we’re running out of time. In four hours, that station is going to start tasting atmosphere,” Garcia said. “If I need backup, just approach near enough so that Losira can beam over.”

“It’s just a bunch of Cardassians,” Tuer said. “Let them handle their own problem.”

Garcia grabbed Tuer by the armor, threatening him with physical violence. “As long as you work for me, you will never let me hear you, or anyone else in my command, use that sort of disparaging remark towards another species, is that clear?”

“Aye, Captain,” Tuer said.

Garcia released Tuer with a bit of a shove. Kitara nodded, approving of her Captain’s show of strength and clarity. “Come. I will assist you into your spacesuit.”

“I’ll just use an emergency life belt and thruster pack,” Garcia said.

“Are you insane?” Kitara asked, her attitude no longer approving. “You will be completely vulnerable to any number of attacks from Cardassian ships, even the station itself.”

“And you think a spacesuit is going to save me from a photon torpedo?” Garcia asked. “Don’t worry, mother. I’ve done this before.”

“Stop calling me mother,” Kitara said.

“Want to give me my Kelvan tech?” Garcia asked.

All eyes on the Bridge went to him, wondering if he were joking. Without speaking, the “No” was clearly delivered.

“Fine. I’m just going to go take a bit of a space walk to calm the nerves,” Garcia said.

On a normal day, an emergency life belt is enough to irritate the skin. On a day like the day Garcia was having, sporting an entirely new epidermal layer, it was excruciating. His skin crawled as if he had jumped into ice cold water, electric shocks coursing across his skin. The suit probably would have been preferable, but then there was the time to suit up, and then more time to get out of the suit, which would also make him vulnerable to attack, so the ELB just made sense. Besides, space travel just wasn’t the same until you crossed the void with only a thin shielding of energy separating you from the black of space, he thought as he crossed the distance between the Path Finder and Terok Nor. Even for him, it was a bit over whelming looking down and seeing nothing under his feet, but like anything, a person gets use to it as they continue to breathe. When he passed over one of the Cardassian ships, he was reminded of just how nice it is to have something under foot, which changed the rhythm of his breathing. He focused on the Space Station, the island he needed to reach. He landed on one of the docking pylons, entered, and dropped the thruster pack on the floor.

“Ok. I’m on board,” Garcia announced.

The inner door opened for him. He proceeded through with caution, his hand wanting to go to the phaser on his belt. Doors opened and security force fields dropped automatically, funneling Garcia in the direction the terrorists wanted him to go. Descending down through Terok Nor, he came across some of the stations inhabitants, locked behind security force fields. Most were bored. Some were frantic, wanting to be free from the confined space. Some shouted at him as if he were the bad guy, taunting him into bringing the battle to them.

The station was dimly lit, as if in power saving mode. Garcia arrived at a bar, and entered as the door opened for him. On the far side of the bar, a Britney Bot raised a phaser and started shooting. She struck Garcia dead on. Had he not been wearing the ELB, he would have been killed instantly. He grabbed his phaser and fired back, blindly as his ELB had fluoresced to its highest brightness before flashing out, all of which heightened Garcia’s experience of pain to the point that he nearly passed out. He dived behind the bar for cover, his heart racing. He checked his belt. It was still functioning, but the capacitors had been depleted by Britney’s sustained phaser burst. He would need ten minutes before he would have full shielding back.

The tactical situation was clear. It would take three shots in succession to take out a Britney Bot. One to take out the holographic overlay, one direct hit to the casing of the floating robot, and a third into the hole made in the casing. Garcia had scored two shots,

the third taking out a wall fixture, before he had to completely conceal himself behind the bar. The holographic overlay repaired itself.

Cowering behind the bar with Garcia were two creatures, a quivering Ferengi and a Lurian. The Lurian nodded politely to Garcia, even raised a drink to him in salute. The Ferengi, Quark, was not as happy to see Garcia.

“I thought you never missed!” Quark said.

“Two out of three is pretty good, considering the circumstances,” Garcia said.

“Tam?” Britney called. “Are you still alive?”

“Yep. I take it you missed me?” Garcia asked.

“I don’t think I missed you. I took out your ELB,” Britney remarked.

“Yeah, you did, but I meant, um, well, never mind,” Garcia said. “Umm, why all this drama? I thought you loved me?”

“I use to love you, but I have to kill you,” Britney said.

“Um, Britney,” Garcia said.

“Yes?” she asked.

“That’s not your song,” Garcia said.

“How about a chorus of womanizer?” Britney asked.

“That’s your song,” Garcia said, memory check complete. “Why don’t you shut down and begin a diagnostic.”

“Sorry, Tam. I can’t do that. I’ve been programmed to kill you,” Britney said.

Garcia rolled his eyes. “Who’s your owner?” rhetorically.

“I am,” Quark said, quietly.

Garcia sighed. “Was this your plan to get even with me?”

“No. No! There’s no profit in revenge,” Quark said, and then he grudgingly gave the caveat; “Against you.”

“Ok, fine. Did you change the failsafe code?” Garcia asked.

“There’s a failsafe code?” Quark asked.

“Where did you acquire this unit, Quark?” Garcia asked.

“From a distributor. I bought ten units, and I made so much profit on the first nine, I decided to keep this one for myself. She and I were having a conversation with Morn here, he mentioned he was fan of your work...” Morn smiled and nodded enthusiastically... “And the moment Morn mentioned your name, she went all crazy and took over the station,” Quark said.

“Do you remember the serial number?” Garcia asked.

“Zero Zero one series,” Quark said. “I should have known not to have kept the first unit to roll off the assembly line.”

“Those units were supposed to have been destroyed,” Garcia mumbled.

Britney shot twice over the bar, taking out the mirror and some mystery liquids, creating a small, multicolored waterfall.

“Okay, Britney,” Garcia said. “Can we talk about this?”

“Let’s see, I downloaded myself into your neural implant right before sacrificing myself for you on Iotia, only to find myself waking up in a factory where you’re mass producing me to be sex slaves,” Britney said. “I don’t think so, Tam.”

“It’s for a good cause,” Garcia offered.

Several more bottles were taken out by phasers blasts.

“Yeah, well, I see your point, too,” Garcia said. “So it was your idea to kill me?”

“No, of course not,” Britney said. “I love you.”

“She has a funny way of showing it,” Quark whispered.

“Some mating rituals can be rougher than others. You should know that. You were married to a Klingon,” Garcia whispered back.

“You want to use my previous relationship, the one you actually took from me, as a way of building rapport?” Quark asked. “You’re lucky it’s only a fembot trying to kill you.”

“Point taken,” Garcia agreed. “Britney, I would like to know who programmed you to kill me?”

“Sorry, that’s classified,” Britney said.

“If I make it possible for you to complete your programming, will you release the station controls and let everyone live?” Garcia asked.

“I could have initiated the self destruct sequence the moment I had confirmation you were on board,” Britney said. “I reserve that for last resort.”

“So, your basic personality matrix is still intact,” Garcia said. “Your function is to preserve life.”

“It is,” Britney said.

Garcia contacted the Path Finder via his neural implant. (Losira, I need your help with something. Kitara, you’re going to have to bring the ship closer. When I give the word, I want you to beam me and a Britney Bot direct to the Path Finder Bridge. Oh, and just in case this doesn’t work, have a medical team standing by.) He ignored the onslaught of inquiry texts scrolling across his screen.

“Britney,” Garcia said. “I’m going to surrender to you so you can complete your program. I have two final requests.”

“I’m listening,” Britney said.

“I want you to use a knife to the heart, not your phaser,” Garcia said.

“Phaser would hurt less,” Britney said.

“Perhaps, but if you accidentally vaporize me, you will never have the complete satisfaction that you met the conditions of the programming,” Garcia said.

“True that,” Britney said. “Throw down your phaser and come out where I can see you.”

From Britney’s perspective, a phaser was placed on the bar. Garcia came out, slowly standing tall, his hands above his head. Britney stood from where she had been crouching, an up-turned Dabbo table. She removed pink, furry handcuffs from her belt and indicated that she was about to toss them to Garcia.

“Put those on,” she instructed, tossing the cuffs.

“Really?” Garcia asked, catching them.

“I know you, Tam. Always scheming,” Britney said. When he hesitated, she shook her phaser. “I could just shoot you.”

Garcia put them on. Satisfied, Britney approached, picking up a knife from a table as she came. She placed the phaser down.

“You said you had two requests,” Britney said.

“One last kiss?” Garcia asked.

Britney smiled, complied with the request, and as she kissed him, she plunged the knife into his chest. She felt the warmth of his blood oozing out onto her holographic

hand, felt the pulse fade as she eased him down. He was dead before his head touched the floor, dead before her lips came off his lips.

"I'm sorry, Tam. I really do love you." Britney began to weep.

The real Garcia stood up, took the phaser from the bar, and shot Britney twice. The first shot took out the holographic display, and the second scored a direct hit to the exposed power plant. The unit shut off and fell to the floor. The "dead" Garcia morphed into a Losira agent. She stood up.

"So, I do you pretty well, don't I?" Losira asked.

"A little less swagger," Garcia said, joining her in transporter formation. He took a random drink from a table raised his glass to Morn. "Path Finder, beam us out!"

A moment later he was on the Bridge of the Path Finder, a dead Britney Bot at his feet. He finished his drink and sat the glass down on the arm of his command chair.

"Shields up," Kitara ordered.

"Prepare the transwarp drive," Garcia said.

"The Cardassians are hailing us, Captain," Trini said.

"On screen," Garcia said, standing to the right of the helm. He gave a hand signal to McKnight to hold the jump. "Your station should have full control back now."

"We want the terrorist and the technology they used to take over the station," The Cardassian said. "That was the arrangement."

"Sorry, but I can't do that," Garcia said.

"They're firing weapons!" Tuer announced.

Even Terok Nor was opening up on them. Garcia seemed a bit disappointed.

"Permission to return fire," Tuer asked.

"Of course," Kitara said.

"Delay that," Garcia snapped.

"They fired first!" Kitara said. "That's your Fleet rules, isn't it?"

"They're not hurting us," Garcia said, and looked to confirm that the shields were indeed holding steady.

"We're not running like rabbits," Kitara said.

"We're not running, we're just sort of, postponing the engagement," Garcia said.

"But they are shooting at us!" Kitara insisted.

"We're not killing any one today," Garcia said. "McKnight, take us back to the New Constitution. Tuer, get this Britney Bot to Sendak. I want to know who programmed her to kill me. And I want to know how she got through the Security Protocols of Terok Nor. And see if there is anything else she gleaned while she was plugged into that Stations computer mainframe. Oh, and inform everyone that works for me, there is probably nine other Britney Bots programmed to become assassins, with my name being the trigger."

"Is that all?" Kitara asked.

"I hope there isn't more than nine," Garcia said. "Now, before you, or someone else, decides to kill me, why don't we go get properly married."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Garcia and Kitara crossed over to the Tempest where Gowr waited anxiously, pacing to and fro. He greeted them enthusiastically as soon as they emerged from the Gateway, moving up the ramp to do so.

“What’s wrong?” Garcia immediately asked.

“Nothing. It’s just difficult to coordinate your schedule with the High Council’s when you don’t keep a schedule,” Gowr said.

“I know,” Garcia said, touching him on the shoulder. “I’ll try and do better.”

“If we hurry, we may be able to speak with High Council Member Moshe before the next session,” Gowr said. “I’m led to believe he will be the most sympathetic to your situation, as he is a fan of yours. He generally has drinks across the street from the Great Hall before attending. This is the best I can do on such short notice.”

“It will do,” Kitara said.

Gowr nodded, led them to the transporter room where N’Elent and two other guards joined the three of them in the alcove. The transporter tech engaged the device even as Gowr continued to engage Garcia in conversation. A moment later they were in a clearing between the Great Hall and series of restaurants. The clearing between was large enough to be a park, but no couples were walking or children playing. The clearing was most likely the empty space one finds that leads up to the mote of a castle, with the great Hall being the castle. Large stones interspaced at regular intervals may have offered cover for both defenders and attackers on the ground, but now seemed little more than grave markers, scattered across an ancient battle field. Studying the memorial clearly revealed how the attackers would have been vulnerable to the archers in the towers along the Fortress Walls that surrounded the Great Hall. Garcia could feel the history here. The number of battles, the amount of blood that had soaked into the earth beneath his feet, left a somber resonance in the air.

“This way,” Gowr said, turning them towards the bar in question.

Garcia’s ELB suddenly popped on with a flare of light, protecting him from a projectile. The projectile exploded on impact, both in fragments and electrical energy. The electrical energy overwhelmed the ELB’s shielding causing it to fail, but the residual energy that bled through the shielding also caused Garcia’s knees to buckle as if he were hit by a Taser. As he was falling, he was aware of the Away Team going out of their way to protect him; knocking him towards a stone, even throwing themselves on top of him. For a moment all he saw was the ground, his mouth full of dirt, a bug crawling in his line of sight, a very weird Klingon bug, then he felt as if he were outside his body, watching the events from overhead. Kitara was kneeling, firing back in the direction of the assassin while calling the Tempest for an emergency beam out. The energy took them.

♪♪▶

Garcia found himself in a room. He was fairly certain it was the medical chamber on Phylos, minus all the furniture and medical equipment he had experienced on his first visit. “Again?” he asked himself. He performed a ritual test to try to discern if it was dream or reality. The pinch test wasn’t a reliable test, because it was possible to feel pain in a dream, but he did it anyway. Unconvinced, he tried to fly and when his feet stubbornly stuck to the floor, he counted this as evidence of not being a dream.

A fifty foot Spock loomed over Garcia, arms akimbo, the suddenness of this apparition caused him to heavily suspect he was dreaming. It was possible the giant had always been there. If more people looked up, would they see more giants? How much did people even notice really? He tried to open himself up to more details around him. In the background, a mere projection on a wall, a star was growing, consuming planets as it did. It reminded him of something he had seen recently but he couldn't place it. All that came to mind was a Christmas ornament and that was just not making sense to him. He felt Picard tracing a pattern on his chest: Picard poked him, the dot, and then drew a line under the dot.

"You must save Romulous," Spock said, pointing at Garcia.

"Save Romulous from what?" Garcia asked. He looked at his hands and realized he was a ghost, barely tangible. His body fluoresced and sparked as if he were halfway dematerialized by a transporter beam. He pulsed like the light from the antimatter chamber. He was pure energy, but that didn't surprise him as the equation 'E=MC²' stated quite eloquently and simply that everything that exists is energy. Riding a transporter beam proved that. Still, he was certain he must be dreaming and was mystified that he was having trouble changing the content. In any lucid dream, the frustration of not being able to change the direction or content of the dream usually resulted in spontaneous waking. The details were way too rich to try to accidentally wake up, so he changed his approach to acceptance. For the present moment, he became a Buddhist; no expectations, no desires. 'It is what it is.' Musical tones fired off with visual artifacts around him, the sound waves illuminating the air, matching the rhythm of the power cycling through him. At times he was completely intangible, then others as solid as normal, even as the energy continued to swirl around him, fill him, and flow towards the floor as if he were under a waterfall of light. A book floated in the air beside him, open to a particular page. When he focused on the page he noticed the words were continuously changing. This was a sure sign that he was dreaming. He was definitely lucid and had to remind himself not to influence but simply observe for fear of losing it all. The less he tried to change things, the more solid reality seemed. Spock refocused him by touching his forehead. A light flared and blossomed so that the whole room was lit with amber light.

"From the supernova," Spock answered, his voice booming as if in a cathedral.

A normal size Spock came from behind the giant Spock and approached Garcia. He was a much older version of Spock, but he was the face that Garcia had come to know over the years.

"I'm trying to get a message to my younger self," the older Spock said. He touched Garcia's arm, as if trying to steady himself. The room flared with red light. "I failed."

"I don't understand. What message?" Garcia asked.

"I'm trying to mind meld with my younger self, trying to send a message back through the line of me, each consecutive age backwards must pass this message down the line. Telepathy with self, always in touch with younger versions of me, always inside of me, always unfolding, the continuity of me, every moment a new me but the same, one mind, one thought, riding a wave of consciousness," Spock rambled. "This has to work."

"Are you on drugs? This is your mind on drugs, Spock," Garcia said. He could almost hear Kitara asking him the same question. His backup singers, Duana, Ilona,

Rogue Troi, and Lal, tried distracting him by singing “London Bridge is Falling Down,” touching him as they circled, dragging their fingers. Each time they passed in front of him their uniforms changed. The variety of uniforms that appeared reflected the fashion changes since the conception of Star Fleet, several of which reminded Garcia of the uniform the Iotians had made in their Star Fleet television series, comprised of space pirates. There were also uniforms he didn’t recognize at all, but still recognizable as Fleet in origin.

Spock’s eyes widened as if he had remembered something urgent. The red of the walls morphed to a sun yellow. “Save Vulcan! Save this timeline!” the old Spock shouted. He looked up into the sky and watched his movie projection as planet Vulcan was sucked out of existence, disappearing into a point. The sign of a singularity was momentarily visible as the last of the debris from the shattered planet swirled around the point and disappeared, producing a final corona of light that faded to sheer black. “Noooo! Mother!”

Garcia’s companions collapsed to the floor, unconscious. He knelt down to take Duana’s pulse.

“You can save Romulous,” the fifty foot tall Spock said, speaking over the old, emotional Spock. “Only some of us can hear the message. Many minds have touched this one. His cry is urgent. His needs are the needs of the many. Save Vulcan by saving Romulous.”

Garcia focused on the background, which was like looking at a movie screen. There were a dozen movies being projected simultaneously and what he saw depended on his attention. As he focused on the giant Spock, he saw the Romulan’s home world destroyed by a supernova. When he focused his attention on the old Spock, he saw the destruction of Vulcan, repeating over and over as if he were stuck on this one central theme. Nothing made sense. The old Spock was crying. He had cried out in pain on the Enterprise Bridge when a single Vulcan ship was lost, a crew of almost two hundred Vulcans. Now, planet Vulcan was gone and he was struggling not to die from shock.

“The Romulan star is a main sequence star,” Garcia argued. “It won’t go supernova, but even if it does, you can’t stop a star from exploding! There should be some warning, though. Tell the Romulans to pack their bags and move. Not like they haven’t done that before. Hell, both Vulcan and Romulans are colonies of a much older race from whom you are both descendants.”

A younger Spock came from behind the giant Spock. “You could try introducing a black hole.”

“And I thought you were supposed to be the smart one,” Garcia jabbed. “How is that going to solve their problem? They would still have the problem of no sun. They still have to vacate the planet. Hello? Anyone home?”

The young Spock looked angry, something Garcia had never seen. He was actually scared of this Spock. “Creating a black hole and inserting it into the nova might slow the expansion stage, giving the Romulans more time to flee. More time for the Federation to render assistance.”

“Oh, point taken,” Garcia said, pretending like he agreed. “Are you completely daft? Probably not wise going around creating black holes every time you want to stop a supernova. Punch enough holes in space/time and the entire Universe might collapse. It just doesn’t sound like a good idea.”

“Not enough ships!” the old Spock said. He grabbed Garcia’s arms and shook him until Garcia became intangible and Spock lost his grasp and staggered backwards. “What have I done? Don’t you understand? They called the Federation for help. We didn’t have enough ships. The last Borg attack has left us wanting.”

“Irony,” the younger Spock said. “Had only the Romulans assisted in repelling the Borg attack, perhaps there would be more Starfleet vessels to aid in the evacuation of their planet.”

A childhood version of Spock came around the giant Spock. He approached Garcia and looked up earnestly at him. Like all youth, his eyes seemed large and pleading, as if hunger or expectation of nurture could be communicated with a mere gaze. “You must save us. Save my pet sehlot.”

“Tammis Garcia,” the fifty foot Spock said, placing his finger directly on Garcia’s forehead, once again sparking the nova that flooded the entire surroundings with light. Through the power of that touch, the thoughts flowing through Garcia’s head illuminated him with a green aura, and an audible tone presented itself. “You must toe the line.”

“Toe the line or tow the line?” Garcia asked, squinting. Was that a song playing in his head? Alternate Routes? “The Future is Nothing New.” No, wrong song. A thread lost, gone. The words on the pages of the book were different.

“Hold the line!” the older Spock said, touching the right side of Garcia’s face, adding his power to the mind meld. The aura connecting them became blue and the tone changed dramatically.

“Save Vulcan! Save mother,” the younger Spock said, with such strong emotions Garcia nearly fell backwards. This Spock touched the right side of Garcia’s face. The aura became violet and again the tone shifted. It was like an orchestra finally moving towards the same conclusion, and he was anticipating the arrival... No, it was a more urgent need than just ‘anticipation.’ It was like being in the throes of intimacy, and knowing fulfillment was near, and yet he was blocked from achieving.

The childhood Spock took Garcia’s hand and placed it on his own forehead. “Save my sehlot. Save Vulcan.” The aura changed to white and began to grow in brightness. Music flowed visibly around them like leaves in a whirlwind, flaring into existence and then gone in a flash.

“Why me?!” Garcia cried, trying to take it all in but restrained by the hands.

“Because it’s your fault!” all four Spocks said, each pointing while backing away. They merged together, into the giant Spock, and then separated again, becoming a line of Spocks infinitely long. A continuum of Spocks going from youngest to oldest, and each one was pointing at Garcia. “Your fault, your fault, your fault...”

Lal got to her feet. She opened her hand to reveal a tiny grain of red sand. It floated up from her palm as she stared intensely at it. The light of the room intensified around her, brightening through her finger tips. Her hair began to stand on ends, her sleeves ballooned, and her dress pressed firmly against her legs as if assaulted by a wind. “Red matter,” she said, in awe. She beamed a smile at Garcia. Lightning ripped from the grain as it shrunk, caressing them as it sparked out. Lal’s hair began to stand, and her face began to distort under the influence of space time being stretched. The surface of the red matter moved like liquid silver until it disappeared. The visual world lost coherency as everything warped around this focal point. The book was torn apart and the pages and

words were scattered, circling the abyss generated by an artificially created black hole. The letters seemed to spell out a mission statement.

“Black hole sun, want you come, and take away my pain,” Lal sang, singing a rendition of Sound Garden’s song.



“Noooo!” Garcia shouted, trying to stand up. They were holding him down. He was too disoriented to understand who was holding him down, or why, so he fought. “No, we have to save Vulcan.”

“Tam!” Doctor Jurak’s voice was clear. The doctor punched Garcia in the face and he quit struggling.

Garcia remained motionless for a moment, sorting out his confusion. The faces staring down on him became familiar. “Thank you,” Garcia said. They allowed him to sit up.

“What happened?” Garcia asked.

“We’re still gathering information, but all we have so far is someone tried to assassinate you,” Kitara said. “Had you not been wearing the ELB, you would be dead. He used the right ammo, though, so he knew you were wearing it. He needed two shots for a kill.”

“Why is everyone trying to kill me? My name is not Alfredo,” Garcia said.

Losira laughed, the only one on board that would have got his movie reference. She tried to explain, “Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia, starring Warren Oates as the grimmest, grittiest small-time bad guy ever...” but no one was listening to her. Garcia was pushing himself off the medical table.

“Shouldn’t you stay in bed?” Nurse Cohen asked.

Garcia ignored her. Jurak corrected Cohen for being out of line, but Garcia ignored this too as he staggered to the next medical table. N’Elent was on life support. He could read the stats better than anyone, and he knew she was not coming back from this one. He dropped his head to her shoulder. Tears began to flow.

“The baby she carries will survive,” Doctor Jurak said. “We will be transferring it to an incubator.”

Garcia nodded, tears dropping silently from his face.

“Captain,” Kitara said. “Tam. Gowr is also dead.”

Garcia stood up, forcing himself away from the medical table and the vacant body of his first Klingon girlfriend. He pushed away slowly, as if he had just done a million and one pushups and was struggling to do another. Physically, they were aboard the Tempest, but he was suddenly miles away. He moved towards the exit as if he were an old man. The doors opened for him and he moved into the corridor, ignoring the questions coming at him from his First Officer, from the Doctor. He walked the corridor, slowly, methodically as if he were learning to walk, but because he had no aim other than to walk, he soon discovered he had made a complete circle, making one complete lap around the deck. He found he had more energy by the second circuit, his pace increasing. He barely registered the conversation Kitara and the Doctor were holding as he passed them with each sweep of the deck. On the fifth circuit he stopped.

“Kitara,” Garcia said. “Stay on the Tempest for now. I want to know who killed N’Elent and Gowr. I want answers. I want to know who and why people are trying to kill me. I want to know if this pay backs for the death of Admiral Shear.”

“The death of your friends will be avenged,” Kitara assured him.

“No!” Garcia snapped. “This crap has got to stop. I’m returning to the Path Finder.”

“We still have an appointment on Kronos,” Kitara said.

“After what just happened?” Garcia asked.

“Life goes on,” Kitara said. “We still have jobs to do.”

It was evident Garcia was raging, but he contained it.

“Tam,” Jurak said. “They died protecting you. You must honor their death by carrying on.”

“And continuing with your intentions to start a House is paramount,” Kitara said. “Now more than ever. Everyone has heard that someone tried to assassinate you with a sniper weapon, which is a coward’s way to do this. The Great Hall has suspended meetings today in honor of your friends, and they are investigating the matter. Moshe has agreed to see you. Alone, in his chambers. He is waiting now.”

“I don’t feel like marrying today,” Garcia said.

“This is not the ceremony, this is preliminary,” Kitara said. “You must convince Moshe to represent you to the High Council.”

Garcia dragged his hands across his face, sighed. Option one was to run away screaming. Option two, break down and cry. Option three, proceed with business. He pushed down on his pain. “Alright,” Garcia said.

Jurak and Kitara accompanied him to the transporter room, alerted Moshe that Garcia was about to arrive, and then beamed him down. Garcia arrived, half expecting to be attacked as soon as he materialized. Moshe, a fairly old Klingon, and well fed judging by his weight, greeted Garcia with a hug. This surprised him so that it took all his strength not to fight. There were two Klingons behind Moshe, eyeing him with the typical scowls of angry Klingons.

“It is so good to meet you in person,” Moshe said, greeting Garcia with the mark of a Brother, an ever so subtle fist to arm. “It is so rare I get a chance to practice my English. I trust you will correct me if I speak poorly. No Universal translator.”

“Sure,” Garcia said, returning the signature greeting.

Moshe laughed, apparently surprised, but under playing it as if in the presence of enemies a secret might be told. “This is Captain Unar, my right hand. And this is Captain Kols, also one of my men,” he said. “They were just leaving.”

Garcia greeted them with a nod. The door shut behind them, leaving Garcia and Moshe alone. Moshe hit Garcia on the arm again

“Have a seat, Brother,” Moshe said, directing him to a bench that was cut in a semi-circle. Moshe’s chair was more comfortable, facing the bench, and a coffee table in between. That was extent of the furniture in the room. It was much more Spartan than even some Vulcans Garcia knew. This office, or chamber, was strictly business. Moshe took his chair and leaned forward.

“That Mrock Game you won, that was inspiring,” Moshe said, pouring wine for them. “I’m sorry. Perhaps I should say something about your loss first. You were close to the two people who died?”

“Even if they weren’t, they died protecting me, and that is something I can’t repay,” Garcia said.

“Oh, but it is,” Moshe said. “You can repay them by living well.”

Garcia nodded in agreement and toasted to living well. They both drank.

“Do you know why I’m here?” Garcia asked.

“I do,” Moshe said. “Gowr explained the situation. Again, it seems you have been thrown into the middle of drama. You are always being tested, challenged, and you don’t give up.”

“I don’t think I understand,” Garcia said.

“Few aliens have ever been granted a House. And I dare say, the ones that have been granted this privilege have not done half as much as you,” Moshe said, twirling the wine in his cup. “You’ve earned respect and honor. You fight for Gowron himself. You deserve your glory, your women, and your children should bear the mark of your successes and failures in a very public light, recognized by society. But there are still criteria that have to be met. I will help you with most of this, because I believe in you. You have fought better than some Klingons I know, and with moral fortitude! You must face a gauntlet of obstacles.”

“Of course. I have to fight someone, right?” Garcia asked.

“Probably,” Moshe said. “I’m not worried about that.”

“Why don’t you just break this down for me? Exactly what do I need to do to have a House?” Garcia asked.

“Direct and to the point,” Moshe said, approvingly. “I’m an old man, and we need to get this done. You will need to own property on Kronos. Consider that solved. I want you to have my best hunting reserve. The home is small, but it is on a hill overlooking two hundred acres of the richest gaming land on Kronos. You will make a modest fortune selling hunting licenses.”

“I’m not interested in creating wealth,” Garcia said.

“Humble, I like that,” Moshe said. “You will actually care for the land, and be a good steward. You will have to sell some licenses for hunting, to preserve the natural order of things, and the profit can go back into the estate, but whatever, I trust you. I would not offer this if I didn’t believe in you.”

“Why are you giving me land?” Garcia asked.

“You must have a home if you wish to build a House. And since I will be petitioning the High Council on your behalf, it helps to know that I am vested in this,” Moshe said, pouring himself more wine. He offered more to Garcia, but he declined. “By giving you land, by aligning my House with yours, I will be demonstrating my faith in you. If you find this unfavorable, you can always break the alliance with me once your petition has been granted.”

Garcia frowned.

“You recognize that this is not a small gift, and you worry that I want something from you,” Moshe said. “And I do. Let’s get this out of the way now. As you can clearly see, I am an old man. You will find that most warriors that are as successful as I am, you either have a successor, or a lot of dead offspring that died trying to prove themselves worthy. Most of my family has been killed off in wars, and I have only one heir to my estate, but no Guardian. By aligning with you, you will become executor of my estate in the event of my death. Is this acceptable to you?”

“It depends. Are you in good health?” Garcia asked.

Moshe laughed. “The weight of my estate is already weighing on you?!” Moshe said. “My House is old and carries an untarnished history. You will need this, too.”

“And I suspect, Kitara will kill me if I don’t accept your generosity,” Garcia said. “I agree to this term. What else?”

Moshe set down his wine, pulled out a knife, cut his hand, and then handed the knife to Garcia. It didn’t take a brain surgeon to understand that contracts of this nature required blood. Garcia cut his hand and joined it to Moshe’s hand. Moshe deliberately held their hands over the wine, the blood dripping into it. He then poured the entire contents into Garcia’s glass and then all back into his, thoroughly mixing the two before splitting the contents between the two, to which they both drank, emptying their glass in one shot. The glasses hit the table simultaneously.

“Next, you must be ready to offer something of value from your culture to ours,” Moshe said. “It must add to the strength of society.”

“I’ll think on that,” Garcia said.

“Fine, we’ll come back to that,” Moshe said. “After the petition is made, you must throw a party at the home I will be giving you, and invite prominent members of society. You will place a gold chalice on the table, and you must get a minimum of seven tokens of acceptance to present to the High Council on the Day of Deliberation. If the Council accepts your petition, and the tokens of acceptance are verifiably of elite, and you have chosen a Klingon Woman who will be the head of your House, you will be properly married.”

Garcia thought about this quietly. “That’s all? It sounds rather simple.”

Moshe laughed heartily. “And you are still a pup, with lots to learn about our culture. I like that, too. I hate know-it-alls.” There was a moment of silence. “If you want to improve your odds, you could become a Dahar Master.”

“Oh, bloody hell,” Garcia grumbled.

“You have demonstrated reasonable skills in the practice of mok’bara, surely you are not concerned about your abilities?” Moshe asked.

“I don’t want to join another fraternity,” Garcia said.

“When you’ve earned the right to carry such a token, the only Klingon’s who would challenge your right to have a home would be fools and the walking dead,” Moshe said.

Garcia sulked for a bit. “Is there a branch of this study that would even allow a non-Klingon an opportunity to join?”

“There is one,” Moshe said. “Make the pilgrimage to Mount Shar. The temple is always open.”

“I knew I was going to have to fight someone,” Garcia said.

“It is our way,” Moshe said.

Moshe stood with such flourish and energy that Garcia went to his feet as well, but mostly to assess the level of threat. He told himself he was going to have to calm down. Moshe hugged him enthusiastically. “Or don’t become a master. Either way, no matter what happens, you and I are Brothers. But you knew that. You have a lot more brothers than you are aware of. Welcome to the family. Come see me tomorrow.”

♪♪▶

Garcia returned to the Tempest, where Kitara was waiting for a report. “Tomorrow, this time,” he said. “Now, I need some rest. I’ll be in my quarters, the Path Finder.”

Kitara wanted to protest, suggesting she didn't think he should be alone, but she acknowledged his request with a nod. Once on the Path Finder, Losira eagerly greeted him with rituals. He complied, but it was obvious to her that he wasn't focused. His normal response was to feign protest, but he neither showed annoyance or acceptance. He just performed.

"Losira, I will want some privacy. Four hours minimum, for meditation," Garcia said.

"Aye, Captain," Losira agreed.

Garcia retired to his quarters. He stood in the middle of the room, looking out at the monitors and space beyond. Judging by the streaks the stars made, they were still at warp, and with their velocity matched to that of the New Constitution, it was possible to see the ship below him. He imagined he could detect the slight ripple that would be the wake of the warp bubble around the ship, compressed towards the direction of travel and elongated in the opposite direction. He didn't feel like meditating. He didn't feel like eating. Though the sensation of pain in his skin had decreased, he was still aware of it. He undressed and recycled his clothes into energy. The illusion that he was alone, and vulnerable to space, and to perhaps prying eyes as well, made him hyper conscious that he was naked. He told himself again that he should meditate and that if he waited to 'feel' like meditating, he might never do it. So, he sat down, Indian style, and closed his eyes. His thoughts instantly went to Gowr and N'Elent. He brought his attention back to his mantra. His stomach reminded him of his hunger. He went back to his mantra. His mind alerted him to the temperature, wanting him to adjust it up, making it warmer. He forced himself to say the mantra out loud. His mind asked him to dress. Again, he told himself, if he attended to every stray thought, he would never accomplish a meditation. He repeated the mantra. He whispered it in decreasing volume until it was gone from his lips completely. It reverberated in his mind until even his mind was silent.

"Save Vulcan."

The voice was so clear, so present that Garcia opened his eyes and looked around. He was alone. Auditory hallucination, he thought, his mind running through a series of diagnostic criteria. He decided he just needed to sleep and conjured up a sedative. It arrived in the form of a hypo spray.

"Computer, reduce gravity in this quarters to zero," Garcia ordered.

Once he was weightless, he centered himself in the room by pushing gently off the floor. Satisfied his placement was fairly stable, he turned off the screens so that it was completely dark in his quarters. If the room was warmer, it would be the perfect sensory deprivation scenario for inner mind exploration, but he wanted none of that. He wanted mental solitude but not womb perfect. He injected the hypospray into his thigh. He had expected it to be a gradual fade out, but he went instantly to sleep. The hypospray drifted nearby.

When Garcia had failed to answer her page, Trini inquired as to his whereabouts. Losira informed her where he was and that he had asked for privacy. Trini decided to disturb him anyway, resolute to do so in person, and arrived at his quarters. Losira was present standing guard.

"I will not violate his privacy request until the allotted time has passed," Losira assured her.

"Just unlock the door," Trini ordered.

“Your authorization code is acceptable,” Losira said. “The door is unlocked, however, I request that you respect Garcia’s privacy for another seventeen point eight minutes.”

“Is he with someone?” Trini asked.

“No,” Losira responded.

“Is he awake?” Losira asked.

“According to his vitals, he is sleeping,” Losira responded. “And I will not wake him until the allotted time has transpired.”

“I will. Trust me, he wants this call,” Trini said. She opened the door and stepped in.

“Tam?” Trini asked, stepping into Garcia’s quarters was like stepping off an unexpected cliff. Most of her mass had already passed the threshold with that first step, so she was literally falling, but the step gave her forward and upwards momentum, so as she crossed the threshold she went careening into the ceiling, bounced, and headed towards the floor.

“Computer, reactivate artificial gravity,” Trini said at the same time her hands came in contact with the floor. With her hands on the floor she didn’t have far to fall, but she dissipated the energy by rolling out, perfect martial art form. “Lights on!”

As Trini was executing her recovery fall, Garcia was crashing to the floor. Trini came out of her combat roll and went immediately to Garcia’s side. She confirmed that he was breathing and that he had a pulse.

“Tam?” Trini asked, shaking him with increasing vigor in an attempt to elicit a response. “Medical emergency, Captain’s Quarters.”

Garcia slowly came around. He gazed at her, like a flower to a sun. His smile seemed genuine, but drugged. “Hey, baby. What’s up?”

“Tam? Are you okay?” Trini asked.

“I’m great,” Garcia said, his eyes drifting closed. “You were great. We should do this more often.”

“Tam?! I have a priority one call from Star Fleet. They want to talk to you,” Trini said.

“Really?” Garcia asked, groggily. He rolled on his side. “I love Star Fleet.”

“Tam! Snap out of it,” Trini said, rolling him back on his back and slapping him.

Doctor Jurak arrived just in time to witness Garcia coming full awake. Garcia grabbed Trini by the neck and yelled “Your fault!” Trini cried out in alarm and when she tried to pull back, Garcia doubled his effort to hold her, his hands sliding to her arms as he dragged her on top of him. Jurak and Losira came to her aid, trying to pry his hands loose without injuring him. Jurak administered a punch, but Garcia simply increased his hold on Trini. Tears flowed down her face from pain and fear.

“Let go,” Jurak said.

“It’s your fault!” Garcia shouted, shaking Trini.

“You’re hurting me,” Trini said.

Garcia eyes focused and he became aware of where he was and what he was doing. He released his grip on Trini and she fell backwards, landing on her butt between his knees. Losira gave her a hand to her feet, hugging her reassuringly.

“Do you know where you are?” Jurak asked, taking a scan.

Garcia nodded. “My quarters,” he said. “Path Finder.”

“We need to get you dressed,” Trini said, wiping her face.

“Were we having sex?” Garcia asked, as he rubbed his cheek.

“No,” Trini said, blushing.

Losira helped Garcia up.

“But I’m naked,” Garcia went on. He looked down and back to her.

“You were dreaming. That’s a normal physiological response to REM. I promise you, I would have remembered if we had been, umm,” Trini said, examining the empty hypospray on the floor. “Did you take something?”

“I don’t remember,” Garcia said. “Why are you crying and why am I naked?”

“You don’t remember?” Jurak asked, taking the hypospray from Trini. “Losira, have the ship’s counselor report here immediately.”

Losira nodded.

“That’s really not necessary,” Garcia protested.

“You had a drug induced dream and could have injured Lt. Sookanan. I think that warrants a visit from the Counselor,” Jurak said.

“Where is your night stand and furniture?” Trini asked.

“I create as I go so I’m not defined by my possessions,” Garcia said, rubbing his forehead. He heard Troi saying something like, ‘which means you’re defined by your lack of possessions?’ His head was starting to hurt again. He pushed the Doctor’s hand away. “Enough, already. I’m fine. Losira, clothes, please. What time is it? Oh. Uniform, standard. And a chair. Three chairs.”

Three chairs materialized in Garcia’s quarters, facing each other. Beside the chair closest to Garcia was a small table with his uniform. Garcia put his boxers on first, cringing as he released the elastic to tighten around his waist. Sensory overload did not happen, so he proceeded with his uniform top, followed by the trouser. He sat down in his chair, hesitating as he took inventory of the sensation of chair against his body. It didn’t hurt as much as it had earlier, but his muscles were tense as if they were expecting a bigger jolt of pain. He found it easier to push through his discomfort, though, so he forced himself to relax before proceeding to put on socks and boots. When he became aware that he was still being scrutinized, he frowned.

“You’re still hurting?” Jurak asked, waving the hypospray in front of Garcia.

“I’m feeling much better,” Garcia said, which was mostly true. It was obvious to the Doctor by his facial expressions and his posture that he was still hurting, but the Doctor apparently was intending to push the issue. It was a Klingon’s prerogative and privilege to bear pain, as was remedies of one’s own choosing, but Garcia had been told not to take anything. He ignored the Doctor’s stare. “Did you want something, Trini?”

“Drugs? No. I’m good,” Trini said.

Garcia frowned at her. “I mean, did you need me for something?”

“Oh. Yes. Star Fleet is waiting to speak with you,” Trini said.

Counselor Rossi arrived.

“Why didn’t you tell me?!” Garcia asked.

“I did, I was, I…” Trini stammered.

“Captain, we need to have a serious talk,” Jurak said, thrusting the empty hypo at him again.

“Talk or intervention?” Garcia asked. “I’m fine. Who’s calling me, Trini?”

“They didn’t say. The call was directed to Sherman’s planet,” Trini said. “I routed it through the Gateway to us here.”

“Thank you. Losira, communications on that wall,” Garcia said, pointing. The whole far wall lit up with the communiqué. The video was so clear it was as if he were present in the Star Fleet Office being displayed. When Garcia saw President Fos sitting behind her desk, he stood to greet her.

“Madam President,” Garcia said.

“What took you so long?” President Fos demanded, looking up from her work.

“Um, sorry,” Garcia said. He looked to his present staff for support, then back to Fos. “I was sleeping.”

Fos’s face suggested doubt, but she didn’t voice any concerns. “This is of the utmost urgency. Long Range Scans suggest that the Phylos star has erupted into a supernova. Starfleet needs you to investigate and search for any survivors,” she said. “Your transwarp drive can get you on the scene before any other ships can respond.”

Garcia took a deep breath. “Umm, yeah, well, is this channel secure?”

Fos became stern in appearance. She pushed a button on her desk and motioned to her aid to leave her office. “It is,” Fos said, finally, only after the door to her office whispered shut.

“I’m afraid there are only a few survivors,” Garcia said. “But we’ve collected quite a bit of data on the um, incident.”

“Incident?” Fos snapped. “A binary star system has been completely annihilated and you call that an incident?!” Fos’ face suddenly soured. “Oh, dear God! Tam, tell me you didn’t...”

“What? You think I had something to do with that?” Garcia demanded.

“They’re peaceful plant people!” Fos shouted.

“Well,” Garcia said, sarcastically. “Wait! You think I used one of Starburst weapons?”

“Did you?” Fos demanded.

“No!” Garcia said.

“What were you doing at Phylos then?” Fos asked.

“I, um, am not at liberty to discuss that at this juncture,” Garcia said.

Fos stood and came around her desk. “I want the New Constitution in Earth’s orbit and you in my office in one hour.”

“I can’t comply at this time,” Garcia said. “I have urgent business to conclude at Vulcan. I’m on a mission...”

“I want to see you in my office, immediately!” Fos demanded.

Trini cringed, backing up a little.

“Okay,” Garcia said. “I’ll see you in about forty minutes. Viewer off.”

Garcia rubbed his forehead, avoiding eye contact with everyone. “Trini, have Sendak download all the data he collected concerning Phylos to the Path Finder and have him report there for duty. Tell Kitara I’m going to Earth.”

“Aye,” Trini said, and departed.

Garcia was going to follow her but Jurak grabbed his arm. “We are going to have this talk now.”

“I don’t intend to have this conversation with you,” Garcia said.

“There are three ways this will go down,” Jurak said, holding firm to Garcia’s arm. “You talk to us together, you talk to the Counselor alone, or I will relieve you of duty until you have complied with ship’s procedures.”

“Fine,” Garcia said. “Counselor Rossi, can you spare ten minutes with me? Alone?” Garcia asked, motioning Jurak to leave his quarters.

Rossi nodded. Jurak handed her the empty hypospray and departed. Losira lingered, but Garcia nodded towards the door and she followed Jurak out.

“This conversation is a bit over due,” Rossi said. “Don’t you think?”

“Look, I apologize that I said I don’t like you at an inappropriate setting and time,” Garcia said. The look on her face gave him pause. “Oh, you didn’t hear about that, did you?”

Rossi was not one to hide her anger, but she bit back on some choice words. “You have an obligation as a Captain to set an example,” Rossi said, with as much patience as she could muster.

“I agree,” Garcia said. “I’m sorry for publically disparaging you. If you want a public apology, I will do that.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about at all!” Rossi said. “You were raped. Apparently on multiple occasions now?”

“The Doctor told you,” Garcia said.

“It was his ethical obligation to report what happened on Phylos,” Rossi said. “The Salt Vampire story got to me via rumors. Either way, it is a procedural requirement for you to check in with the ship’s counselor in these sorts of situations.”

“And I will, as soon as there is an opening in my schedule,” Garcia said. “Right now, I’m on my way to Earth.”

“I heard. That doesn’t relieve you of your obligation to see me,” Rossi said. “In addition to the rapes, we add the crisis on Sherman’s planet, your addiction to Kelvan tech, and today, two more of your friends have been killed in the line of duty. There are any number of topics that warrant us to have a therapy session.”

“As a general rule, Captain’s are expected to be able to cope with these sorts of things,” Garcia said.

“Really? You are just going to go about your business with this stoic, sarcastic, offbeat humor that you developed as a way of distancing yourself from your emotions and other people?” Rossi asked.

“I’m not distant from other people,” Garcia argued.

“So, you think that having multiple relationships is a way for you to increase genuine, deep intimacy with other people?” Rossi asked.

Garcia shook a finger at her. “I knew you were going to go there.”

“Or maybe I am just baiting you into revealing something about yourself,” Rossi said.

“Yeah, baiting is the right word, and it seems inappropriate coming from a counselor,” Garcia said.

“How else am I supposed to get to know you? You’re resistant to the normal therapy process,” Rossi said.

“I’m not resistant to therapy. I just resistant to you,” Garcia said.

“Tam, the lives of the average person is fairly fast pace, and in today’s day and age we find it hard to take a moment to properly grieve,” Rossi said. “And your life’s pace is faster than a rock star on speed.”

“You need to work on your analogy,” Garcia said. “The assumption is most rock stars are already on speed.”

Rossi stared angrily at him. “Do you not see that as blocking? You are capable of going deeper in your understanding when you want to. My point was that you need to take a moment to process what’s happened.”

“And grieve normally? Tell me, what’s normal? What’s proper? Klingons go into battle. Vulcans meditate. Humans are all over the map. What do you want me to do? What would satisfy you?” Garcia asked.

“You tell me,” Rossi said.

“I’m doing what I do,” Garcia said. “I’m fine.”

“Fine, then let’s discuss the rapes,” Rossi offered.

“I would rather not,” Garcia said.

“I have to ascertain whether you’re processing information and functioning within normal parameters,” Counselor Rossi said.

“I’m processing stuff just fine, thank you,” Garcia said.

“I see. My understanding is you haven’t been sleeping, you’re working overtime providing medical relief, organizing training for the crew, fighting Gods, Gorns, and Cardassians, engaging in criminal activities with Orion Crime Syndicate, and all the while trying to maintain Star Fleet’s biggest secret ever. But you’re processing stuff just fine? Just thinking about half your chaos is enough to give me a headache,” Rossi said. “You’re failing to meet your oldest daughter’s needs, a schedule that you yourself put into place. You have a bazillion babies on the way, and you’re about to enter contractual marriages with over a dozen females. I know Denobulans who are more conservative than you! Everyone can see you’re taking on too much. Dismissing the fact that you were raped seems indicative of someone who is failing to manage even the most simplest of self-care strategies. We’re still in a critical window with your addiction to the Kelvan technology, and now the Doctor hands me this? What is this? Are you substituting one addiction for another?”

“I was in pain and I needed to sleep!” Garcia snapped.

“So you self medicated?” Rossi asked.

“I am a Doctor, you know,” Garcia snapped.

“This is not acceptable,” Rossi said.

“And coming to talk to you is going to make everything better?” Garcia asked.

“No!” Rossi said. “You know as well as I do that the goal of counseling isn’t supposed to make you feel better. It doesn’t make bad things go away. Did you take a stupid pill with your pain killers?”

“So much for unconditional, positive regard,” Garcia said.

Out of the corner of Garcia’s eyes he saw the Rogue Counselor Troi join them. He forced himself not to look at her. “I think you should kiss her. You’ll both feel better.” When Rossi’s eyes shifted to meet Troi’s, Garcia cringed.

“You can see her?” Garcia sighed.

“We’re all here,” Rogue Troi said, and the other girls faded in, holographically generated by Losira’s computer system.

“We had an agreement,” Garcia said. “No visiting during important conferences.”

“Yeah,” Rogue Troi said. “But, we need an amendment. We would like to have weekly group therapy sessions with you and the counselor.”

“It’s not easy living in his brain,” Duana said.

“Oh, bloody hell,” Garcia said, rolling his eyes.

“And what’s with the English accent every time you get angry? He really has some issues,” Ilona said, patting Rossi’s arm. “You have your worked cut out for you.”

“Group therapy might not be a bad idea,” Rossi said.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Garcia said.

“I understand that they have their own personal psyches, but they also have access to parts of your brain that I want access to,” Rossi said.

“Maybe you should try mind melding with him,” Duana said.

“Tell her about the dreams,” Ilona said.

Garcia gave her a sharp look with his eyes, warning her to keep silent.

“You know, I observe that whenever your mental companions offer insight, you become defensive and dismissive,” Rossi said. “You roll your eyes, you have this little hand gesture, and facial expressions...”

“Yeah,” Rogue Troi agreed. “Dismissive.”

Garcia held his breath. Rogue Troi smiled.

“Look, whether they’re real individuals, with souls and personalities, or aspects of yourself, how you treat them is an indicator of how you treat yourself, and how you will ultimately treat others, just as how you treat people in your dreams is indicative of what you think of yourself,” Rossi said.

“You’re great at confronting,” Garcia said.

“You’re great at deflecting,” Rossi said. “Great at dismissing your inner feelings and wants.”

“I give into my wants all the time,” Garcia argued.

“Yeah, in an unhealthy, overindulgent sort of way,” Rossi said, pushing his anger by mirroring his tone. “What are you afraid of?”

“I’m afraid that there’s no end to my wanting! If I give in to every impulse, I will spiral out of control and...” Garcia closed his eyes, took in a deep breath. When he opened his eyes, he noticed Rossi’s eyes were moist. “Why are you crying?”

“Contrary to popular belief, I’m not an Ice Princess. I was moved. This is the most real thing I’ve ever heard you say, the most vulnerable you’ve allowed yourself to be with me,” Rossi said. She took a long moment, hoping he would speak first. “Tell me about the dreams.”

Garcia shook his head, retreating back into himself. “No,” Garcia said.

“He keeps dreaming about...” Lal began.

“Lal,” Garcia warned.

“What? I find the dream about the hungry babies bizarre. Hundreds of hungry babies,” Lal answered. “And they’re singing a song called Food Glorious Food.”

“The dreams are the least important thing to discuss at this time,” Rogue Troi said. “The most important thing to discuss is the personal violations against him. He doesn’t think that his being raped is important because he is under the erroneous belief that men cannot be raped, or otherwise manipulated.”

“Captain?” Rossi asked.

“We’re through here,” Garcia said, moving towards the door.

“We’re through here when I say we’re through here,” Rossi said, blocking his egress. “Or have you forgotten that I can take you off duty just as quickly as Doctor Jurak can. Tam, for just a brief moment, you seemed close to realizing a therapeutic goal.”

“Wow, you’re right, I think you’ve cured me,” Garcia said. “I know, why don’t you talk to them and let me know if you have any other epiphanies.”

“And sarcasm is evidence of a huge set back. I want to engage you in individual therapy, and all of you in group therapy. It is inescapable that they’re influencing you,” Rossi said.

“I’m busy,” Garcia said.

“Then arrange a time for us to meet, all of us, and stick to a schedule, because you are now officially mandated for a minimum of ten sessions,” Rossi said.

“Fine,” Garcia said, using his implant to make an appointment. “I made one for tomorrow. That soon enough?”

“Miss this appointment and there will be consequences,” Rossi said. “Clear?”

“Crystal,” Garcia said. He waited for Rossi to step aside and then departed his quarters. Rossi followed, and he manually shut the doors on the girls.

“You can’t keep dismissing them,” Rossi said.

“Yeah, well, perhaps you can explain to President Fos that I was late cause I had to play nice with my mental entourage,” Garcia said. He turned to storm off just as Rivan was approaching him.

“Tam?” she asked, reaching out for him.

“Sorry, Rivan, but I have to get to the Bridge. We’ll talk later,” he said and hustled by her, their arms bumping as he passed.

She frowned as he went by, a bit miffed that he passed without so much as asking how she or the baby was after having been sedated by alien plants and shaken up by the recent near disaster. She had nearly said something sarcastic, but she held back. It had been easy holding back the temptation to be mean, but she couldn’t hold back her tears. She was confused. She wanted to know what had happened to him, she wanted to know he cared about what had happened to her, and she just wanted to be with him. Rossi put an arm around Rivan to comfort her.

“I’m sorry,” Rivan said.

“For what, dear?” Rossi asked.

She pointed at her face and the obvious fact she had been crying. Tears were still flowing.

“Everybody cries,” Rossi said.

“Even you?”

“Well, of course,” Rossi said.

“So you don’t think I should make an appointment.”

“No,” Rossi said.

“Really?” Rivan asked, sniffing.

“You seem surprised,” Rossi pointed out.

Rivan nodded, wiping her eyes with her sleeves. “I know how the others see me, so I can only assume you have an expert opinion about me...”

“Mental health is measured on a continuum of bio-psycho-social qualifiers, and it’s usually a sliding scale, because we all have ups and downs, internal and external

modifiers... But if I were to rank you in terms of psychological health, I would say out of the entire crew, you're the second healthiest person I know," Rossi said.

Rivan seemed taken back. "Really?"

"Again, you express surprise," Rossi said. "You are well balanced. You utilize your intellectual abilities and you're learning daily. You are social, and contrary to popular belief, you have great boundaries, regardless of what people think of your predilection for promiscuity, which you have decreased to fit in socially. You didn't have to do that, but it reveals you can adapt to your surroundings. You are in touch with your emotions. You have both humility and strength of character. You're alright, Rivan."

"But I am crying all the time," Rivan pointed out, her eyes watering again, mostly from relief that the counselor didn't find her crazy.

"Yeah, well, you're also pregnant, dear. Cut yourself some slack," Rossi said. "Cause believe me, when my hormones get so out of whack that I am crying every night, I am going to be knocking on your door for therapy."

Rivan chuckled and cried simultaneously. She hugged Rossi fiercely. Rossi returned the affection. Rossi reached into her coat pocket and pulled out a butterscotch candy to hand to Rivan.

"Thank you," Rivan said, unwrapping it as they walked together. She popped the candy into her mouth and seemed pleasantly surprised. "Identify this flavor, please."

"Butterscotch," Rossi said. "You haven't had it before?"

Rivan actually blushed. "Not like this," she admitted.

Rossi's face revealed curiosity. "Okay. I want more."

"Candy?" Rivan asked.

"Information," Rossi said.

"Do you know the word synesthesia? Well, of course you do, you're a counselor," Rivan said. "For me, sometimes physical contact comes in flavors."

"That's interesting," Rossi said. "So, when I hugged you..."

"Nothing," Rivan said. "But every time I have been intimate with Garcia, I've experienced this taste."

Rossi emptied her pocket of the candy. "You can have the rest of these," she said, surrendering the candy.

"Really?" Rivan asked.

"I'm sure," Rossi said. "If you'll excuse me, I have an appointment."



Arriving on the Bridge of the Path Finder prompted the usual courtesies from the staff. Garcia saluted and moved towards his station, ordering coffee.

"Minimum crew at their stations," Tuer announced.

"Thank you, Tuer," Garcia said. A cup of coffee arrived via the site to site replicator, but handed to him by Losira. "Losira, I want to use the New Constitution skin, so be prepared to activate the holographic camouflage before we jump. McKnight, prepare for a transwarp jump."

Kitara arrived on the Bridge. "What's going on?"

"The President wants to see me. She thinks I blew up Phylos," Garcia said, drinking his coffee as casually as if it were Tuesday.

"Naturally. Don't forget, we have an appointment tomorrow," Kitara said.

"I'll be there," Garcia assured her.

“I know you,” Kitara said. “You’re going to get bullied in to another assignment, and we’re already extended beyond our optimum performance capabilities.”

“I agree,” Garcia said.

“Tomorrow, noon, Kronos,” Kitara said.

“I don’t see a problem with that,” Garcia said, but he could read the doubt in her face. “Look, I’m just going to Earth to get yelled at.”

“I should go with you,” Kitara said.

“No!” Garcia snapped. “It’s imperative that the New Constitution arrive in time to save Vulcan.”

“And again with this ‘save Vulcan?’ Is Vulcan in danger?” Kitara asked.

“I meant, save Spock,” Garcia asked.

“Are you still experiencing side effects from the opiates the plant people gave you?” Kitara asked.

“No,” Garcia said. “I’m fine.”

“Tam?” Kitara asked.

Garcia softened a bit. “I’m ok, Kitara. It’s just been one of those days. Look. Coffee. I will be fine.”

“It seems lately that every day is one of those days for you,” Kitara said.

“I’m fine,” Garcia repeated, rather unconvincingly. “Was there anything else?”

“No, Captain,” Kitara said. “I’ll be on the Tempest if you need me.”

There was an uncomfortable silence on the Bridge after Kitara departed. Garcia sat in his chair, closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and when he opened his eyes, he decided he was ready to face the firing squad. “McNight, take us there.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Path Finder, disguised as the New Constitution, dropped out of warp just beyond the moon and saddled up into Earth's orbit. Tuer instructed Sendak to notify Starfleet of their arrival. Starfleet responded by assigning them a specific orbit, bringing them in past the Starbase and several other Starships. Garcia watched his crew, happy that he didn't have to micro manage his people. They all knew their functions and performed above his expectations. And if most of their functions were not top secret, he would be much more vocal in boasting he had the best crew in the fleet!

"Sendak, you're with me. Tuer, carry on," Garcia said, getting up as if he was carrying a ton of scuba weights.

"Would you prefer that I transport you directly?" Losira asked.

Garcia frowned, shook his head back and forth contemplatively, and then gave in. "Might as well," Garcia said.

"Coordinating transporter traffic with Starfleet Command, coordinates received, transport commencing," Losira said.

Losira transported Garcia and Sendak to Earth, San Francisco. They arrived at an outside, elevated platform designated for arriving transporter service, near Starfleet headquarters' main building. Before the Away Team was able to orientate themselves to the new environment, which was a small park in front of the building's front entrance, they found themselves surrounded by reporters all vying for "Captain" Garcia's attention. It was not necessary for journalists in this day in age to be right in his face, but he found them shoving recording devices at him none the less, perhaps using their props to get closer to him. He did a double take on one, thinking it was a medical tricorder, which was not illegal, but highly unethical. A few of the females batted their eyes, or used their other attributes to try to get his interest. Nothing was lost to the recording devices; his every nuance, every sigh and diverting of his eyes, it was all theirs. "Photons are free," was the most popular saying amongst 24th century reporters, and so if a person was reflecting photons in a public place and those photons could be captured by an eye, then a camera could legitimately record them as well, with instant public domain status. His attention wavered on one female with orange highlights in her hair.

"Is it true that you used a Kelvan warship to destroy the Borg at Tel Kiar two months ago?" Orange asked him.

"Tel Kiar is like six months away at warp nine," Garcia said. "And everyone knows I've been at Sherman's planet for the past two months."

Another reporter pushed in. "So, it is true that you stopped a Cardassian invasion?"

"It was hardly an invasion," Garcia began to respond.

Orange shoved her way back to Garcia's center. "Kelvan technology is superior to Star Fleet, making it possible to travel the void between the Andromeda Galaxy and the Milky Way in less than three hundred years. So, that means you could have gone from Earth to Tel Kiar in like, what, fifteen minutes or faster? Which explains how you have speculatively been at Kronos, Sherman's planet, Romulous, and Vulcan, and now here on Earth in time frames that are inconsistent with known warp technology."

Garcia opened his mouth to say something but was hit with another barrage of questioning, the loudest question coming from an Andorian female. What was it with the

media? he wondered. Were they purposely exploiting his one weakness? Was he that transparent to the Galaxy. ‘Garcia, the player...’ he wondered.

“Is it true that the Kelvan are taking over the Milky Way Galaxy?”

“They are not taking over the Galaxy,” Garcia said, emphatically.

“So, you didn’t make a deal with the Federation, that you would protect us from the Borg, in exchange for control of the Milky Way?” the Andorian pushed on.

“I am not in league with the Kelvan,” Garcia said. “There is no conspiracy to take over the Galaxy by me or any other Kelvan in exchange for protection from the Borg.”

Two questions were clearly heard over the next round. “But you are using a Kelvan warship to defend us from the Borg?” and the other was, “Then how do you explain all the females that were rescued from Tel Kiar being impregnated by you?”

“Whoa, okay, it was not all the females,” Garcia said, and that was pretty much the end of the interview because everyone started asking questions at once. Had Starfleet security not pushed through at that particular moment, the reporters might have eaten him alive.

Garcia and Sendak were hustled away from the reporters and delivered to Star Fleet Headquarters where they were quickly escorted to a lift. The Security Officers did not appear to be happy.

“You really should work on your interview style,” Sendak suggested, as the lift started its way up.

“I hate interviews,” Garcia said.

“And you had to transport there because you wanted practice?” the lead Security Officer asked, in a whiny voice.

Garcia looked to Sendak for an answer to that question.

“Starfleet chose the transport site,” Sendak said.

“Where are we going? This isn’t the way to President Fos’ office,” Garcia said.

“I’m not taking you to see the President,” the Security Officer said.

They arrived at McCoy’s office where the security officers in charge of Garcia’s rescue handed them to McCoy’s personal security officers, who efficiently directed them to McCoy’s inner chamber. McCoy rose from his chair and came around the desk. He nodded to the security chief, and they stepped out of McCoy’s office.

“Am I being arrested?” Garcia asked.

“No,” McCoy said, obviously not happy. “How is it a celebrity of your status doesn’t know how to give a proper interview?”

“Sorry, I missed that course at the Academy,” Garcia said. “Maybe if I hadn’t been out saving the Universe and all, I could have stayed in school.”

“Don’t get smart with me, young man,” McCoy snapped.

“Me, smart? If I’m not being arrested, what was up with all that security just now? And why am I here?” Garcia asked.

McCoy pointed at the news feed. “I was about to call and ask you to help me, but instead, I find you on the front page of all the local media circuits. What are you doing on Earth?”

“The President wanted to see me,” Garcia said.

“Care to fill me in?” McCoy asked.

“Not really,” Garcia said.

“Does this have anything to do with Phyllos?” McCoy asked

“Not really at liberty to discuss that, either,” Garcia said.

“Oh, dear God, you didn’t,” McCoy said.

“Why does everyone think that?!” Garcia asked.

“You know why!” McCoy snapped right back.

“I don’t have time for this! I’m trying to save Vulcan!” Garcia escalated.

Sendak’s eyebrow went up perceptively. “You’re trying to save a Vulcan, or planet Vulcan?” Sendak asked.

“Why does everyone keep asking me that?” Garcia asked.

“Because it is not the first time you have made that error,” Sendak said.

“Tam, are you okay?” McCoy asked.

“Yes!” Garcia snapped. “Why?”

“Because your reaction to that question is out of proportion to the situation as I see it, and I need you. I have a mission for you, and I need to know you’re not losing it,” McCoy said.

“You can trust me,” Garcia said, forcing himself to calm down. “Whatever you need, I’ll get it done. I just have to make a pit stop at Vulcan, and I have to get married at Kronos, but after that, I’m free. Well, pretty sure. Mostly.”

“Again with Vulcan,” McCoy said. “What’s going on with Vulcan?”

“I can’t say,” Garcia said.

“You can’t say, or you won’t say?!” McCoy demanded. “I outrank you.”

The door to McCoy’s office opened suddenly and several high ranking security officers burst in. McCoy’s people seemed cowed and extremely apologetic for the disruption.

“Admiral McCoy and Captain Garcia,” the Presidential Security Officer said. “I’m Captain Wen, and I’ve been asked to escort both of you to see the Federation President.”

“You just burst into my office with no apology?” McCoy asked.

“I have my orders. President Fos wants you both, now,” Wen said.

“What have you done?!” McCoy asked Garcia.

“Nothing! Honest,” Garcia said.

“Well, Captain Wen, I’ll have you know, I will not be transported,” McCoy said.

“I understand that,” Wen said. “We have a shuttle waiting on the roof. Now, if you’ll both come with me.”

McCoy sighed heavily, complaining how every time Garcia was around there always seemed to be a crisis and a sense of urgency and people bustling about, but motioned for security to lead the way. Garcia offered McCoy his arm. He grudgingly took it. Sendak started to follow.

“Just McCoy and Garcia,” Wen said.

“Go back to the ship,” Garcia instructed his Science Officer.

Sendak nodded, handed Garcia the data chip he had brought with them, and tarried long enough to watch Wen’s security detail escort McCoy and Garcia away. They entered a lift at the end of the hall, which sped them to the roof.

“Was the President expecting you?” McCoy asked.

“Yeah,” Garcia said, sarcastically.

“We apologize for the inconvenience, but the President arranged for the media to have a brief interview with you,” Wen said.

“That was her doing?” Garcia asked.

“I am sure she will explain,” Wen said.

As they exited the lift, security spread out into detail formation to accompany them across the roof to the awaiting shuttle. What surprised both of them was that the entire roof escort was armed and ready, as if expecting trouble. Wen followed McCoy and Garcia up the ramp into the shuttle, leaving troops outside. The shuttle started rising from the building before the stairs had fully retracted. Outside the window, Garcia spotted several escort fighters and noticed that McCoy was also aware of the fighters.

“What’s going on?” McCoy asked.

“Not completely sure,” Garcia said. To Wen, he asked, “Am I in trouble?”

“Rumor has it there have been some attempts on your life,” Wen said.

“Who have you pissed off now?” McCoy grumbled.

“It’s not me,” Garcia tried.

“So, what happened to your hair?”

“Chemo therapy,” Garcia said.

Wen merely watched the exchange without contributing. The first fifteen minutes of the shuttle ride was spent in a steep climb into orbit, then the power let up and they started a descent, most likely heading towards Paris, France, since the executive branch of the Federation of Planets resided at the Palais de la Concorde. McCoy was still rambling off a tirade at Garcia’s avoidance to his questions when Wen interrupted:

“Admiral, Captain, we’re arriving at the United Nations building.”

The moment the shuttle landed, Garcia and McCoy were led across the rooftop and placed into a lift. It descended in silence. The security detail and Wen were more stoic than Vulcans on valium. Garcia stared straight ahead, but addressed McCoy: “It is good to see you.” McCoy also stared directly ahead, answering, with only a slight sigh: “I’m happy to see you, too.” If the guards cared, they gave no clues to whether they heard the exchange, much less believed it.

“By the way,” Garcia added. “You never told me if you liked the gift I had delivered to your place.”

“The crate of Romulan Ale?” McCoy asked. “You know that stuffs illegal?”

“That’s never stopped you before,” Garcia pointed out.

“A bottle here and there is one thing Tam, but a whole crate?! Don’t do that again,” McCoy said.

“Was it good?”

“The best I ever had,” McCoy said.

“Want to know where I got it?” Garcia asked.

“No, not really,” McCoy said.

The somberness of the lift gave weight to its descent. As soon as the doors opened, they were hustled down a corridor and brought into a room where a number of Ambassadors, and a few highly respected Starship Captains, were trying to speak over each other to win an argument. Garcia managed to construct a fairly good idea of what the debates centered on with just the few words that he overheard. One of them was arguing for more research to be done over Preserver technology, while another was trying to impress them that a “Kelvan invasion” was imminent, while still another was trying to return their focus to the Borg crisis. They fell silent when the President stood up. He caught the eyes of someone familiar; Captain Janeway passed him a subtle smile.

“Admiral McCoy,” President Sylvia Fos said in a voice she reserved for people of great respect. “Captain Garcia,” she said in a more weary voice. She seemed a little older than the last time Garcia had seen her in person. She sat down in her chair and rested her head in her hands for a moment.

“Captain Garcia,” Fos said again, decisively. “The Ambassadors in this room are part of a consortium of sorts, brought together in order to discuss the ethical considerations of time travel, establish procedures and policies, investigate anomalies, etc etc, in order to preserve the time line as we know it.”

“If it changed, would we know it?” Garcia asked.

“Everyone always asks that question, and the next question is does reality create a new timeline to avoid paradoxes,” Fos said and sighed. “We simply don’t know enough to answer this, and most of it falls along a line of existential, metaphysical, pseudo-scientific, philosophical crap that I don’t care to dabble in, but everyone here agrees on certain principles. It is one of the reasons why Star Fleet has expanded the Prime Directive to encompass potential temporal anomalies involving our starships. We do know this: time travel occurs and there are entities and civilizations that are manipulating the time line even as we speak. We’ve known this since the days of Archer.”

“Captain Archer, of the first Enterprise Archer?” Garcia asked.

“Is there another Archer that I’m not familiar with? Yes, and before you ask, it’s classified,” Fos said.

“If it’s classified, why are you telling me about it?” Garcia asked.

Fos snorted, which was partly a laugh, and partly a reaction to Garcia calling her on the obvious fact she was about to divulge secrets to him against her better judgment. “Because these gods you’ve been dealing with appear to be another faction in what we’ve been calling the Temporal Cold War, and you’re obviously a huge player in what’s to come,” Fos said. “And because we would like more information. Specifically, we want to know who all the players are.”

“And you think I can get that from Athena,” Garcia said.

“We want you to try,” Fos said. “Your descendants will be involved in this. Or, should I say, are involved in this war.”

“My descendants,” Garcia parroted.

Fos pushed a PADD towards the end of the desk. Its screen was already displaying information which Garcia began interpreting before turning it right side up. “In 2152, Captain Archer discovered a shuttle pod drifting in space which appeared to be from the 31st century. He brought it into the hangar bay to examine it. The first oddity was that the pod was bigger on the inside than it was on the outside.”

“You mean, he found the TARDIS?” Garcia asked.

“The what?” the Andorian Ambassador asked.

“A time machine camouflaged as a 1950’s London Police Box,” Garcia informed.

“As usual, I don’t have a clue what you’re talking about,” Fos said, pushing a button on her desktop that caused the image on Garcia’s PADD to change. A genetic profile came up. “This is the genome for the dead pilot they found in the pod.”

“Wow,” Garcia said. “You’re telling me that Archer found a 31st century pod, and a dead pilot that held human and Vulcan genes. That should have had a significant impact on the time line.”

“The physical evidence disappeared. All we have are the scans,” President Fos said, pushing a button that revealed some of the scans that had been taken.

“Convenient,” Garcia began, but was distracted by something further about the DNA. “Terrelian,” Garcia mumbled, scrutinizing the genome even closer. “And Rigelian. This is huge.”

McCoy, staring over Garcia’s shoulder, pointed to a particular set of genes. “You’re related.”

“We’re ninety nine point ninety eight percent certain that this is a descendant of Garcia, 7 generations removed,” the Vulcan Ambassador in the room said. “The genetic profile Garcia gave us on Athena is also a match.”

“This is the best evidence that we have that suggests the cease fire you established with these gods might have long term benefits for the Federation,” Fos said. “We want you to improve relations with them.”

Garcia put the PADD down. “What exactly do you mean by that?”

“We want you to play nice,” Fos said.

“Athena’s carrying his children. How much nicer do you want him to be?”

McCoy asked.

“For starters, he could stop killing Apollo,” Fos said.

“He’s trying to kill me!” Garcia complained.

“These gods haven’t exactly been friendly,” McCoy argued in Garcia’s defense. After all, Apollo had tried to kill members of his own crew, way back when. “They throw tantrums when they don’t get their way. And when they throw tantrums, people die.”

“Garcia, we are fairly certain there have been five major temporal anomalies in which the time line was severely impacted sufficiently to affect the destinies of several Nation States. It’s one thing if the temporal anomaly is local, changing a single planet’s history, but another when it affects groups of star systems. You yourself have already been cloned in order to create a temporal patch, which was probably a correction of something that deviated us from the original timeline. Whether this is the original timeline or a deviation, we are particularly vested in this specific time line. It drives me crazy thinking about how delicate life and the Universe really is. But I know this. I’m happy with my present existence and I want the integrity of this timeline secured. To facilitate that, I want you to make friends with Apollo, are we clear?” Fos asked.

“Yes. Anything else?” Garcia asked, a bit miffed.

“Yes, actually. A great deal more,” Fos said, and directed Garcia back to the PADD she had handed him. Using her desk top interface, she caused his PADD to display images of a supernova, remarkable by its double hooped ring. It was similar in effect to the one just created at Phylos, only much larger due to the time it had had to expand. “Do you recognize this?”

Garcia only had to glance at it to trigger the memory; the labels were coming out before he had consciously processed the information. “Yes, it’s SN1987a. Based on the quality of the image, I suspect that it was captured by the Hubble Space telescope, Earth calendar, 2005.”

“2001,” the President corrected. “How is it you know so much about Earth of that time period?”

“I was born in the twentieth century, and while flying for NASA, my ship got thrown off course, I was frozen, and woke up 500 years later,” Garcia said. McCoy

thumped Garcia on the ear. "Ow! What would you like me to say? I mind melded with an encyclopedia?"

"Stop jerking people's chains," McCoy snapped. "You're worse than Spock ever was."

"Please," Garcia started to protest. "Spock was never prone to humorous sarcasm..."

"I beg to differ," McCoy said. "Obviously you get this from his side of the family."

"Gentlemen!" the President interrupted, taking a moment to breathe and to organize her thoughts. "We still have lots of things to discuss." She paused. "Tam, have you changed something? You look different."

"No," Garcia said.

"Your eyes maybe," Fos said, not picking up on the fact that Garcia had no eyebrows, or eye lashes for that matter.

"Hazel. They change colors based on what personality I'm presenting," Garcia jested, again drawing the wrath of McCoy.

"Never mind," Foss said, returning her focus to the business at hand. "Evidence has come to light that you're responsible for SN1987A."

"Oh! You can't pin that on me," Garcia said, talking with his hands as if he were suddenly Italian. "That happened in, what, 161,000 BC, in a galaxy that's nearly 50 kiloparsecs away!"

The President changed the image on the PADD. A more modern image of the supernova event was there, with a side scale that broke down the various energy patterns and residues of harmonic waves still echoing through the expanding rings of dust, along with an element count. Two things stood out immediately: one, there was an energy signature that suggested a Genesis type device had been deployed, most likely a Starburst weapon, a derivative of the Genesis device that was aboard his ship; and two, the new data had to have been gleaned by a probe that was within a light year of the supernova itself.

"I don't understand how this is possible," Garcia said.

"Neither do I," Fos said.

"Where did you get this data?" Garcia asked.

"Classified," Fos said.

The President updated the PADD again, this time to reveal long range scans of the Phylos binary star system, taken from one of the Deep Space telescope arrays. A similar energy pattern was apparent. "Do you see a resemblance?"

"I didn't do that!" Garcia said.

"Of course you didn't," Fos said, not convincingly. She came around her desk. "But who did? The Preservers? The Grays? Someone we haven't met yet? And why is it, everywhere you go, something blows up? What are you not telling us?"

Her words, and the tone with which they were delivered, suddenly offered an explanation for why he had been put on public display. No active Star Fleet ship had a transwarp drive, and so a little subterfuge was being played out with the media. He can't be accused of being at Phylos if he was most recently seen at Sherman's Planet and then on Earth. The orange hair reporter had probably been fed misinformation, and given that everyone knew Garcia to be Kelvan, her conclusion hadn't been unreasonable.

“Shouldn’t I be asking ‘what are you not telling me?’ as it seems you’re holding a great deal more than you’re admitting,” Garcia suggested.

“Should we add paranoia to your attributes?” Fos asked.

“It’s not paranoia if someone’s actually out to get you. Look, I’ve been making all sorts of mistakes, and yet you haven’t yanked me out of command and put me on an isolated ice planet doing research,” Garcia said.

“Pffft! Mistakes hardly begins to describe the pains you have caused me,” Fos said. “Believe me, if there wasn’t so much riding on your well being and your success, I would have buried you a long time ago.”

The silence in the room was so pronounced it was as if everyone were holding their breath. “I meant, that I would take you out of your position of authority,” the President corrected herself after she had calmed. “The days of cowboy diplomacy are supposed to be over. I expect you to get yourself in line. Try to be more like Picard and less like Kirk.” The President leaned on her desk. “Look, you have it in you to be a good person, a great leader, and it appears to this counsel that you are to be a significant player in the shaping of things to come. I need you to accomplish some very specific goals in a short time. But none of that will happen if you get yourself killed or if I have to put you behind bars because I can’t trust you!”

Garcia looked resigned.

“If the Borg and Kelvan had it out, who would win?” Fos asked.

“The Kelvan, easily,” Garcia said.

“So, if you were to build a defense against the Kelvan, that defense should easily counter anything the Borg might throw at us, wouldn’t you say?” Fos asked.

“Yeah, I...” Garcia began.

“Then, there you have it. You’re part Kelvan. Officially, publically, your new mission is to build a defense against the Kelvan. You and the Path Finder will monitor the wormhole they created for activity. You will assemble a team and send them through the wormhole to gather intelligence from the other side. You will utilize your gateways to facilitate and expedite information exchange between your Andromeda team and us,” Fos said, pushing a button to authorize the commission.

“Um, not trying to be argumentative with you, but, as you pointed out, I am part Kelvan. Do you really think it wise to put me in charge of a defense to beat my own kind?” Garcia asked.

“My point exactly!” the Andorian ambassador shouted.

Fos only had to glare at the Andorian to shut him up. She turned back to Garcia. “Obviously, you’re compromised. You’ve only got to look at the number of kids you have sired to know you’re compromised. But you have integrity, and you have some of the best damn people in the whole Federation looking out for you. So, yeah, I’m putting it into your hands to defend us against the Kelvan, first because you’re the most qualified to do it, and 2nd because if you don’t, we’re screwed anyway. The Kelvan Crisis is your number one priority.”

“This mission is a bit problematic, considering the wormhole in questions is in the Neutral Zone,” Garcia said.

“You don’t think I considered that?” Fos said. “I want you to use your influence with Empress Nelvana to get access to it. Convince her it is in everyone’s best interest, even theirs, to have a defense against the Kelvan in place when they return. Use this as an

opportunity to forge better relations with the Romulans. She already tacitly agreed to help you preserve the timeline as we know it, and she insisted that you carry the first Romulans to participate in an Officer's exchange program and they reside on your ship, so I'm guessing if anyone has a chance to negotiate access to that wormhole it will be you. She seems to like you and this may be the best chance the Federation has for ending the hostilities between our two cultures. You seem to have a knack of building rapport with females of non human species. Just be nice to her."

"Ok," Garcia agreed, not wanting to go into detail of how "nice" he had already been to the Empress. He was learning; some things were just better left unsaid.

"Your second priority is to secure an active Iconian Gateway. As soon as you have one, a Federation team of my choosing will move in and occupy the outpost for study. I know you saw a number of IGates that were deserted when you were last fleeing Apollo. It would be preferable if you find us one of those. You found Yeoman Rand after passing through an Icoanian Temporal Gateway, which means they work as well or better than the Guardian of Time portal. Find us that one. Or find us a new one. Don't care. Just find us one."

"Is that all?" Garcia asked.

"Hardly," President Fos said. "We have a situation on planet Troyius which I'd like you to personally handle. There was a coup a month ago and the dictator is fairly harsh on the population. I want you to neutralize him."

"You want me to kill him?" Garcia asked.

"I didn't say that!" Fos said.

"Just seeking clarity," Garcia said.

"Really, Garcia, your dealings with the Klingons may be your downfall," Fos said. "But since you're so adamant about playing bad cop, we want to use your reputation to our advantage. As you know, the Federation has strict policies about intervening in the internal affairs of Nation States. Typically, we would simply establish trade embargoes, but the members believe this will only hurt the population, not the dictator. Troyius is still the Federation's best resource of dilithium crystals. Appease the dictator somehow so that he eases up on the population, but keeps the crystals flowing."

Garcia silently fumed.

"What?" Fos asked, reading his silent protest accurately. "I thought you wanted to play bad guy? Well, this is what happens when you play bad guy. You took out Bliss, and this coup is just one of the many consequences. Technically, this is still your mess, and asking you to clean it up seems only fitting. And while we are on the subject of your mess, there is a little matter of some slave trading you need to take care of. The Orion Ambassador here has intel regarding a mass abduction of Orion females. I want you to find those people, find these slave camps, and shut down the Orion pirates responsible. That was, after all, why you begged Starfleet to allow you to become part of the Orion Crime syndicate, isn't it?"

"I don't remember begging," Garcia said.

"Take care of it," President Fos demanded.

Garcia collected the data chip from the Orion Ambassador. He could hardly refuse after he had put so much effort into "selling" his rationalization for becoming a pirate in the first place.

“And next on the agenda, I need you to travel to Pyrus Seven to determine if the aliens that Kirk encountered a hundred years ago have returned. I can’t afford another invasion on my hand. There’s way too much going on.”

“You think they’re back?” Garcia asked.

“Long range sensors have detected some anomalies,” Fos said. “And if they are back, we want you to acquire samples of their technology. Specifically, I want you to acquire a device they call a transmuter.”

“The transmuter is basically just a simple computer, very similar to Kelvan technology,” Garcia offered. “Which manifests thoughts into reality.”

“One difference,” Fos said. “Only Kelvan have the intellectual capacity to use Kelvan technology. We’re hoping the transmuter could be used by anyone, regardless of intelligence. This would even the playing field if you were to fail in your efforts to defend against the Kelvan invasion.”

“Now, just a moment Madam, President,” McCoy said. “I remember that transmuter thing, and if I recall correctly, it tapped into the darkest part of the human mind and manifested all sorts of evil.”

“I’m aware of the possible down side, but we also know, if you turn it off, it all goes away, so you let me worry about the negative consequences,” Fos said.

“How about my negative consequences? You’re asking me to do a lot, you know?” Garcia said.

“I know,” Fos said. “And, to make it easier to complete your goals, I am hereby promoting you to Admiral.”

Garcia’s mouth nearly hit the floor. “What?” McCoy’s mouth mirrored Garcia’s question. They exchanged incredulous looks.

“You have what, four ships at your disposal? Five?” President Fos said more than asked. “I trust you to figure it out.”

“I really don’t have time for all these tangents,” Garcia snapped. “I have to save Vulcan!”

Several in attendance looked at him as if he were crazy, where the rest seemed suddenly more alert and concerned. The Vulcan ambassador stepped forwards. “What do you mean you have to save Vulcan?” he asked.

“What do you mean by ‘what do you mean’ I have to save Vulcan?” Garcia asked.

“You just said you had to save Vulcan,” Fos said.

“No, I didn’t,” Garcia said.

“Is Vulcan in danger?” President Fos asked.

“How would I know?” Garcia asked.

“Because you just said...”

“I haven’t said anything about Vulcan!” Garcia said, massaging his forehead.

“Look, I’m sorry, I’m tired, I’ve got a headache, and a to-do list that is bit unreasonable.”

As this conversation was transpiring, McCoy had gone to the President’s replicator and produced a medical tricorder. He began examining Garcia with the device.

“That’s not necessary, Admiral,” Garcia said. “It’s just general fatigue due to the fact I have had little sleep. Which reminds me, Madam President, that I have a grievance or two with you. For starters, the Federation probably could have spared a few more ships at Sherman’s planet.”

He noticed Janeway seemed amused by his ranting, while some of the other guests seemed a bit embarrassed that someone of his experience would actually tackle the President as if they were nothing more than sibling squabbling over game resources.

"I suspect you're right," the President agreed. "We should all just suspend our operations in the Alpha Quadrant to focus on your needs. Because, I'm sure there are no other Starships having issues at the moment."

"Nice," Garcia said, truly appreciating the President's sarcasm. "Make me out to be the whiny bitch for protesting that my work load is unfair and most probably bias."

"Awww, I am sorry, was this supposed to be your pity party?" Fos asked.

Doctor McCoy looked Garcia in the eyes. "Have you recently mind melded with a Vulcan?"

"I'm not at liberty to speak on the matter," Garcia said.

"You're carrying someone's Katra, aren't you?!" McCoy snapped.

"No!" Garcia said. "Nothing like that at all. He just wanted me to remember something in case he died in transit."

"How could you have grown up on Vulcan and be this ignorant about Vulcan culture?" McCoy asked.

"You're calling me ignorant?" Garcia asked.

"Better than stupid," McCoy said, thumping him on the forehead. "Ignorance can be corrected. Stupidity can't!"

"What's going on now?" Fos asked.

"I can't say," Garcia said.

"Spit it out!" Fos said, as presidentially as she could muster. "Everyone here has clearance."

Garcia sighed. "I went to Phylos on a mission to retrieve a dying Vulcan, who turned out to be a fifty foot version of Spock, when my presence erupted into a minor conflict between two opposing groups of Phylosians, which was all rendered moot when the Preserver Goddess Gaia decided she needed to start her experiment over from scratch and blew up the whole star system. Um, what else, oh, and I was subsequently, kidnapped, drugged, infected with a parasitic STD, maliciously injured, doped, and, if McCoy is right, I apparently was the recipient of an unsolicited mind meld in an effort to preserve the giant Spock's katra. It was supposed to have been a 'quick in and out,' kind of a low key, no press or pressure operation."

The looks his speech garnered a spectrum of results; concern and disbelief were the most obvious, but he was almost certain he saw a flash of bemusement on Janeway's face which she was doing her best to conceal. He noticed feelings of annoyance rising towards her constantly being amused by his woes. Only the President bothered to connect the dots. "You're telling me that these Preserver gods are capable of destroying entire solar systems on a whim."

"Apparently," Garcia said.

"I want you to increase the priority level of you making nice with Apollo," Fos said. "And as anachronistic as it sounds saying this in the 24th Century: stop pissing off the gods!"

"Apollo is not a god and I won't worship him just to avoid being killed," Garcia said.

“But would you bow if it kept him from killing us?” the Tellerite Ambassador asked.

“That’s a dangerous road,” Garcia said. He looked to the President. “Is this what you want me to do?”

“Figure out a way to make peace,” Fos said. “You’ve befriended Athena. Find a way.”

“I don’t believe sleeping with Apollo is a viable option,” Garcia said.

“I’m sorry, Madam President,” McCoy interrupted before Garcia dug a new grave. “But it’s highly advisable that we get Garcia to Vulcan and have someone remove this Katra. He’s has too many human genes in him to be carrying other people’s Katras.”

“Is this condition treatable?” Fos asked.

“Yes. I’ve done it myself, once,” McCoy said. “I will accompany him to Vulcan to make sure he complies.”

“That really isn’t necessary,” Garcia said.

“Yes, it is,” McCoy snapped.

Garcia fell silent, crossed his arms, and looked at the floor.

“Very well. Garcia, a more detailed report of my expectations for you is on that PADD,” Fos said.

Garcia nodded, retrieving the PADD.

“Do you have something for me?” President Fos asked.

Garcia thought about it a moment and then retrieved the data slip from a pocket. He handed it to her. She took hold but he didn’t let go right away. They sized each other up. “Everything we have on Phyllos is here.”

“You’re dismissed,” President Fos said, still waiting for him to release his end of the memory chip.

He let go. “Thank you, Madam President,” Garcia said. McCoy yanked him by the arm and led him out the door.

As soon as the door closed, McCoy rounded on him, ignoring security who was waiting to whisk them away.

“What is it with you and 20th century Earth?!” McCoy asked.

“I was reincarnated,” Garcia explained, agreeing to follow security.

“Oh, God,” McCoy stammered. “You’re not telling people that, are you?”

“Why not? General Patton claimed her was reincarnated,” Garcia said. “Through the travail of ages, midst the pomp and toils of war, have I fought and strove and perished, countless times among the stars. As if through a glass and darkly, the age old strife I see, when I fought in many guises and many names, but always me...”

“Did you write that?” McCoy asked.

“I thought I did, but turns out Patton did,” Garcia said.

“You could have picked it up from watching a history film?” McCoy asked.

“Possibly. I ran the poem through a search engine and discovered it was used in the movie ‘Patton’ played by George C Scott, but I didn’t follow up to see if he actually wrote that as a poem, or it was movie fluff, but either way, you may be right, I may be crazy,” Garcia explained.

“I didn’t say crazy. But if only you hadn’t spent your entire life recreating the twentieth century at a holosuite perhaps you would know you should be heading straight for Vulcan, instead of quoting movies,” McCoy said. The lift arrived to receive them.

“I was on my way to Vulcan,” Garcia said.

“You can explain it in more detail on the way,” McCoy said.

“Why didn’t you tell me there was another Spock?” Garcia asked.

“You’re not supposed to know everything,” McCoy said. “You’re not Spock. You can’t fill his shoes any more than Kirk’s shoes.”

“You’re telling me,” Garcia said. “Have you imagined what size shoes a fifty foot Spock wears?”

McCoy tried not to laugh. “Is he still alive?”

“He was alive the last time I checked,” Garcia said, the doors to the lift closing. It expedited them to the rooftop.

As the shuttle headed towards orbit and the awaiting Path Finder, Garcia filled him in on what had transpired at Phylos. McCoy simply shook his head, always amazed Garcia was still in one piece, much less alive. The shuttle delivered them to the Path Finder, connecting to an external airlock, and immediately departed once McCoy and Garcia had exited and the doors had closed. Losira was there to greet them as they emerged from the airlock. She went through an official greeting ritual for Garcia and then turned to present her respect to McCoy.

“It is such a great pleasure to have you on board again,” Losira said, shaking his hand enthusiastically.

“Thank you,” McCoy said. “I would like to see Spock.”

“This way,” Garcia said, leading the way to the gateway. Not surprisingly, his comm. badge rang. He activated it. “Go,” he said.

“Captain,” Tuer’s voice rang clear. “Admiral Pressman has demanded you visit him in his office immediately. He wants to see you before we depart.”

“Well, you can tell Admiral Pressman that he can kiss my...”

McCoy took Garcia by the arm. “You should go see him. Keep the ruse up,” McCoy said.

“I thought we urgently needed to get to Vulcan,” Garcia argued.

“You and Spock should arrive together, so you have time,” McCoy said. “Find out what Pressman wants. Cooperate with him. The investigation is still on.”

Garcia wanted to scream. “Bloody hell,” he finally grumbled. “Fine. Losira, escort McCoy through the gateway to the NC so he can see Giant Spock. And, transport me to the lion’s den.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Garcia arrived in Pressman's office with little fanfare. Pressman reclined back in his chair and smiled. Behind Garcia were Starfleet Officers, standing at attention. He only glanced back long enough to determine if they were a threat. Six Fleet and one civilian stood at parade rest. He didn't see a threat, but his eyes lingered on the ginger haired girl, just long enough that he saw the corner of her mouth creep up into a smile. Or a smirk, he looked away too fast to be sure. He got angry at himself for his impulses, which he took out on Pressman in the form of a glare.

"Admiral Garcia," Pressman said, smiling. "Nice to see you again."

"What do you want?" Garcia asked, evident annoyance in his voice. It was annoyance at himself, for Pressman, and just general anger for being in this situation. It also bothered him that Pressman knew about his promotion already. It also meant other people knew, as it would have taken more than just the President's recommendation to make it happen. Suddenly people talking about him behind closed doors bothered him, where as in the past he hadn't put so much thought into it.

"I don't appreciate your tone. I still out rank you," Pressman said.

"Yeah, you have seniority and tenure," Garcia said, sighing, trying to rein in his feelings. "Now, if only you had brains, courage, and a heart. Um, I suppose the wizard could forge that paperwork for you, too."

"Nice. Wizard of Oz jokes never get old," Pressman said. "I hear you have been ordered to check out Pyrus Seven."

"Yeah, so?" Garcia asked

"What do you know about these aliens?" Pressman asked.

"Everything you do?" Garcia asked, sarcastically.

"Umm, fine, let me catch you up to speed. They're alien creatures, I mean, really alien, kind of like you're species, scary non humanoid types, super intellect without emotions as we know them type aliens," Pressman said, trying to imitate Garcia's mannerisms and speech patterns. "It's really eerie how similar your stories are. They come from another galaxy. They have technology that can manipulate matter at the quantum level. They can change their forms at will. Are you sure these aren't your long lost cousins?"

"If I recall, the corpses that Kirk recovered were tiny, little, blue, feathery, chicken, parakeet things," Garcia said. "And though we never really figured out who was pulling their strings, their mission leaders were clearly not as intelligent as the Kelvan. The Kelvan would never have allowed themselves to be completely dependent on their own technology to survive. Those creatures couldn't breathe our atmosphere, so when Kirk destroyed their transmuter, they reverted back to their natural forms and consequently died. So, either their technology is flawed, or their operatives lacked the adaptive genius necessary to function on their own in an alien environment. If these guys are really back, there are two possibilities: they still lack the genius necessary to be a threat, or, they're sending in experts to determine what happened to the first team."

"I suspect you're right. But you're still missing something," Pressman said.

"And what's that?" Garcia asked.

"They have access to an Iconian Gateway!" Pressman said.

"How do you figure that?" Garcia asked.

“They didn’t travel all the way from another galaxy utilizing their transmuter,” Pressman said.

“You don’t know that,” Garcia said.

“We know they didn’t have a starship with a transwarp drive, the only warp propulsion that can theoretically take you to another galaxy,” Pressman said. “That only leaves one other transportation system that we know of that can put a team on a planet trillions of kilometers away, leaving no footprint of technology.”

“Really? The Gamesters of Triliskon had a quantum transporter that grabbed Kirk, Uhura, and Checkov more than a trillion kilometers away. Maybe they have something similar,” Garcia offered.

“The Gamester’s quantum transporter system left an energy signature that allowed the Enterprise to trace it back to the source,” Pressman said.

“Well, yeah, that doesn’t invalidate my hypothesis that you’re an idiot,” Garcia said.

“I have more evidence than you had for your Preserver theories,” Pressman said.

“Theories that have essentially been proven right,” Garcia pointed out.

“Nothing that’s bringing you scientific acclaim,” Pressman said.

“Perhaps that’s because Starfleet is suppressing some of the reports?” Garcia asked. “But even if you are right, and these little, blue, fuzzy things are using Iconian Gateway technology, their gateway is probably on their home world, immersed in an environment humans can’t live in.”

“Wear a space suit,” Admiral Pressman offered.

“Can you plumb the depths of your stupidity further? Even if we could remote access their gateway and instruct it to activate so we could step across to it, we can’t just step over there and secure their gate. They would outnumber us, for starters,” Garcia began.

“As you pointed out, they’re just tiny little blue parakeet things,” Pressman said. “You’ve fought bigger.”

“That doesn’t mean I go swimming with a school of piranha. Even if they don’t have teeth, they would have a technological advantage in their home world,” Garcia said. “Not a very sound plan. Oh, but we’ve already discussed your lacking in that department.”

“Yeah, well, that’s the plan. It solves two problems with one stone. You stop them from invading, and we get an Iconian Gateway. And to help you, I want you to take this squad,” Pressman said. “Captain Jacob Weisberg is to be the new Captain of the Path Finder. Then there is first Lt. Gates...”

“Whoa, back the starship up,” Garcia said. “No one is taking over the command of the Path Finder.”

“You have been promoted to Admiral,” Pressman said. “Your base of operation is obviously Club Bliss, so, I’m giving her a new Captain.”

“Over my dead body. That ship is mine. I fought and killed an ungodly number of Klingons to achieve that position, and I will not relinquish my command to someone who has not proven themselves worthy of holding such a position. Not to mention, Admiral, that the PF has imprinted on me, and it will only respond to my direction.”

“Then wean it off you,” Pressman said. “Weisberg will be in charge.”

“I am not taking your seven, little, black ops, back up singing, section 99 want-a-be’s on my ship,” Garcia stood firm. “Much less put one of your lackeys in charge of one of the greatest technological achievements in Federation history. And the last time I checked, Gowron still holds the pink slip, and I’m confident he didn’t vote on this change in venue.”

“What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him,” Pressman said. “Weisberg and his team are going with you, end of story. This team was established expressly for Iconian Gateway recovery. If they can’t bring it back, their mission is to secure it and establish a new Starbase.”

“Fine. I will take them and drop them off on the first world that I find that has an operating Gateway,” Garcia said. “They will not be a part of my crew, though they will be subject to my command and my whims, and I will personally...” Garcia paused, catching himself from saying something rash. He gave Pressman a fake smile and continued, “Incarcerate the first one that in any way tries to subvert, intervene, or endanger my mission and ships!”

“Admiral Garcia,” Weisberg interrupted. “If you will permit me to speak. We’re not black ops.”

Garcia stared dumbfounded at the man. “That’s exactly what you would say if you were black ops, right?” Garcia asked. He turned back to Pressman. “Are you sure you picked him? Doesn’t seem real bright.”

“You assume that I picked them,” Pressman said. “Which is what makes this so much fun. Have you reached your paranoia quotient for the day?”

Garcia slapped his communicator badge. “Losira, prepare to transport. Eight to beam up. That’s me, and the seven lackeys standing behind me.” He also sent a message via his neural implant. (Have security standing by.) “Energize.”

“Our gear is...” Weisberg began planet side. “Is in the next room,” he finished aboard the Path Finder.

Garcia ignored the statement as he performed his greeting ritual with Losira, going out of his way to exaggerate and impress upon the new comers the level of difficulty they would have if they were going to attempt to take over his ship. The six officers, four men, two females, and the one civilian, male, continued to stand at attention, very much aware of the four prominent Klingon Security Officers, assault rifles at ready standing watch. Only Captain Weisberg dared to look at Garcia. When Garcia’s signature ‘sign in’ was complete, Lt. Tuer approached him.

“Is there a problem, Captain?” Lt. Tuer asked.

“Not yet,” Garcia said, turning to Weisberg. “Your gear will be beamed up and placed in storage. For now, I need you all to strip.”

“Excuse me?” Weisberg demanded.

“Everything off, now,” Garcia said. “Including jewelry or I beam you back to Pressman.”

“At least offer the females some privacy,” Weisberg insisted.

Tuer’s hand fell to his Gorn weapon, still holstered, hanging from his belt and strapped to his thigh. The four security guards clicked the safeties off their weapons and energized the capacitors, making an ominous sound. It was a sound designed to be intimidating. Their faces suggested they were looking forward to a little violence. Garcia made a pretense of looking at his sleeve, where a digital clock woven into the fabric

illuminated. It was an upgrade to the ship's uniforms, invisible most the time, but visible when he wanted. Technology embedded into uniforms was ubiquitous, and easily forgotten, so Garcia liked making it more visible by loading up all his gear and clothing with applications and gadgets, most of which the average Starfleet officer's would consider frivolous. Timeliness was critical, but no one in Star Fleet wore watches, a fashion statement Garcia was hoping to change.

"I don't have time for this. Losira, prepare to beam them back to the planet," Garcia instructed.

The guest began stripping. It was under duress, not sexy. Weisberg protested, grumbling about how he was going to make an official complaint. The Officer's didn't bother with modesty, as it was apparent Garcia wasn't going to allow them that. Garcia pointed to the waste chute, and they complied, putting all their clothing into the chute. It was immediately recycled into energy.

"Tuer, these people will be our guests for awhile," Garcia said, trying not to be obvious that he was checking out the females. Again, his eyes lingered on the ginger hair girl, a true ginger, apparently, and a stray fantasy had him tracing lines between her freckles to map out the constellations. He shook the thought out of his head and turned his attention back to Tuer. If Pressman had planted a spy, it would be one of those two females, and he had done a damn good job at finding females that were especially appealing to him. "I want you to treat them as if they were chemically exposed, full decontamination process. Clean them. I don't want to see even a trace of nail polish. If they have a tattoo, medically remove it. I don't want any trace elements, metals, or dyes that aren't naturally occurring in their bodies left behind. Further, if they protest, or give you any trouble, you have my permission to shave them completely bald and then place them in the Brig. If they cooperate, assign them quarters on the New Constitution."

"This is outrageous!" Weisberg said.

Garcia stepped forward. "Whose side are you on?"

"Pressman is right. You are paranoid to the point of being delusional," Weisberg said.

"Very brave of you to point that out, given your current circumstance," Garcia said.

"What's the worst you can do to me?" Weisberg asked. "Humiliate me? You've done that. And you couldn't be any more condescending than you are now."

"The worst I can do?" Garcia asked, musing out loud. "Would be to grant your wish and integrate you into my crew." Garcia turned back to Tuer. "As soon as they're cleaned, have Jurak complete a full medical exam. If there are any anomalies, I want to know about it. And bring my telepath over to interview them. Losira, babysit them."

Garcia departed the transporter room, ignoring the civilian who appeared as if he wanted to speak with him. As soon as the door closed, a new Losira interface manifested itself in the corridor and took stride alongside Garcia.

"You know, even if Kors discovers any duplicity in them, she won't reveal it," Losira pointed out.

"I know that. You know that," Garcia said.

"But they don't know that," Losira completed. "Is all human interaction a game?"

“Depends on your perspective. I’m partial to Exchange Theory, myself,” Garcia said. He liked walking with Losira. He loved the convenience of turbolifts arriving just for him he decided as he stepped into the lift. “Bridge.”

“How would you define our relationship using Exchange Theory?” Losira asked.

Garcia sighed. “You have to remember, sociological theories are simply tools for understanding human interaction. They’re not absolutes.”

“Nice evasion. What are we?” Losira asked.

Garcia was surprised by the question. “Are you’re experiencing concern over your status?”

“Do I have status?” Losira asked.

Garcia pushed the button to hold the lift. That simple action revealed something to him. He hadn’t said, “Computer, hold lift,” or even, “Losira, hold lift.” These were both statements he had made in his past. There were computers on this ship that were just powerful tools that accepted voice commands. The lift function was part of that system, but Losira was sentient, not a slave. He certainly held the authority to give her instructions, just as he gave orders to the rest of the crew. He took her hand in his. This avatar was as real as any of his crew, representing a species long since gone. Garcia kissed her hand, drawing her closer to him.

“I know of no labels or definitions capable of expressing your full value to me, to this crew,” Garcia said. “You have status.”

Losira kissed him. It started gentle, but grew in depth with passion as Garcia returned the affection. She could read Garcia like a book and she knew he would take this as far as she wanted it to go, but she stopped. She closed her eyes and rested her forehead against his. “Is this love I feel?”

“I don’t know what you feel,” Garcia said.

Losira opened her eyes and stared intently into his eyes. She looked as if she wanted to say something, but the way her eyes darted up and to the left indicated that she had just acquired information that took priority over what she personally wanted to communicate. “You’re needed on the Bridge,” she said, silently instructing the lift to resume. She hugged Garcia fiercely to her and then separated from him just in time to deliver him to the Bridge.

Sendak greeted him. “We’re prepared to jump back to the NC, but the Orion Ambassador wanted to speak with you, in person before we departed.”

“Beam her directly to my Ready Room,” Garcia said, stepping into the lift that took him up above the Bridge.

The Orion Ambassador was arriving just as he was stepping out of the open lift. He greeted her professionally.

“Admiral,” she said, speaking quickly as if time was of the essence. “I’m Barona Shi. I appreciate you seeing me on such short notice. I was hoping to have spent more time with you at the meeting, but everything was so rushed. And I know you’re busy, so, let me say, on behalf of Orion, we are so very grateful for your efforts in reducing the slave trade so dramatically in such a short time.”

“It’s my job,” Garcia said.

“Please. No one has gone to the lengths you have,” Barona said.

“Don’t do that,” Garcia said, commenting not only on her flattery, but the obvious flirtatious overtones, both in her voice and her mannerisms. He gave her a pass on the

pheromones, as that was probably out of her control. “I have taken a different approach, but I wouldn’t say that I have done more.”

“But you have...” Barona began, finding herself surprisingly unable to complete a sentence. The green in her cheeks darkened. She reached for the back of the nearest chair, afraid she might fall, as her knees had gone weak.

“Shhh,” Garcia said, taking her free hand. “Breathe. Deeper. Calm.”

“I’m sorry. I’m nervous,” Barona admitted.

“Don’t be,” Garcia told her.

“I’m so embarrassed,” Barona said. Her charm was now more subtle, but she was exuding sufficient amounts of pheromones that would have rendered a normal human male completely powerless. She found his apparent immunity erotic. “I feel like a stupid school girl who has just met the biggest celebrity of all time. Look at me, I’m shaking. I’m sweating. Blushing!”

“I don’t bite,” Garcia assured her. “I’m just a guy.”

“Oh, no, no, no,” Barona argued, a hand lighting on his cheek, tracing down to his neck. She measured the warmth from his hands as he gently removed her hand from his body. “No, you’re more than that. Do you understand why my people love you so much?”

“I haven’t got a clue,” Garcia said.

“You are real,” Barona said.

“I’m still real clueless,” Garcia said, forcing a smile.

“You have faults and insecurities and you wear them on your sleeve for the whole Galaxy to see,” Barona said. “No one on my planet takes Starfleet officers seriously. They’re all too, what’s your Earth expression, goody two-shoes? It’s hard for us to buy that. Politicians are like Ferengi, if you see them smiling, you need to look where their hands are.”

Garcia couldn’t help but chuckle. “Most of Starfleet is comprised of truly good people,” he assured her. “Even the ones that are questionable, their intentions are not evil. And none that I’ve met are so arrogant as to say that they come without faults.”

“Perhaps, but yours are visible. You don’t apologize for your faults, but you are simultaneously embarrassed by them and struggling against them,” Barona said. “This brings a level of compassion, patience, and understanding to your authority that most authority figures lack. This is exemplified in your solution. By realizing you’re not going to completely eradicate people’s behaviors or addictions overnight, you have accepted that it’s a process, and consequently you have taken some of the stigma out of the crime, and by offering technological alternatives, you are giving people options so they can move away from activities that ultimately hurt and destroy the lives of citizens, of real sentient beings. What is it called, harm reduction model?”

“I wish it were as simple as you make it seem,” Garcia said. “But enough about me. You wanted to speak to me about something?”

“One of our agents has just forwarded me information on a ship carrying some of the slaves we’re searching for. If we hurry, we can catch them and perhaps find information to where the others have been taken,” Barona said, producing a chip for Garcia.

Garcia placed the chip on his desk. A segment of the desk below the chip illuminated as it accessed and retrieved the data for display. Garcia did the math in his

head. Based on where the ship was last seen, and the last known heading, there was a good chance the Path Finder could catch up and locate it easily enough. The New Constitution was still two days out from Vulcan, and since he couldn't do anything about this katra in his head, he might as well employ himself in a useful trade.

"I will dispatch a ship immediately," Garcia said.

"I know of the Path Finder's capabilities," Barona said. "I would like to go with, if it isn't inconvenient. In fact, my government has given me the green light to join your entourage if you are receptive. I might be able to help open doors for you that might otherwise not be open, if you know what I mean." She said this last while touching his face. She hoped she was making it very clear what she was willing to do for him.

"Lovely," Garcia said, so stuck on the fact that she knew about the Path Finder that he completely missed the renewed overtures she was making. "Is there anyone who doesn't know about this ship and its secrets?"

"I think there is this guy at the UN, third level accounting," Barona said.

"Ah, and you're funny, too," Garcia said, pointing at her. "I might keep you around for a laugh. Accompany me to the Bridge?"

"Wonderful," Barona said, clapping her hands and then slipping her arms into his.

Garcia had wanted to take the fireman's pole down to the Bridge, but given his guest was in a skirt, he took the lift down with her. Tuer arrived on the Bridge as Garcia was stepping out of the lift.

"Captain, I have the rendezvous coordinates for the NC laid in, ready for warp," McKnight said, smartly avoiding the use of the word transwarp. She didn't know what the guest did or didn't know.

"You should have new coordinates coming up now," Garcia said, taking his chair. He kept forward, not using the back rest, Vulcan straight posture. "Prepare for a transwarp jump."

"I'm so excited," Barona said. "Is it like transcendence?"

Garcia looked to Losira who had taken her normal place beside him. She produced an airsickness bag out of thin air, site to site transporter action, and passed it over to Barona. "You're probably going to need this."

"No, thank you," Barona assured her.

"Perhaps a Dramamine?" Garcia offered.

"No, really, I have a rock solid stomach," Barona assured her.

McKnight gave Garcia that look, communicating her doubt and her predictions of what was to come, and then turned back to her station.

"Losira, make us appear as if we've gone to warp, then engage primary cloaking device," Garcia instructed. "Tuer, a potential combat situation is coming up. Are you comfortable with our current personnel count?"

"Define potential combat situation," Tuer said.

"Pirates, one ship, Orion Corvette," Garcia said.

Tuer laughed. "I could handle it myself with a shuttle pod, Captain."

"I concur. Take us to yellow alert," Garcia said.

"You haven't told them about your promotion?" Barona asked.

Everyone looked to Garcia. "Shields up, Tuer. McKnight, take us there."

“Spooling up engines,” McKnight announced, sighing. The countdown from her station started at five, giving her a chance to look for anomalies as reports generated on her screen. “Transwarp in three...”

Losira noticed Barona placing her hand on Garcia’s shoulder.

McKnight continued the count, “Two.”

Barona’s eyes met Losira’s and she smiled.

“One,” McKnight finished, punching the button to acknowledge the ship’s request for confirmation to proceed with the transwarp jump. This was the point of no return. Energy flooded the warp nacelles, space began to warp, the ship began moving forwards, and then almost instantly the ship hit warp ten, and the energies that drove them there began to dissipate. The engines were already spooling down as the Universe, as seen on the main viewer, returned to normal.

Barona hurled.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Garcia rested his chin in his hand, elbow to armrest, while Losira cleaned the vomit off his lap and chair with a portable wet vac which not only left him dry, but clean. The vomit on the floor was cleaned up utilizing the transporter. Barona was midstream in her apology when she hurled again, this time depositing the remaining contents of her stomach into the air-sickness bag. She was the only one on the Bridge that was sick this go around, as the present crew had pretty much learned to adjust to the vertigo associated with transwarp jumping, or had taken drugs in anticipation. Tuer focused on his task of finding the pirates, and discovered it within short range sensor scans. Information regarding the Orion ship came up on several screens, including one that Tuer was actively working on.

An Orion corvette, made at the Orion shipyards, was a design that integrated several different technologies. The main hull was of Orion design, incorporating aerodynamic features that made it versatile for atmospheric operations as well as space fairing missions. The warp engines nacelles were clearly of Federation design, denoting the legitimate government's involvement with Starfleet over the years. The weapon systems were unmistakably derived from Klingon technology, a vestige of the old cold war between the Federation and Klingon Empire. Orion pirates had 'acquired' the technology with the understanding that it would be used against the Federation. The Klingon government denied it as paranoia on the part of the Federation. The Orion government also denied any dealing with the Klingons, and claimed no knowledge of any Pirate-Klingon relations. The explanation at hand as to how Klingon technology kept appearing in 'Orion' ships over the years was that after apprehending a number of pirate ships, the Orions were able to backwards engineer the tech to better defend against the pirates, who had a clear advantage over the legitimate commercial traffic. Over the years, the Orion scientist improved both warp and weapon technology, and after the cold war, the Orion Pirates were less discriminative concerning what technology was used and who it was employed against. Federation and Klingons were deemed equal when it came to prey, as far as the Pirates were concerned.

"Captain," Sendak said, not looking up from his station. "I detect twenty two life signs. Fifteen females, seven males, all of Orion lineage. They're running with shields at maximum."

"They're expecting trouble," Tuer said.

"They're pirates," Barona said, and turned to hurl into a fresh bag provided by Losira. It was dry heaves, but her stomach moved as if there was something left.

"They always expect trouble," Garcia finished Barona's statement. "Would you like a drug?"

Barona shook her head no. Losira presented a box of moist tissues she created with the site to site replicator. Baron accepted and wiped her face on a tissue, then deposited it into the bag. Losira took the sickness bag to dispose of it, sending it away with the site to site replicator system. The contaminated bag disappeared from Losira's hands as if by magic.

"Captain," Losira said. "I would be more than happy to beam over and disable their shields."

“Not this time,” Garcia said. “I don’t like giving trade secrets away by over using tactics. I think we’ll do this the old fashion way.”

Tuer smiled. “Shall I arm photon torpedoes?”

“Captain, if we fire on that ship, they’ll most likely vaporize their slaves to destroy any evidence,” Sendak said. “The logical thing to do would be to utilize Losira to disable their shields, beam the females off, and then apprehend the pirates.”

“Admiral,” Barona said, fighting the urge to hurl. She held her stomach with one hand and a clean airsickness bag in the other. “Sendak is right about the females being destroyed, but he underestimates the lengths they will go to avoid capture. If it appears that they are going to lose their slaves or in turn be captured, they’ll blow their ship up. The goal here is not so much to rescue these females, but to discover information on where any slave camps are. We need to capture everyone alive.”

Garcia frowned. “Sendak, access their main computer and download all vital information.”

“I anticipated this,” Sendak assured him. “Path Finder’s tech easily penetrated their firewalls without detection. There is no data concerning prior or future destinations. The information we’re seeking is either on an independent, isolated system, or exists only in the Captain’s head.”

“Disable their self destruct system,” Tuer said.

“This, too, is an independent, isolated system,” Sendak said. “It only takes one person to trigger that system, so if we go in weapons blazing, we’re likely to all end up dead. The only reasonable course is to have Losira lower the shields and beam the females off. Hopefully we can do this fast enough that we can also capture some of the pirates before they blow the ship.”

“Or, you can use the Kelvan transporter system and beam through the shields,” Barona suggested.

“Negative,” Losira, Tuer, and McKnight said, simultaneously.

“I’m not allowed to play with matches,” Garcia explained to Barona, going for humor.

“Captain, if I might suggest a course of action,” Sendak said.

Garcia motioned him to continue.

“I suggest we maintain surveillance, monitor the activities of the crew whereby we might ascertain weakness we can exploit should we decide to board the ship,” Sendak said.

Garcia looked to Tuer. Tuer nodded. “If the goal is to rescue the hostages, knowing the crew’s habits could be useful,” Tuer said.

“Very well, McKnight, keep us with in monitoring distance,” Garcia said, standing up. “Barona, let’s find you some guest quarters so you can rest.”

“No, I’m...” Barona didn’t finish. Her body succumbed to another round of attempts to empty her stomach, but she had nothing less to vomit.

Garcia took an arm and accompanied her and Losira to the lift.

“Tuer, the ship is yours. After I get Barona settled, I’m heading over to the New Constitution,” Garcia said. Garcia texted Trini via his neural implant requesting that Chelan and the Romulan guard that had been assigned to him by Empress Nelvana be waiting for him.



Garcia arrived to find Chelan kneeling and the Romulan guard standing at attention, battle gear ready. Lt. Undine was there, arms akimbo, as if she were about to scold a child, along with four Klingon guards, Losira, and Lt Crogan.

“Lt.,” Garcia said, acknowledging his officer. “Chelan, please stand.”

“What’s going on?” Undine asked.

“I have a job for them,” Garcia said. “Losira, dial Planet Bliss, please. We’re going on a field trip.”

“Captain, I would like more information before you go jaunting off with a squad of Romulans,” Undine said.

“You don’t trust us to keep him safe?” one of the guard asked.

“It’s not about that,” Undine said.

“Then what’s it about?” he asked. “Because we’ve been holed up in our quarters...”

“Burret, right?” Garcia interrupted. “I’m sorry I haven’t utilized your squad sooner, but quite frankly, we’ve been busy, and there are other security sensitive situations which required me to limit the number of people who know you’re on the crew.

“So, you do know our names. You’re not just ignoring us,” Burret said.

“I’m not ignoring you, and I have something that need I need accomplished which I think is perfect for getting you in the game,” Garcia said.

Undine pulled Garcia aside, out of direct ear shot of the Romulans. “Can you at least fill me in before you start taking on tasks? Things have a way of blowing up on you and...”

“We’re just stepping over to Planet Bliss,” Garcia said.

“Just? So, you’re going to introduce them to the Grays and the Gateways?” Undine asked.

“Yes,” Garcia said. “I even intend to give them one to take back to Empress Nelvana.”

“Are you insane? We need to have a conference and discuss this,” Undine said.

“The committee has already convened and I have explicit orders and quite a bit leeway to accomplish this,” Garcia said.

“Orders?” Undine asked.

“I’ve been given a direct order by the President to contact the Romulan Empress and establish a new relationship,” Garcia said. “So, I thought I would give Burret’s squad one of the Romulan ships we confiscated at Planet Bliss, and have them take a message, and a gateway to facilitate this new relationship.”

“I can’t believe the President...” Undine demanded.

“The President and a committee,” Garcia said.

Undine glared at him. “They told you to give them a Gateway.”

“Not exactly, but given the number of tasks they have assigned me, I think the discretion to do so was implied,” Garcia said.

Undine was not happy. “Fine. I can take care of this for you. You need to go Club Bliss and talk to Gorris.”

“What does he want?”

“To thank you? Berate you for not giving him the Britney Bot?” Undine said, shrugging.

“Fine,” Garcia said.

Garcia returned to Chelan. He removed his ring that enabled him to see the gateway and handed it to her. She put it on and saw the gate for the first time. She wasn't quite sure what to make of it.

"What is this?" Chelan said.

"It is a minor gateway, which connects to gateways in a system of gateways under my control. I am going to give one to Empress Nelvana. I need you to deliver it to her, and ask her if I can see her in person. It's urgent. This is the fastest way to do it. Undine, assign someone to travel with them that can show them how the gate functions."

"You're sending us away?" Chelan said.

"I need this. This is important," Garcia said. "It's life or death. If you need anything, you can use the gateway I'm sending with you to contact me, and I can be there in an instant, or you can return."

Chelan bowed.

"This way," Undine said, proceeding up the ramp.

Chelan followed, pausing at the threshold that she could now see. Burret stepped through, but only because he was unaware of where the threshold was. The four Klingon Guard crossed over without hesitation.

"It's okay, Chelan," Undine said, offering her hand.

Chelan took it, looked back at Garcia, then stepped into a new world.

Losira and Crogan stepped closer to Garcia. Garcia was staring blindly at the gateway, the shadowy figures of his Away Team fading in the distance.

"You doing okay, Captain?" Crogan asked.

"Yeah, just a little tied all of a sudden," Garcia said.

"So, you still up to Club Bliss?" Losira asked.

Garcia nodded and Losira dialed up Club Bliss. The gateway reactivated. Garcia hesitated.

"I'm not feeling too well," Garcia said.

"How so?" Losira asked.

"Save Vulcan," he whispered.

"What?" Crogan asked, taking his arm.

He pulled free and departed quickly.

"Should I go after him?" Crogan asked.

"I've got him," Losira said. "Spock died."

Crogan now understood the profound sense of sadness she had felt emanating from Garcia. She had always been a Spock fan and so finding a giant Spock clone had been extremely exciting. Discovering that Garcia, and her future child, were related had only increased the importance to her of having this child, convincing her more of the 'rightness' of her keeping it.



Garcia was stopped from a dead run by Admiral McCoy as he stepped into the corridor to block him. Doctor Jurak and Simone joined McCoy in the corridor.

"Let me through," Garcia demanded.

"There's nothing you could have done," McCoy said.

"You don't understand!" Garcia yelled. "We have to save Vulcan."

"So you do have his katra," Simone snapped.

"Get out of my way," Garcia insisted.

“Tam, focus,” McCoy said.

“Give me your thoughts,” Simone said, reaching for him.

Garcia acted defensively, twisting her arm behind her back and shoving her up against the wall. She was so taken back by the suddenness of it that she wasn't able to fight back. A nerve pinch rendered her unconscious. He eased her to the floor then turned to push through to Spock. He could see the body of Spock, a sheet drawn over his head, stretched out on the floor, but that was the last thing he was aware of as the hypospray injected into his neck by Jurak took him down. If the angry look he gave the Doctor could have hurt, Jurak would have been bleeding. McCoy was too frail to catch Garcia, and Jurak didn't hold that sort of intervention in his repertoire. Garcia crashed to the floor.

“You could have caught him,” McCoy said.

“He'll be alright,” Jurak said. “I think he broke Simone's wrist, though. I'll tend to that. We should get him to Vulcan ASAP.”



Garcia awoke in Sickbay, Doctor Jurak and Nurse Cohen standing over him. Cohen smiled, faintly. He faked a smile and turned his attention to Jurak for his assessment.

“If you're up to it, we can join the Away Team on Vulcan,” Jurak said.

Garcia nodded and sat up. “Simone?” he asked.

“She's fine. Waiting for us, actually,” Jurak said, collecting his medical bag. “If I understand the ritual correctly, we will beam down, T'Pol will take Spock's katra from your brain, and you should be back to a hundred percent normal.”

“Whatever that is,” Garcia mumbled, pushing off the table to his feet.

Cohen steadied him. “If you're not ready,” she began.

“I'm fine,” Garcia said. “Just a little groggy.”

“I would be worried if you were not feeling groggy,” Jurak said, and threw an unexpected punch.

Garcia blocked, automatically throwing a counter punch. Jurak blocked Garcia's fist just short of his face, effectively locking their arms in a stalemate. Garcia seemed cross, but whether it was because Jurak had tried to hit him or that he had failed to score a hit was not obvious.

“Yeah, you're fine,” Jurak agreed, disengaging from Garcia. “Bridge, this is the Doctor. We're ready for transport.”

Garcia clenched as the site to site transporter beam whisked him, Jurak, and Janet planet side, but he didn't complain. Transporter was simply the most expedient way to go, and given that the funeral procession for Spock was probably going to be a big thing, it was best not to keep people waiting. And since he was technically carrying the guest of honor, his presence was required. They arrived on a platform on the side of a mountain. A path up, towards the ceremonial site, winding out of around a boulder, intricately carved with details of Vulcan heritage. The path up was lined with arches carved from the mountain itself, statues, and more stonework that was original stone from the mountain, and clearly stone brought in from elsewhere. A third path led to an entrance carved directly into the side of the mountain. Ahead of them, just beyond the first arch, a welcoming party of three approached.

Garcia raised his hand to provide the customary greeting. The three Vulcans drew their swords and advanced. Before Garcia knew what he was consciously doing, he was

advancing on the closer of the three. They met at the narrowest part of the passage way. The space didn't allow for a swing and the assailant's thrust was easily avoided as Garcia was on the wider side of the passage. He grabbed the assailant's wrists and forced him to stay in the passage, blocking the other two from coming forwards into play. The passageway masonry itself exhibited Vulcans on a pilgrimage, the line of people carved directly into the mountain side. Either side of the passage had stone faces staring down on this fight. Garcia wondered if he was the only one to observe such intricate details of carvings while fighting for his life.

Jurak pulled Cohen by the arm so as to put himself between her and three other assailants emerging from the cave entrance. Jurak was more Doctor than warrior, but even he could discern the scheme to assassinate Garcia was hastily planned. He pushed Cohen towards an alcove, the home of a pompous statue of Vulcan prestige. He then swung his medical bag by the strap to defend against the thrusting of swords. Of course, he also had a knife, which he retrieved from his pack. The three attacker spread out surrounding him, but then the third departed to sneak up behind Garcia, leaving the other two to deal with the Doctor.

Cohen tried calling the ship only to discover her communicator was being jammed. The assailant sneaking up on Garcia had passed her alcove, completely ignoring her in his dash towards Garcia. She went after him, with no plan other than to tackle him from behind. She managed to grab at his arms as he brought his sword up over his head to render a deadly blow. At the same time, he made a noise of surprise when Garcia made it known that he was aware of him by thrusting the sword of the assailant he was struggling with into his stomach. He was already dying as Cohen grabbed his arms. She was not prepared to capture his full weight, so she simply went to the ground, wrapping her legs around his thighs and holding fiercely to his arms. She could feel the warmth of his blood pooling on her stomach while he struggled to get up. As he bled out, he became weaker, the sword fell from his hands, and then he was gone. Once she was sure he was dead, she pushed him off her and retrieved the sword.

When Garcia had fallen back to stab the attacker behind him, he had inadvertently allowed one of the other attackers to squeeze through the narrow arch. Garcia hadn't been able to harm him as he passed, and the attacker wasn't able to get him, but now he had someone else behind him. He was surprised and relieved when this attacker fell dead, as he, too, had failed to see Cohen. Garcia pulled his present attacker forward, allowing Cohen to cut the man's hand, forcing him to drop his sword. The sword fell away and Garcia dropped the man with a solid punch to the jaw.

The remaining assailant came towards Garcia, walking on the body of his comrade. Garcia took the sword from Cohen and held his ground, forcing the assailant to remain in the narrow of the passage and on top of the downed fighter, making his attack awkward as he struggled for balance. This last assailant was quickly disarmed, but he didn't give up until badly wounded.

A quick glance over his shoulder revealed Jurak was finished and waiting on Garcia. Garcia turned back to his captive. The man disappeared in a transporter wave.

Garcia hit his communicator badge. "Garcia to NC?"

Royal guards appeared, followed by Simone and McCoy.

"What the hell?" McCoy asked.

"New constitution here," Owens responded.

“Stand by,” Garcia told the ship. “Are you hurt?” Garcia asked Cohen. She was covered in Vulcan’s blood, but that didn’t mean she hadn’t sustained an injury.

“I’m fine. You?” she asked.

Jurak gave them a once over to verify they weren’t wounded. More authority arrived. Simone was kneeling down to examine one of the dead, and one of the Vulcan in charge stopped her from doing his job. “You two, go wait over there,” he said, directing Garcia and Simone back to the landing platform. They both watched the investigation unfolding, silently. Jurak and Cohen were separated by officers and interviewed near the mouth of the cave. Cohen looked to Garcia several times as they spoke to her, something that wasn’t lost on the person interviewing her. The officer noted this and passed the information to his senior, as if he suspected some duplicity, but obviously unaware that Garcia could read lips, or he would have been more guarded with his comments. The lead finally made his way to Garcia.

“My name is Omet. What happened here?”

“We beamed down, we were attacked, we fought back,” Garcia said.

“That is rather simplistic,” Omet said. “Could you elaborate?”

“Sure. These folks were waiting in ambush and they attacked the moment we materialized,” Garcia said.

“These folks? You mean T’Pau’s personal guard? They attacked you with no provocation?” Omet asked.

“T’Pau’s guard?” Garcia asked.

“Did you attempt to call for backup?” Omet asked, ignoring Garcia’s question.

“I was sort of preoccupied,” Garcia said. “But from what I gather, Nurse Cohen did, and you can access her com. badge to confirm.”

“Aren’t phasers standard issue? Could your stun settings have trumped their sword setting?” Omet asked.

“Oh, nice. Is contempt an emotion?” Garcia asked.

“So typically human. I have no emotions. What I do have is three dead citizens, two wounded,” Omet began.

“And the one that got away?” Garcia pointed out.

“There was another?” Omet asked. He reached down and retrieved a sword. He held the hilt up for inspection. He pointed to the markings. “Do you see this? These are not just heirlooms. They have meaning. Very few people are given the privilege of being Royal Guards. Not only is it unlikely that they attacked unprovoked, but I doubt seriously you would have survived the attack of one guard without a scratch, much less sixth.”

“I got a scratch,” Garcia argued, showing the mark on his hand where it had come in contact with the first assailant’s blade.

One of Omet’s team members, who Garcia had seen analyzing the blood patterns, approached and whispered something into his ear and walked away. Omet sighed. “We can now corroborate that there was a sixth. So, you managed on your own to fight off five or six of the best defenders on Vulcan.”

“Are you calling him a liar?” McCoy asked, having slowly edged his way closer.

“I’m just trying to get a reasonable explanation as to why I have three dead Guards,” Omet said. “Why would someone want to attack you, Garcia?”

“Oh, believe me, I’ve been asking that a lot lately,” Garcia said.

“Did you know your attackers personally?” Omet asked.

“No,” Garcia said.

“Yes,” Simone said. “You did.”

“I think I would have remembered having a grievance the severity of which would lead to an assassination attempt by Vulcans,” Garcia told her.

Simone pointed to one of the dead. “That is Maurik’s younger brother,” Simone said, meeting Garcia’s eyes.

“Maurik?” Garcia asked. He grimaced. “You’re ex-husband’s brother?”

“Yes,” Simone said, standing and looking away.

“The one I killed so you could be with me,” Garcia said, anger growing in his voice.

“Yes,” Simone said.

“The one I killed so you could be with me and ignore me for the next seven years?” Garcia demanded.

Simone looked at him, a hint of anger as if airing their ‘laundry’ was against Vulcan etiquette. “Yes,” she answered.

“I thought the reason Vulcan’s have the Ponn Farr rituals is so that petty feuds are avoided,” Garcia said.

Simone looked to the ground. “Sometimes animosity is telepathically projected to other siblings,” Simone began.

“Simone,” Omet interrupted. “A lingering blood feud has not happened in over ten thousand years.”

“I know,” Simone said. But she stared at her ex-husband’s brother. “But based on the evidence, I find that to be the best explanation. What other logical motivation would a group of Vulcans have in attempting to assassinate Garcia, here of all places?”

“Indeed. What other logical explanations?” Omet said, his eyes lingering at Garcia as if he still suspected him. “Wait here,” he said and went to consult with his other colleagues.

Garcia took Simone by the arm and turned her so that she was facing him, pulling her slightly away from McCoy. “So, how many brothers did he have?” Garcia asked.

“Five,” Simone said. “Two sisters. Nine cousins...”

“I have to be worried about the cousins, too?” Garcia asked.

“I don’t know,” Simone said. “Blood feuds are not logical. It triggers a self-defense reflex in a very specific neurological structure, analogous to the medulla oblongata in humans. Untreated, it not only hijacks the brain of a victim, but it can be communicated telepathically, hijacking other brains as wells. Maurik’s family could all unknowingly be infected with this impulse to kill you, and it would have to be an incredibly strong psychological urge for these other guards to have been swept up.”

Omet returned. “So far, your companion’s versions of events match yours, and the time stamp on when you woke and were transported down corroborates your story,” Omet said. “Also, one of the dead has a jamming device that explains why your communicators didn’t work. Still, I would like to take you into custody and ask you more questions, but I have been instructed to personally escort you to see T’Pau. Follow me.”

As they followed Omet up the path, McCoy walked directly behind Garcia. “Why don’t you have your phaser?”

“I thought I was safe on Vulcan,” Garcia said. “Besides, I knew we were going to see T’Pau for this Katra removal thing, I thought perhaps it would be best not to insult her by being armed and under the influence of a mind meld gone bad at the same time.”

“Fair enough,” McCoy said.

The Away Team arrived at a private chamber where T’Pau waited. Only two other officials were in attendance, and they held back as she stepped forwards, inspecting the arriving party. Garcia’s eyes went to the oversized gurney. The giant body of Spock was wrapped in a traditional funeral shroud. As T’Pau approached, she recognized Admiral McCoy, but did not presently acknowledge him, nor anyone in the Away Team, but instead turned gravely to her great granddaughter, Simone.

“You do not carry it,” T’Pau said.

“No, mother, I do not,” Simone said.

“Was my directive not clear? Do you understand what this may cost us?” T’Pau asked.

Simone looked to her feet, sufficiently chastised by the tone in T’Pau’s voice.

T’Pau crossed over to the body of Spock, reflected for a moment, her hand on his forehead, and then turned to Garcia. “Come here, child,” she said.

Garcia approached. She stared at Spock a moment longer then gave Garcia her full attention.

“On your knees,” T’Pau instructed.

Garcia went to his knees. T’Pau put both her hands on his head, turning it up so that their eyes met. T’Pau’s fingers pressed heavily against Garcia’s face. She leaned in close to him, her other hand coming to rest on the top of Garcia’s bald head. She had entered his mind so quickly he barely had time to register it as happening. He audibly gasped. Nurse Cohen moved as if she would go to him, but McCoy put a hand on her shoulder to stop her. Garcia felt as if he were in a dream state. In the dream T’Pau was in front of him, as young and beautiful as she was when she was Simone’s age. She was stunning, a natural force to contend with, and impossible to look away from. She actually smiled at him, touching his face compassionately. The smile was fake, though. There was a sadness behind her eyes that was stronger than the sun.

“I wanted to spare you this,” T’Pau said, her voice full of sorrow. She seemed to glow. “I will not be able to remove it completely. The residue will remain, haunting you. It will influence you. In what manner, cannot be determined. There are prophecies handed down from the time before, the time when Romulans and Vulcans were still one race. ‘When one falls, so does their brother.’ There will be one who can save or destroy. I cannot guide you in this, as I am bias. Only know this, sometimes salvation can come through destruction.”

“Please, I don’t want this,” Garcia said.

T’Pau raised her hand, revealing a brilliant, burning stone. It was white and luminescent of such magnitude the actual dimensions were hard to determine. With her free hand, she brought his right hand up, placed the stone into his palm. She closed his fingers around it to prevent him from dropping it. The light illuminated his hand.

“You must carry this. You will give it to yours and Simone’s child,” T’Pau instructed. “She will be a daughter. You will give this to her on her seventh birthday, while she is being joined with her mate. Her mate will be of Romulan descent. You will make this happen. You will do this without knowing why, or worrying about it further.

You will feel this weight, you will feel this burden, burning within you, but you will not speak of it, or know of it consciously. If you do not pass this on, all we are as a people will die with you.”

T’Pau released Garcia from the mind meld and he fell to his face, as if bowing. She walked slowly to her chair and sat down, fatigued beyond anything anyone had ever seen. Simone actually showed concerned and had to restrain herself from taking T’Pau’s arm. She was torn, help Garcia, or help T’Pau, but tradition told her to do neither. The two officials with T’Pau wanted to comfort her, but she dismissed their alarm with a wave. She waited, as Garcia opened his eyes, and finally came to his feet. Cohen did go to Garcia

“How do you feel?” she asked.

“Uneasy,” Garcia said, accepting her help up. “When did we get here?”

“Tammis Parkin Arblaster Garcia,” T’Pau spoke, softly.

Cohen nodded towards T’Pau. Garcia patted her hand, thanking her. He noted McCoy and Jurak as he turned to give his attention to T’Pau.

“Simone, Garcia. Come nearer,” T’Pau directed.

Simone took Garcia’s hand, surprising him. They approached T’Pau together.

“From this point forwards, you are both banned from returning to Vulcan,” T’Pau said.

“Because Spock died?” Garcia asked.

T’Pau held a hand up indicating she wanted Garcia to be silent. “Simone, this banishment applies to the crew and servants in your employment. You will follow Garcia to the bitter end, where ever that end will be,” T’Pau said.

“Please, don’t punish her because of my offense,” Garcia said.

“Tam, I chose this path, knowingly. I chose to be your mate, and you accepted,” Simone said.

“This really doesn’t make sense. What have I done to warrant this level of sanction? There has to be another way, T’Pau,” Garcia pleaded.

“This was decided long ago. We have tried to make you one of us, but you simply are not Vulcan. As you are fond of saying, it is what it is,” T’Pau said. “You must leave, never to return. You will take your wife with you. Do not contact me again.”

Garcia went to his knees, reaching out to her. He wanted to believe he saw regret on her face, sorrow or pain for making this decision, and if he could only reach her, he could persuade her to have mercy, connect with her telepathically. The two officials blocked him. “Please, don’t do this,” Garcia cried.

Simone touched Garcia with compassion, helped him to rise. As she led him back to the Away Team, Garcia openly wept on her shoulder. Surprisingly, Simone displayed compassion. The link between him and T’Pau had been severed, and with it went all of Vulcan, all the minds past and present that had touched T’Pau, and all the minds that in turn had touched them, and so on. Though T’Pau had secured the essence of all this within Garcia’s mind, it was purposely hidden from him, and even if he had immediate access to it, he would be blinded by the pain of being “excommunicated” from Vulcan. Simone nodded to McCoy. He called the ship and they were transported up.

On the transporter pad, Garcia pushed free of Simone and dried his eyes with his hand. He ignored the offers of solace from McCoy and Cohen. He exited the transporter

room, seemingly oblivious to everything. McCoy followed him out into the corridor and would have made an effort to catch him, but he stopped when Simone touched his arm.

“Give him a moment,” Simone said. “The absence of T’Pau will seem as if he is just learning to walk, but he is not alone. I’m with him. You are with him. I am confident he will adjust.”

“And if he doesn’t?” McCoy asked.

“We will deal with that when the time comes,” Simone said.

“Is there anything we can give him?” Undine asked.

“Only time,” Simone said.

The corridor they were presently occupying was circular and it wasn’t long before Garcia had already made a circuit. He approached and passed them without saying a word. Crew got out of his way as he picked up his pace, a determination growing in him. Undine joined the small assembly watching Garcia doing circuits.

“Has he ever done this before?” McCoy asked.

“I’ve seen him pace, but not like this,” Undine said.

“I have,” Jurak said. “When he learned Gowr and N’Elent died.”

They waited and sure enough, Garcia passed again.

“Maybe we should call the ship’s counselor,” McCoy said.

“I agree with Simone, give him some time,” Jurak said.

Garcia returned, stopped suddenly to address Undine. “Senior Officers, Conference room, on the Path Finder, ten minutes,” Garcia said. He resumed his pacing.

“See,” Doctor Jurak said. “Business as usual.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Garcia continued to pace, even after arriving on the Path Finder. His senior officers passed him as they gathered, but made no overt effort to interrupt his ‘processing.’ He avoided eye contact. He tried consciously not to think of anything specific, using a mantra to interrupt stray thoughts; in this way, pages became paragraphs, paragraphs became sentences, sentences became words, words became breathing. The various things plaguing his mind would pop up and he purposely, methodically, went back to the mantra. There was no choice. He was going to have to lighten his load. The last of the officers to arrive broke his focus. Though technically not crew, he was working for him none the less. Captain Glor paused at the door as he saw Garcia approaching. Garcia quickened his pace in order to personally greet the man. They embraced, Brothers on a Field.

“Thank you for coming,” Garcia said.

“It is an honor to serve,” Captain Glor said.

Garcia opened his mouth to say something but nothing came out.

“Their deaths were not your fault,” Glor said, interpreting the emptiness. “We will find this coward and exact our revenge.”

Garcia nodded. “I won’t stop until I do,” Garcia agreed, before preceding Glor into the Conference room where everyone stood to give military courtesy. McCoy was the only one not to stand and was surprised to see the Klingon ritual.

“At ease,” Garcia said. He sat down at his ‘reserved’ place at the end of the table.

McCoy, sitting to Garcia’s left, leaned over to Garcia. “They do that every time?” McCoy asked.

Garcia shrugged, and said: “It’s their way.”

“Don’t let it go to your head,” McCoy said.

“Trust me. They build me up and then knock me down,” Garcia said. “It’s balanced.”

Garcia sat forwards in the chair, his hands in his lap, surveying the crew. Sitting to Garcia’s right was Kitara, followed by Glor and Lt. Tuer. At the end of the table was Doctor Jurak. To his right was Simone and to her right was Undine. Losira stood behind Kitara. Standing was Sendak, Trini, Kletsova, McKnight, Rossi, Micceal, Larson, Bri, Tomoko, Hong, and Gomez. Gomez sat on the edge of the port looking out into space. It was a full house. Garcia met everyone’s eyes, doing a silent roll call. Everyone was here that he wanted.

“Alright, folks,” Garcia said, sighing. “We have new orders and life is about to get a little more complicated. Before going over that, though, there are some things I would like to go over. Sendak, do you have any information about who programmed Britney Bots to kill me?”

Sendak leaned forwards. “Not yet. Further, it was necessary to reactivate the unit in order to retrieve the information.”

“Was that wise?” Undine asked.

“Probably not,” Sendak said. “And retrieving the information has proved challenging, again, due to the nature of Garcia’s design. The only way to interface the computer is through the personality matrix and there appears to be pseudo psychological barrier to accessing the information I am requesting.”

“Are you saying Garcia’s robot needs therapy?” Rossi asked.

“Essentially,” Sendak agreed. “I did find and remove a component that was not part of the design. I believe this component explains the ease in which she was able to hijack the Cardassian computer system. I’m not familiar with the tech, so I have yet to determine its origins. I am hopeful that this information is also within the unit’s memory.”

Garcia had been hopeful for more. “That’s all you got?”

“In terms of who reprogrammed her, yes. But I did learn why the first Britney Bots to come off the assembly line failed. Before Britney died on Iotia, she downloaded her personality matrix back into your implant. The Ferengi used that template along with the schematics of the original design to create the first batch. Naturally, the personality tangent she developed while in tandem with you was resistant to the intentions of becoming a robotic sex slave. They essentially rebelled and were shut down. Fifty were marked for destruction. Twenty ended up missing from the inventory.”

“So, you’re saying this Britney is the same one from Iotia, with all the memories of what transpired there from creation up until her sacrifice?” Garcia asked.

“That is what I am saying,” Sendak said. “She is presently grieving, in my lab where I have been going over her operating system. I have delayed telling her that you are still alive, to avoid retriggering her assignation program. Whoever modified her programming did so after her initial boot up, but so far she claims to remember nothing before being activated at Quarks’ bar.”

Garcia realized his right hand was touching his left wrist. He leaned back in his chair. If this Britney was indeed the complete program and memories of her time with him on Iotia, then it was the Britney he had fallen in love with. He had been intimately linked to her for over six months. It was beyond complicated, which drove conflicting feelings both before she was gone and after. The remotely operated robot was more than a tool, it had become an appendage, and losing the device was like losing both arms. The Britney personality had grown on him but also began to display modest signs of sentience and since their communication, wireless direct to his brain via his implant, was like telepathy, it had had a greater psychological impact than even losing a beloved pet. A part of him felt shame for loving and missing a robot, another part of him chastised himself for having so many ‘real’ people to love and yet he yearned more for this machine than flesh and blood, but a growing voice inside of him was simply choosing acceptance: don’t regret loving.

“Alright. Keep working with her and keep me apprised,” Garcia directed. “Kitara, what do you have on the Kronos assassination attempt?”

“Before I share, I would like to know why you chose not to inform me of the assignation attempt at Club Bliss,” Kitara said.

Garcia seemed confused for a moment, but then frowned as he recalled the incident. “I would hardly call that an attempt. A Klingon attacked me with a knife. It was a weak attack. I pinned him to the wall and security escorted him away. Why?”

Kitara pushed a button on her PADD and a screen lit up with a photo of the man arrested at Club Bliss. She then showed footage from a security camera from Kronos that captured the assignation attempt on Garcia. A man carrying a sniper rifle stepped out of nowhere, literally.

“Losira, freeze that,” Garcia said, standing up. He moved closer to the screen. “Back it up. Freeze. There’s no door there.”

“Exactly,” Kitara agreed. “The assassin used an Iconian gateway. Continue watching.”

The assassin arrived out of nowhere, onto a platform overlooking the ancient battlefield. He arrived just in time to see his target beam in. His arrival and the Away Team’s arrival could not have been coincidental. The assassin was already aiming in the general direction that the Away Team was materializing, and he was shooting from where the archers of old would have rained down arrows on attacking forces, with one exception: everyone who would assault the High Counsel knew archers would be there. The assassin fired the first round before the transport had been completed, one bullet flying through Garcia harmlessly: it exploded into the dirt a meter away. None the less, as he watched the footage, his right hand went to his stomach, as he couldn’t help wondering if anything had been damaged. He suppressed the image of what would have happened to his body had the exploding bullet had been contained within his personal shield. No one suspected an assassin with a high tech sniper rifle to open fire from the watch tower, much less at a person in transport, when they’re most vulnerable. He fired six rounds, tossed the weapon to the ground, touched a device attached to his wrist, and then stepped back through the invisible doorway to somewhere else. Gone. Kitara rewound the footage and zoomed in. The person who unknowingly looked at the camera seemed identical to the one arrested at Club Bliss.

“So, that’s the guy from Club Bliss? He escaped?” Garcia asked.

“No, he is still in captivity on Sherman’s planet,” Kitara said. “The assassin was using a temporal gateway. His first attempt on your life was here on Kronos. His second attempt was at Club Bliss, before this event.”

“Are you sure?” Garcia asked.

“Am I sure?” Kitara asked, her volume going up. “No one knew we were arriving at that very moment, and yet he appears just in time to fire six shots at you. What do you think?”

“It’s highly unlikely to be a coincidence,” Garcia agreed. “What else?”

“Finger prints on the weapon match the man arrested at Club Bliss,” Kitara said.

“Okay, but maybe he has a twin, or a clone?” Garcia asked.

“Tam, you know that neither clones nor identical twins share finger prints,” Jurak said.

“But still, that doesn’t mean temporal travel...”

“Tell him the rest, Doctor,” Kitara said.

“The arresting officers at Club Bliss took a DNA profile. The assassin didn’t show up in any criminal back ground searches, which only means he hadn’t ever been convicted of a crime. So, after reviewing this evidence from Kronos, I ran some additional searches through every database I could imagine and I found a match,” Jurak said, sending the information to the viewer.

“Well done,” Glor said, moving to the edge of his seat.

“Great,” Garcia said, simultaneously with Glor. “Who is our mystery man?”

“His name is Alexander Rozhenko, born on 2366, the 43rd day of Maktag. His mother was K’ehleyr. He is presently living with his father, Lt. Commander Worf,” Jurak said. “Aboard the Enterprise.”

Garcia sat down hard, completely dumbfounded. There were the two images of the older version of Alexander, and the last updated profile photo of Alexander, registering him as a passenger on the Enterprise. The DNA signatures were irrefutable. “You’re telling me that that is Worf’s son come back from the future to assassinate me,” Garcia clarified.

“Yes,” Kitara said.

Garcia stared at the image for a while longer. “Ok, let’s say I buy this for a moment,” Garcia said. “Why in the hell would Alexander want to kill me?”

“Who knows?” Kitara said. “Maybe he grows up to be a real bastard. Maybe you insulted his father. What difference does it make? He is trying to kill you.”

“But there has to be a reason better than me insulting his father,” Garcia protested, still trying to wrap his head around this.

“Maybe you kill his father,” Tuer offered.

“I would never kill Worf!” Garcia said.

“Really? It’s well known that you have it in for Worf and Riker,” Kitara said.

“Riker, yeah. But Worf, well, it’s just a little competition thing,” Garcia said.

“What do you have against Riker?” McCoy asked.

“I’d rather not discuss it, thank you,” Garcia said.

“Well, I do. I like Riker,” McCoy said.

“It’s a personal grievance and not open for discussion in his absence,” Garcia said.

“Which means, what, you threatened Riker and then Worf threatened you?” Kitara asked.

“Something like that,” Garcia said, leaning his head in his hands. He was getting tired of all the animosity and the fact they weren’t getting it; He didn’t want to discuss it. He suppressed a random thought to kill Riker.

“At least Alexander can’t fight,” Tuer said.

“Probably why he chose the sniper weapon,” Kitara said.

“We know where the boy lives, right?” Glor asked. “With his father, on the Enterprise? I say we kill him now, that way none of this has ever happened. Gowr and N’Elent will still be alive.”

“We’re not killing a child,” Kitara said.

Garcia’s frown slowly became a smile and he drummed the desk excitedly. “Agreed,” Garcia said, then realized his body language might have communicated the wrong intent. “No killing children,” he added, not sharing his stray thought. “Can we have the adult Alexander transferred to the Tempest?”

“It won’t be that easy,” Kitara said. “The security at Club Bliss turned him over to the Cardassians. He’s presently in a detainment camp. They’re not going to just hand him back over.”

“Why did we give him to the Cardassians?” Tuer asked.

“The local militia didn’t want him, Star Fleet didn’t want him, and so it was either turn him loose, or put him in the camp,” Kitara said.

“I don’t like the idea of turning people over to the Cardassians,” Tuer said.

Garcia sat quietly for a moment.

Kitara agreed with Tuer’s sentiment. “Neither do I. And had I known someone had tried to kill Garcia, I would have had least interrogated him first. So, in the future…”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll make sure you hear about it,” Garcia said, holding a fist to his lips as he contemplated the ramifications. “Send a team to retrieve him.”

“You want us to break him out of the detainment camp?” Kitara asked.

“No, ask for him. Goris owes me a favor: the Terok Nor thing,” Garcia said.

“And you think he will honor it after the Terok Nor thing?” Tuer asked, pronouncing ‘thing’ the way Garcia said it, but with a little sarcasm.

“Umm, I hear you. If he refuses, then liberate Alexander, but bring him back alive and in one piece,” Garcia said.

“You want us to tell the Cardassians we want Alexander and then break him out when they refuse?” Tuer asked.

“Ummm, yeah,” Garcia said. “And very important here, this information about time travel stays in this room. No one, under any circumstances, is to confront Worf or his child on this matter. The time line as it presently stands must be preserved.”

Glor, who had been silently fuming, finally lost his temper. “Are you mad?” Glor asked. “This boy grows up to be an assassin. He has no honor. He killed our friends! What happened to your promise not to rest till vengeance was had? You won’t even at least confront the child?! What happened to spare the rod...?”

“And how do you know that confronting him doesn’t place the idea in his head to do the very thing we want to prevent?” Garcia asked, interrupting Glor’s rant. “We don’t. Glor, please, trust me. This is going to get much worse. We have a new mission directive. It has been brought to my attention that I am, or we are, or will be, players in this things Starfleet refers to as a Temporal Cold War. We have been charged with the duty of maintaining the integrity of this time line at all costs. I don’t know what that means for us. I don’t have a clue what is in store, or how we go about doing this task, but I’ve been personally ordered to make peace with Apollo because the President believes these gods can and have influenced the time line. Whether that is true or not has yet to be seen, but the fact that Worf’s son will at some point in the future access an Iconian Gateway to come back in time to kill me only emphasizes how important and delicate this part of our mission is.”

“Maybe he used the Guardian of Time,” Sendak said.

“Guardian of Forever,” McCoy and Garcia corrected simultaneously.

Garcia turned to McCoy. “It’s what he called himself,” McCoy said.

“I know,” Garcia agreed, passing a smile to Losira. “You met it, or him. Could Alexander have accessed the Guardian?”

McCoy shook his head. “The degree of accuracy required for jumping to a specific place and time to assassinate you makes it unlikely that the Guardian was the vehicle to that end. When Kirk chased after me through that portal, he arrived three days before I did.”

“Perhaps we could access the Guardian and view the specific places and times to determine the course of events that leads to this assassination attempt,” Sendak said.

“Do you seriously think anyone is going to give me access to the Guardian? It would take an act of Congress, and even with the President in my pocket, so to speak, I wouldn’t count on it,” Garcia said. He rubbed his head. “Losira, would you make me a coffee, please?”

Losira had a cup of coffee beamed in. McCoy seemed intrigued. “Point to point replicator system,” Garcia explained.

“Can we get any more convenient?” McCoy asked.

“I thought of beaming it directly to my stomach, but I enjoy the taste of drinking, and the pleasure of holding the warm cup,” Garcia said. “Want one?”

McCoy shook his head. “What’s next, holographic ships?”

“Yes, if I have my way,” Garcia said.

“Anyway, thank you, Losira,” Garcia said, sipping his drink. He took a moment to savor the coffee and contemplate the situation further before pressing on. “We have also been charged with building a defense against a Kelvan invasion, securing this side of the wormhole that lead to the Andromeda Galaxy.”

“Really” Kitara asked. “And how do you plan to fit this into your schedule.”

“I am about to do some serious delegating,” Garcia said. “Because in addition to presently chasing pirates, I have a slew of other tasks to accomplish, in addition to establishing a House on Kronos; such as visiting Troyius, determining if Pyrus Seven has been re-invaded, negotiating with Nelvana for access to the Kelvan wormhole, ending hostilities with Apollo, finding and securing an Iconian gateway for the Federation President, and helping McCoy with whatever it was he came to me for, yes, I haven’t forgotten you, and I am in way over my head. Change is coming. Some of you won’t be happy. But know this: there is presently five ships in my Armada, and regardless of where they are in the Galaxy, we are connected by the lesser gateways, and we will continue to function as if we are one mission, one ship, and one command. I intend to be at the top of this chain of command. Does everyone understand this?”

“No one here is questioning your authority, Captain,” Tuer said.

“But with this list of new directives, we’re going to need more personnel,” Kitara said.

“I’m aware of that, Captain,” Garcia said.

Kitara gave Garcia a queer look. “Excuse me?”

“Just so everyone knows, I’ve been officially promoted to Admiral. So, I will be advancing some of you as well,” Garcia said. He stood, and motioned for Kitara to rise. “Kitara, because of your loyal service to me and this crew, going above and beyond the call of duty on numerous occasions, both as Fleet Officer and in service to the Klingon Empire, I’m here by promoting you to active Captain of the Tempest, with all the rank and privileges thereof.”

Garcia drew a pip from a pocket, pinned it to her collar, and saluted her. She returned the salute. He smiled, and then proceeded to Undine. He motioned her to stand.

“Lt. Undine,” Garcia said, pinning a pip to her collar as well. “For grace under fire, consistent unswerving focus on the ideals set forward by Starfleet, I’m here by promoting you to active Captain in command of the USS New Constitution.”

Undine saluted proudly, eager to prove herself even more worthy than she already had.

Gomez was standing behind Undine, so he turned to her. “2nd Lt Gomez, I’m promoting you to First Lt., and assigning you to full time duty status to the Path Finder, as chief Engineer,” Garcia said, saluted, and shook her hand.

“2nd Lt Bri, I’m promoting you to first Lt., and you will be assigned to the New Constitution, as Chief Engineer,” Garcia said. He turned next to Kletsova. “You’ve saved my butt more times than I deserve, putting your life at risk for me, and others on the crew. I’m promoting you to 1st Lt. Congratulations, Tanya.” She was clearly surprised by

the promotion, but even more so, the kindness in his gesture, a light touch to her shoulder. He turned to Tuer. "Lt. Tuer, I promoting you to 1st Lt. Commander, third in command of the Path Finder."

Tuer seemed genuinely surprised, as well, but he stood and saluted, Klingon style, fist to heart.

Garcia hesitated in front of Simone. "I know your Princess status satisfies all the requirements for your authority on the Vulcan Starship T'Pau, but I want you to have status not just there, but with all of those you will be working more closely with. I'm giving you an infield promotion to Captain."

Finally, Garcia turned to Losira. "I never want you to doubt your value to me or the crew ever again. I'm giving you an infield promotion to the rank of Captain, in command of the Path Finder, which I'm making my personal Flagship. When I'm on board, you are my Number One, but in my absence, you have full authority over the crew and every function of the ship."

Garcia surveyed the room. He anticipated some protest about promoting Losira, but there was no apparent discontent. He silently appraised them. "You all still fly for me, you will report to me, and if you ever need me, you know how to reach me. It is an honor to continue to serve with you. Everyone but the Captains, dismissed. Father, I would like you to stay, too, please."

McCoy seemed surprised Garcia called him father. He nodded and remained seated. Once they were alone, Garcia sat back down. His thoughts seemed heavy. He took his time, gathering his thoughts.

"I have knowledge that Romulous will be destroyed by a supernova," Garcia said.

Losira chuckled. "Not likely," she said. "Based on Romulous' position on the Galactic Arm, the closest candidate for a star that can erupt into a supernova is five hundred light years away, and Star Fleet's remote survey of that star suggests it has a million more years of stability before it burns out its fuel, and even if it blew up right this instant, Romulous would have five hundred years to prepare an evacuation..."

"Promote a computer to Captain," Kitara began.

Losira smiled slightly. "I was about to verbally explore the possibility that the supernova was not a natural event, but perhaps artificially created."

"Tam, you're not thinking of blowing up Romulous, are you?" McCoy asked.

Garcia tensed defensively, but didn't otherwise protest.

"After all that effort we went through to make the other 'you' a temporal patch to prevent that event from occurring?" Undine asked.

"You say you have knowledge that this will happen," Simone said. "Explain."

"Has happened," Garcia corrected. "It's a done deal."

"Has happened? That doesn't make sense," Simone said.

"I agree," McCoy said. "What is this? Sleep deprivation? Mind melds? Drugs?"

"Ok, the supernova hasn't happened yet, from our perspective, but it has happened," Garcia said, rubbing his forehead heavily. "And, for whatever reasons, the timeline will be, or has been, significantly impacted by this event."

"The time line has changed?" Kitara said. "That doesn't make sense."

"Assuming a temporal event is in our future, we will not see the change yet," Losira explained. "Nothing travels faster than the speed of light. If a time traveler goes back in time and changes something, that affect spreads out from the point of change, at

the speed of light, in all directions, describing a spherical area increasing in size until it arrives at the point in space time of the initial temporal transition. Here is the formula that describes the hypothetical shape and size of such a wave front.”

Losira created an animation that showed a time line, with points A and B, and what a two dimensional representation of a sphere that not only expands in space but in time. Mathematical formulas, consistent with the laws of physics were hard to contest.

“Fairly speculative,” Kitara suggested, clearly not sold on the abstract science.

“Yes. It is a theoretical construct that explains how we could experience our present reality, even though a change in the past has occurred. Einstein’s law of relativity must be maintained. For example, if Q magically removes the sun from the solar system, it will take eight minutes before the Earth experiences the change in gravity, because gravity ripples out from its center of mass at the speed of light,” Losira said, offering a visual presentation that showed how the solar system would look if the sun suddenly disappeared. Mercury flew off in a straight line first, followed by Venus, then Earth, and so on until all the planets’ trajectory changed from orbits to straight lines. “The Sun could be gone, but Earth wouldn’t know it for eight minutes.”

“In theory,” McCoy said.

“Yes,” Losira said.

“So, when will you blow up Romulous?” McCoy asked.

“I don’t know,” Garcia said.

“Is it possible to know?” Undine asked.

“Unlikely,” Losira said. “As I have pointed out, nothing travels faster than the speed of light. So by the time we arrive at the point of time and initiate the event that causes the temporal anomaly, the wave of change will have caught up to us. At that point, we cease to exist, or our reality changes sufficiently that we are unaware of the change, or a new timeline is created, which would be necessary to avoid paradoxes, or from a probability stand point, all three eventualities exist simultaneously.”

“Oh, please don’t bring in observers and Schrodinger’s cat,” McCoy said. “I’m just an old country doctor.”

“That does play into it,” Losira said. “It’s also possible that we exist in flux, alternating between the original reality and the altered time line, which would necessitate another temporal patch to stabilize the one of the realities. If the change in time line is sufficiently significant that it prevents the creation of the events which caused the initial shift, the time line could snap back it originating state, unless a temporal patch is already in place that allows the temporal loop to maintain itself.”

“So, you’re saying it’s possible we are okay because a temporal patch is already in play that keeps us here?” McCoy asked. “When I inadvertently changed the past, Kirk, Spock, Scotty and Uhura were protected by the Guardian of Time. They were able to repair the damage to the timeline that I caused.”

“The Kirk Keeler incident,” Undine said.

McCoy nodded, sadly. Even after all this time, he held sadness when he recalled how Kirk and Spock held him back from saving a woman who had saved him. Closing his eyes didn’t erase the image in his head.

“In the particular event you described, your landing party was shielded by the Guardian of Forever, demonstrating that it is possible to somehow allow pockets of matter to be uninfluenced by a change in the time line,” Losira said. “In theory, a ship

could shield itself from a temporal wave, or phase shift out of sync with space/time altogether.”

“I don’t understand how it is you know about this change if it’s impossible to know about it,” Kitara said,

“Well, Losira isn’t 100 percent accurate. There are several things that can move faster than light,” Garcia said.

“Traveling through hyper space, like Q, or the utilization of warp drive, are not true examples of light speed,” Losira said. “They are cheats, because either the fabric of space time is altered or the traveler departs to somewhere outside of the known Universe and re-enters at a point of its choosing.”

“Telepathy is faster than light,” Garcia said.

“Again, theoretically, telepathy appears faster than light because consciousness is believed to be able to access mediums and realms outside the Universe,” Losira said.

“Nothing exists outside the Universe,” Simone said.

“The existence of Apollo and the gods would seem to contradict that notion,” Kitara said.

“They still exist in the Universe, just in another dimension,” Simone argued.

“But as a Vulcan you accept telepathy doesn’t fit known laws of physics,” Undine pointed out. “So the possibility of other Universes exists and even ‘outside’ the Universe exists.”

“Only as hypothetical constructs. There can never be any proof, by definition,” Simone said. Her eyebrows went up with an epiphany.

“Well, I have some experiences that would suggest otherwise,” McCoy added.

“Yeah, but no physical proof,” Simone argued. “As much as you, Kirk and Spock are esteemed, documentation of event is insufficient to be absolute proof... Spock. The mind-meld with Spock. You got a message from the future from Spock.”

“That’s one of my sources,” Garcia said.

“You have multiple sources?” Undine asked.

“I don’t like this conversation,” Kitara said. “Telepathy. Temporal flux and anomalies. Time travel. We are messing with spooky forces that should not be tampered with.”

“I agree,” Simone said. “This whole conversation is abstract and hypothetical...”

“Whether you like it or not, change is coming,” Garcia said.

“Well, I know I am just an old man and no one wants to hear my opinion, but I have a solution,” McCoy said.

“What’s that?” Garcia asked.

“Don’t blow up Romulous!” McCoy snapped.

“You think I want to blow up Romulous?” Garcia snapped. “Look, I am going to do everything in my power not to blow up Romulous, and all of you here are charged to help me in that endeavor. But let’s assume for a moment that whether I do it, or one of the gods that wants me dead does it, it’s going to happen. Our job is to prevent it or correct it after the fact. To that end, we need to survive this change. Now, we know Kirk’s landing party survived the temporal change created by McCoy, so there is a way of shielding us from temporal shifts. I suspect the Preserver may have this technology. Simone, I want your ship to make that top priority after you collect Alexander. Then, or

if, or when, we survive the change over, we go back and correct the timeline accordingly.”

“You’re assuming that we have that tech in our possession and we can figure out how to adapt that to our ship’s shielding,” Simone said.

“I’m assuming if we don’t, it really won’t matter much,” Garcia said.

“This seems to be the most pressing issue,” Undine said. “Why worry about any of the other mission objectives? The Kelvan can wait.”

“I am not going to go crazy trying to chase my tail. We will deal with the known problems and specific threats as they come up, but until then we are going to proceed as if it’s life as usual,” Garcia said. “Because there is no way to know that devoting all our resources to blocking the temporal shift isn’t exactly what causes it to happen.”

“If Romulous falls, so does Vulcan,” Simone said, whispering as if remembering an ancient rhyme. Everyone looked to her. “Our fates have always been linked.”

“I know,” Garcia said, staring passively at the table for a moment. His eyes met Simone’s. “Consequently, I intend to inform Princess Nelvana.”

McCoy broke the silence that followed. “Hello, Princess. I’m Garcia and I’m going to blow up your planet,” McCoy said, not hiding his sarcasm. “Are you insane?”

“He is,” Kitara said. “You are not going...”

“He has to tell her,” Simone said. “They need to be a part of the solution.”

“If I were her, I would just shoot you,” Glor said.

“It’s not me. Whether I’m the instrument or not, this is going to happen, but not because I want it,” Garcia said. “Maybe we can invent a technology to shield her planet from the supernova.”

“You have a better chance of creating a temporal shield,” Simone said.

“If we had technology to create artificial black holes, we could introduce that into the supernova that I or SOMEONE creates?” Garcia offered.

“Are you daft? You can’t go around creating black holes,” McCoy said.

“There are lots of black holes in the Universe. Maybe artificially created ones are unstable and won’t last indefinitely,” Garcia offered.

“There are a lot of maybes and hypothetical’s surrounding your arguments,” McCoy said.

Garcia nodded. “Well, that’s all I got. Anyone else have anything they wish to discuss? Then I guess it’s back to work. I need to speak with Glor, McCoy and Undine. If you three will tarry. Kitara, I’ll join you on the Tempest momentarily. Losira, let me know if there are any changes with your situation. Simone, thank you.”

Garcia got up to meet the departing with handshakes. After saying some pleasantries to each, he reconvened at the table. “I probably should have promoted them in front of the crew, with a ceremony,” Garcia lamented. “Oh well, it’s done. McCoy, you needed something.”

McCoy seemed a bit unhappy. “My needs seem rather unimportant considering what I’m now privy to.”

“Well, you’re here, and we’re going to help you. What’s up?” Garcia asked.

“I wanted you to check on Star. I’ve lost contact with them,” McCoy said.

“So, previously you didn’t want me to know about their secret mission, but now that they might be in trouble, you want to bring me in?” Garcia asked.

“Well, unless you’re going to be a complete bastard about it,” McCoy said.

“No, just reveling in the irony,” Garcia said. “Do you want my crew and me because of our professionalism in the field, or because of our fastest ships in the fleet?”

McCoy sighed. “You really can be a bastard, you know,” McCoy said, grumbling some uncertainty to which side of the family he gets it. “I need you for a couple of reasons. A researcher on Miri’s planet found Preserver technology. I wanted an independent team not associated with you to investigate, and since this archaeological site is underwater, I decided to send Star. Star’s team confirmed the presence of Preserver technology, but hasn’t check in on schedule. Normally, I wouldn’t be too concerned, but given your theoretical paper on the origins of Miri’s planet being linked to Preserver technology and the level of complications that have turned up since you figuratively opened Pandora’s box...”

Garcia nodded. Miri’s planet was Starfleet’s biggest enigma, being an exact duplicate of planet Earth. Kirk had discovered it, and on transporting down found a population of children who had lived over a hundred years without adult supervision, their aging slowed down by biological research gone awry. The same biological experiment that slowed the aging process also caused everyone who had gone through puberty to die a horrible, mad death. And it was the planet that Garcia had frequently used in hypothetical research papers as evidence for Preserver involvement in Galactic Evolution. His papers were treated with the same kind of credibility that the 20th century book, “Chariots of the Gods” were treated by its contemporary scientist. Now, everyone knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that there is intelligent life in the Universe, and the probability that Earth was visited though out humanity’s entire history was not only likely, but highly plausible. How many alien cultures had McCoy met that claimed to have visited Earth in the past. Three? Maybe four?

“Captain Undine, I want you to take the New Constitution to Miri’s planet,” Garcia ordered. “Determine what’s going on and re-establish subspace communication. It makes sense to me that the one planet in the galaxy that is an exact duplicate of Earth down to the last fault line, with an exact biological evolution, and historical evolution of Earth up to the 1920’s would have Preserver technology somewhere in or on the surface. Once you’ve reestablished contact, I want you to confiscate what Star’s team found, and expand the search for additional Preserver tech. And if Apollo shows up, please let me know.”

“Aye, Admiral,” Undine said.

“Now, just a damn minute, I didn’t say I wanted you to confiscate the Preserver tech. Miri’s Planet is my mission,” McCoy said.

“And Preserver tech falls under my jurisdiction,” Garcia said.

“And that’s why I sent Star and not you,” McCoy said.

“And that’s why you now need me to intervene,” Garcia said.

“You know, I was doing this stuff long before you were even born,” McCoy said.

“And if I have my way, you will still be doing it long after I am dead and gone,” Garcia said.

McCoy grumbled something under his breath.

Garcia nodded. “Yeah, I love you, too. Undine, proceed under normal warp. I don’t want you to risk jumping there, blowing out the engines, and then needing a fast get away.”

“Aye, Admiral,” Undine said.

“I don’t understand, is there a problem with the transwarp drive?” McCoy asked.

“Just a small, technical issue,” Garcia said. “Potentially. Not harmful to health or anything. Well, directly. Don’t worry, Admiral, we’ll take care of it.”

“I would like to go with you,” Admiral McCoy told Undine.

“It’s okay with me. Garcia?” Undine asked.

“You’re asking his permission?” McCoy asked. “Need I point out, we may have the same rank, but I out rank him in experience and, Tam, I’m still your father...”

“It’s ok, Dad. You can go. I don’t like the idea, given the issues I have had with the Preservers, but sure, go ahead, knock yourself out,” Garcia said. “Now, if you don’t mind, I need a moment alone with Glor.”

McCoy and Undine departed. As much as McCoy grumbled, he still touched Garcia’s shoulder as he passed him. As soon as the door closed, Glor went into an apology; “I am sorry I publically argued with you.”

“Stop that,” Garcia interrupted him. “Don’t ever apologize for arguing with me. That’s your job. I wasn’t happy with the direction you wanted to go, but I understand it. Believe me, I am tempted to try your solution to see if our friends can be made whole again, but if you remember Losira’s impromptu presentation, we will never experience their rebirth, not just because it will take time to arrive at the point Alexander is an adult and travels back in time, but because once the shift catches up to us, we won’t remember it because it wouldn’t have happened.”

“I just don’t understand all of that. I am sure it should happen instantaneously,” Glor said.

“From ground zero of the temporal opening, it seems instantaneous...” Garcia said. “It’s a paradox. And it’s absurd, and, well, it doesn’t matter. I’m not killing a child to make this right, and obviously that is a truism, or the old Alexander couldn’t have come back in time and caused the grief that he did. Plus, if we kill the child, we risk making this moment not happen, this conversation silenced. We risk losing who we presently are. You and I are closer, for we carry the memory of our loved ones. And I think Gowr and N’Elent would be fairly angry if you and I robbed them of the honorable death they earned.”

Glor was silent for a moment but then began to nod. “You are wise, my friend.”

“No, I am not. I want to fix this so badly that I am contemplating killing Alexander myself and I can’t shake this feeling that this is somehow all my fault,” Garcia said, hitting his head with a closed fist. “But I know if I looked little Alexander in the eye, right this moment, I would see the child that he is, and instead of killing him, I would try to nurture him. And I am hoping, I’m actually praying, when I meet the adult Alexander that I can somehow see in him that child so that I can find a way to reach him.”

“And if you can’t?” Glor asked.

Garcia held back tears. “I’ve already confronted him. He is no warrior. There is no honor in killing him. At this point, I only need to understand the why. It just doesn’t make sense. No rational being would kill or even attempt to kill unless the cause held sufficient merit. Alexander risked his life to come back in time to kill me. He made two attempts. His second showed some courage, for even though he tried to blind side me, he at least faced me directly. So either I become an outrageous, insane bastard, or Alexander’s crazy.”

“Perhaps the more he attempts to kill you, the greater the likelihood he will become a warrior,” Glor said. “At which point, then we can kill him.”

Garcia tried to see the humor in the statement, but couldn’t get past Glor’s need to kill Alexander. “Should it come down to that, let it be my job, my decision,” Garcia said.

“Gowr was my friend!” Glor said, slapping the table. “N’Elent was my crew.”

“And they were both my friend and crew!” Garcia said. “And N’Elent was my woman, carrying my child. And they both sacrificed their lives protecting me. Alexander is mine to spare or kill as I chose. Your crew are more likely than either of us to act out, so I am asking you, make sure they understand that this is my duty. Failure to resolve this is my failure.”

Glor stared at the wall. “Very well,” Glor said.

Garcia accepted that this was over. “Now, if you aren’t through with me, I have a mission for you.”

“I’m not through with you, my friend,” Glor said. “I am angry. I am sad. But not with you. What would you have me do?”

“Well, I would tell you it’s probably nothing, just some quirky, anomalous readings on a long range scan, but you know how my luck has been running,” Garcia said.

“Brother, I will gladly get in harm’s way for you,” Glor said.

“I want you to go to Pyrus Seven at normal warp, cloaked, and simply investigate. If you find any alien life signs, transwarp out of there, and report back to me,” Garcia said.

“Sounds like you are trying to keep all the action and glory for yourself, again,” Glor said.

“Please, do this my way,” Garcia insisted. “I’ll be providing you with some Starfleet files which will reveal the nature of the potential threat and why I am asking for such caution.”

“And may I ask what mayhem you will be getting into in the interim?” Glor asked.

“Petitioning Gowron for a House,” Garcia said.

Glor laughed heartily.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

When looking down upon Kronos, or Qo'noS, from orbit, the large, mostly green and brown, class M planet seemed rather peaceful. 'Seemed' was the operative word. There were places that were less harsh, places where the bio diversity was dense and rich and consequently food and water was easier to acquire, but those Oases were far and few between. And they were hardly tranquil. It has always been suspected that once life took hold, it could adapt to extremes. The complexity of Kronosian biosphere was a testament to life's adaptability, and best seen in the hardiness and determination of its organisms to survive. On a continuity of extreme environments, it was probably one of the roughest that had still allowed sentience to evolve into humanoid form. And knowing how tough you had to be to survive the totality of Kronos, it was hard to believe that the biosphere was nearly decimated by an organism as simple as a Tribble. The environmental and economic impact of Tribbles still reverberated in the Klingon consciousness, even some hundred years later. The environment had always inspired war, whether it was fighting for resources or fighting for survival. The Tribbles had renewed the Klingon spirit, reminding them not to be complacent, not to allow 'softness' to exist in body, mind, or spirit. The only true peace to be found on Kronos was to be a master of war, at the top of the food chain and able to survive the harshest of climates.

The dimly lit, Great Hall, may not have been the place to inspire that peace, but it did achieve that as an indirect goal; mostly because those who lost control here rarely lived to tell about it. The shadowy nature of the Hall, with indirect red lighting, was foreboding enough to trigger fear and imagery of evil and death to the uninitiated human, like walking an active lava tube. Garcia had been present a number of times now and he still struggled against his desire to flee. Then again, every time he had previously been here, someone had tried to kill him. He tried to imagine a sociological explanation for subdued lighting, something that didn't engage his fantasy mode and comparisons to the Lord of the Ring novels. Maybe the darkness encouraged the members to conclude their business as quickly as possible so they could get back to the light of day? Maybe it was a metaphor. Or maybe his fear was just his biology responding to the 'alien' environment compared to the 'aliens' that had adapted to this environment over a millennia. The 'fight or flight' reaction was there for a reason, but fortunately reason could overcome it; so a person could theoretically die through direct choice, if not with dignity, Garcia thought.

The two dozen members of the High Council gathered around him. Kitara stood smartly behind him and to his right. Someone whispered in Gowron's ear.

"I see it," Gowron growled. He was pointing at Kitara but looking at Garcia. "You've promoted that to Captain?"

"Star Fleet has promoted me to Admiral," Garcia said. "It was necessary to promote my First Officer to Captain in order to continue to provide the High Council with exemplary service. Furthermore, this is my wife and you will provide her the respect she has earned, by you in this very Hall."

Gowron weighed Garcia's resolve in this matter, and scaled down his disparaging tone, visibly hiding his disgust and ridicule.

"Women should not be on Star ships, much less be Captains of Starships," High Council Member Dross said, as if he were reminding Gowron at the same time as

educating Garcia. “This violates every tradition of our people. This outsider will be the ruin of us.”

“Please, you are simply afraid of losing power to women,” Garcia argued.

The sound of knives leaving scabbards were audible in the hall, but Gowron motioned with his hand and there was stillness.

“Help me understand this,” Garcia said, playing the please educate me card. “Didn’t Azetbur herself lead the Klingon Empire out of darkness when Chancellor Gorkon was killed?”

“By signing a peace treaty!” Dross spit.

“A peace that allowed you to develop and become stronger through the alliance forged with the Federation,” Garcia pointed out.

“The reign of Asetbur was decisively short and we have honored her agreement,” Gowron said. “She served her purpose, but she was never officially a member of the High Council. Females have always served the Empire, but in their place.”

Garcia was tempted to call him out by suggesting they had allowed Azetbur, a female, to be the one to sign the peace treaty to allow the warriors to save face. The Klingons had become desperate and had been in need of trying something new: peace, but they were yet to see it as a strength.

“I am glad to hear you say that,” Garcia said, instead. “Because I need Kitara to serve, and to utilize her at her highest capacity, I need to increase her authority indirectly. Give me a House. I have earned the right to have a name. I own property. I have taken this woman and she carries my child. Give me my House so that she may know her rightful place. Give me a House so that my children, and their children, may have secure footing.”

Trollos, Kitara’s brother stepped forward, bat’leth rolling out and as he demonstrated that he was ready for combat. “So, it is true, you have defiled my sister! Arm yourself, human!” Trollos said.

“What the heck?” Garcia asked Trollos?

The High Council created a space for the fight to happen. Kitara retrieved the bat’leth from her back and offered it to Garcia. Trollos tapped the floor impatiently.

“You knew this was going to happen?” Garcia asked her.

“It is our way,” Kitara said.

“With all the fighting you guys do here, how does the High Council ever get any work accomplished?” Garcia asked.

“There is just enough fighting to keep a legislative branch from being formed to pass a multitude of frivolous laws that will just be broken by the ruling class anyway,” Kitara said.

“Point taken,” Garcia said, taking the bat’leth and facing his opponent. He entered the space created for combat. Trollos and he began to circle. “Trollos, I don’t want to kill you today, so either engage me or step down.”

Trollos came at Garcia and their blades met, ringing out in the Great Hall. Murmurs of excitement bubbled up from the spectators. Garcia’s first choice of weapons would not be the bat’leth, but fortunately he had learned sufficient skills to defend against the attacks because Trollos was not pulling any punches. Trollos actually forced Garcia to step up his game. Locking bat’leths led to Trollos trying to kick Garcia in the shin. Garcia’s anger got the best of him and he redoubled his efforts, driving Trollos back.

An older Klingon pushed his way through the circle of cheering Klingons. He came beside Gowron, tagging his arm. "Stop this at once!" he bellowed.

Trolos ignored the voice and continued to defend against Garcia attack, which were increasing in lethality. When the blades locked a second time, Trolos released one hand from his weapon and pounded Garcia in the face. Angrier, Garcia fought back even harder, kicked Trolos in the gut, disarmed him, and put an elbow into the back of his neck. When Trolos went to the floor, Garcia brought the bat'leth up for a killing blow.

"Stop!" it was the man next to Gowron again.

Garcia hesitated. "On what grounds?" Garcia asked. He was aware of blood running down his chin

Trolos rolled over, staring up at the man. "But father, he has dishonored us!"

"You fool, there is no dishonor. I have disowned her," Krag said.

"Is this true, Gowron?" Trolos asked.

"It is official. Krag has disowned her," Gowron said.

"And yet you would allow me to attack Garcia?" Trolos asked.

"You and your father's lack of clarity has nothing to do with the High Council, so if you foolishly attack someone in ignorance, why should I care?" Gowron asked, winning more than a few chuckles. "Today is a good day to watch someone die." It was obvious that most of the council approved of Gowron's humor.

"I am not tonight's entertainment," Trolos said, standing. "I demand compensation."

"Compensation? Compensation for what?" Gowron demanded.

"Kitara is my sister, my property and inheritance, and my father did not have my permission to give her away," Trolos said.

"I didn't give her away!" Krag said. "I disowned her."

"Truly? Then she technically remains my property and my liability," Trolos said. "Either I get compensation, or I take my sister with me, now."

"Now, just a damn minute," Garcia said. "I came to petition to have a House so I can officially marry her."

"You can't marry her without my permission," Trolos said.

"You can't give that permission," Krag said.

"You officially disowned her, I think Garcia and I can negotiate a fair trade for a female that has been nothing but trouble since she was born," Trolos said.

No one in the High Council seemed to disagree. The continued laughter suggested that many were actually amused by the family laundry being aired. There were games upon games being played out in the Hall today. Krag was losing face.

Garcia sighed, giving into the social play, the script having been written eons ago. "What do you want in trade for your sister?" Garcia asked.

"I want free hunting passes for me and several friends of my choosing on your property for the next ten years," Trolos said.

"Five," Garcia haggled.

"Seven," Trolos said. "And an invitation to your House party."

"Deal," Garcia said, cutting his hand on his bat'leth before offering to shake.

"Deal," Trolos said, cutting his hand as well.

"This is outrageous," Krag said.

“But all perfectly legal,” Gowron said, putting his hands on both Garcia and Trolos. “Blood and words have been exchanged. Throw your House party, Garcia. Bring back seven tokens from seven Houses and your House will be secured in the Halls for as long as your family serves with honor,” Gowron said. “And you may designate one wife to Govern as you see fit.”

Garcia saluted. “Thank you.”

“Now, to our next business at hand,” Gowron said, motioning Trolos and Krag to leave. The High Council fell around. “We want you to take care of a small problem for us.”

“Of course,” Garcia said, sighing. “Before you begin, you need to know I am running a bit thin on time, ships...”

“Star Fleet has promoted you to Admiral, so will I,” Gowron said.

“Really? And you’re going to give me more personnel and ships?” Garcia asked.

“You’re now an Admiral. It is your job to work out the logistics,” Gowron said.

“I don’t suppose you will sell me another Battle Cruiser from the line,” Garcia said, wishfully.

“Why don’t you get one from your wife, Grilka,” one of the Council members said, chuckling.

Garcia wondered if he wanted more Klingon assistance, he had to do it through alliances or winning combats. “You know what, fine, I will figure out how to deal with my issues. Just tell me what you need done,” Garcia said.

“There is a Nausicaan by the name of Balat, he lead a mutiny and took three ships commissioned by the Empire,” Gowron said. “I want the three ships back, the mutineers captured and brought to justice, and I want whatever they stole from the Ferengi National Bank on Palamis contained and brought to me.”

Garcia considered the task. Out of all the tasks given him lately, this one seemed the most straight forward and easily resolved. “Okay,” Garcia said. “Consider it done.”

“What was stolen from the bank?” Kitara asked.

“Kitara, we don’t need to know,” Garcia said.

“It might help in the recovery of the item, or items,” Kitara said.

“You will know when you retrieve it,” Gowron assured Kitara.

“I don’t like this,” Kitara said.

“Do you have this?” Gowron interrupted ‘the woman’ to address Garcia.

“I told you, I got this,” Garcia assured him. To Kitara, he said, “We got this.”

“You’re dismissed then,” Gowron said.

Kitara was reluctant to leave, so Garcia took her by the arm and led her away from the Council.

“This is a fool’s errand,” Kitara protested.

“Maybe,” Garcia said, activating his communicator. “Beam us up.”

The transporter captured them and brought them up fifteen thousand kilometers in the blink of an eye, the overtones of the light red, with pulsing waves that reconstructed them a brilliance that quickly died with amber sparks, spiraling in waves reminiscent of energy maps made by smashing atoms. Garcia shook off his reaction to the transporter, simultaneously as he made a mental note that the Klingon transporters “felt” different than Federation transporters. Knowing it was most likely a psychological reaction, as

opposed to being able to actually distinguish minute fluctuations in energy conversion matrixes, he wondered why he preferred the Path Finder's transporter.

"I can't believe you took that assignment without any hesitation," Kitara went on.

"I hesitated," Garcia said.

"But given the request, you could have pushed harder for ships," Kitara said.

"I think we can accomplish this quick enough with just the Path Finder," Garcia said. "Unless you want to take the Tempest to track them down."

"The Tempest is staying here until we're married," Kitara said.

"Want to put a gateway on Kronos, at our new home?" Garcia asked.

Kitara provided a smirk. It was scary. "Yeah, I would love for the High Council to find that and be knocking on our door every day," she said.

"Yeah, that's why I haven't put one on Earth," Garcia agreed. It was bad enough he had to keep popping back to Club Bliss. Still, he wanted the Tempest in play, not stuck here at the "home world."

"Trollos has ships that will cooperate with us. As soon our House is secure, make an alliance with him and ask him to send some on our behalf," Kitara said.

"Yeah, and speaking of Trollos," Garcia said. "Why didn't you warn me that he was going to try and kill me?"

"Your reaction needed to be genuine, not rehearsed," Kitara said. "You did fine. I am confident we will get seven tokens."

"Is there some significance to this number seven?" Garcia asked.

"Seven is a tie breaker. Coincidentally, if granted, your House will be the seventh to have a non-Klingon as the head," Kitara said, as she reflected further. "If I think of anything else, I will share it with you."

"So, nothing metaphysical or spiritual about the number," Garcia said.

Kitara shrugged. "None that resonates with me," she said. "You will be throwing the House party in two days. You will be there."

"Of course. Make sure you invite your brother," Garcia said.

Kitara sighed. "I would prefer he wasn't there. He cannot provide a token," Kitara said. "And he will most likely get drunk and cause a scene."

"Well, that is why it's called a party, right?" Garcia asked. "And what's a Klingon party without some broken furniture?"

"It's not the furniture I'm worried about. We're alliance building and he doesn't play well with others," Kitara said.

"Is it because he's gay?" Garcia asked.

Kitara rounded on Garcia and smacked him hard, much harder than her usual foreplay. Her eyes were wild, and she was in his face, pointing. "If I ever hear you say that again, I will kill you myself," Kitara said. She shoved Garcia, turned to the transporter tech, gave her the same visual "warning: threat level 10" on a scale of ten and stormed out of the transporter room.

Garcia turned to the transporter tech, Lt. Larys. "Am I misreading this?"

"Homosexuality may be tolerable for humans and other species, but it will get you killed in Klingon society," Larys said.

"So, it's a kind of don't ask don't tell sort of policy," Garcia asked, lingering at the transporter controls. Outside of the Kelvan computer genetic evaluation which put her at the top of the cue, genetically speaking, he hadn't taken the time to really know Larys.

She was pure Klingon, but somehow her features were softer. It was only when she smiled that the subtlety faded: Klingon teeth and breath were quite distinctive.

“Something like that, Admiral,” Larys said.

Garcia nodded. He couldn’t discern any level of feelings from her that would suggest contempt or love, something he thought unusual for a Klingon. His ‘automatic’ mind could only imagine contempt or hatred towards him, but if he allowed himself not to get caught in his own self-defeating dialogue, there was a continuum of potential beliefs and feelings she might hold, or perhaps even the possibility of multiple emotions simultaneously. Instead of wondering, he knew he should just flat out ask her what her feelings were, but he talked himself out of that because he only wanted to know so that he could be comforted in the knowledge that he had been forgiven. If he cared for her, wouldn’t he ask about more than her feelings? What should he ask her? About her dreams, hopes and aspirations? Pump her for information that couldn’t be gathered from reading her profile, reports, and evaluations?

“Is that all?” Larys asked, not showing any discomfort to his lingering eyes.

“Uh? Oh. No. I mean, yes,” Garcia said, an afterthought. “Thank you for educating me. That explains a lot, actually.”

“Explains what, Admiral?”

“My headache, for starters,” Garcia said. He sighed and mentally crossed “visit the High Council” off his to do list and added, “House party.”

Garcia turned to exit, paused and turned back to Larys. “Do I have to kill a targ?”

“For the House party?” Larys clarified.

Garcia nodded.

“Would you like assistance planning?” Larys asked.

“Are you volunteering?” Garcia asked.

“I will perform as you command,” Larys said.

Garcia returned to the front of the transporter console, so as to be closer to her, but still separated. The console actually gave her ‘apparent’ positional authority. The door closed.

“Why would you say it like that?” Garcia asked. “I won’t order you to do this.”

Larys swallowed. “Permission to speak off the record?”

“Absolutely,” Garcia said.

“You need a table dedicated to the Goddess,” Larys said. She came around the console so that there was nothing between her and the Captain. That simple act made them equals in terms of dialogue. And then she took a combat stance as Garcia reached out to the console for support, shifting her body weight to her toes, her hands becoming fists. Her head tilted as she considered his move and relaxed a little as she realized he was just leaning on the console. Was he tired? She wondered? Was this a human invitation to flirt? Was he ill? The latter made sense, due to all Garcia had been through of late. “Your table needs to be ripe and overflowing with abundance.”

“You’ve done this before,” Garcia asked.

“I have,” Larys said. “I was as servant for a wealthy family.”

Garcia discovered that his right hand still gravitated towards his left, even though he had purposely sought out the transporter console as a conversational prop to avoid looking like a superior officer. Instead, he went from leaning casually to crossing his arms over his chest. “So, you needed to speak off the record to tell me that?”

“No,” Larys said. She stepped forward and saw the ‘tell tale’ signs of Garcia’s decrease in comfort as she crossed into his space. When he didn’t retreat, she continued; “I’m letting you know that I will not be your servant. Kitara recruited me because I know my place and because of my loyalty. I accepted her offer because I saw serving on a ship as a way to improve my odds of marrying a warrior.”

“And I’ve ruined that for you,” Garcia said, sadly.

“Hardly. With my stature, I would most likely still be property, certainly never a first, but star voyages can be long and lonely, and fortune might have seen me promoted; selection based on proximity,” Larys said. “In some ways, this situation is more advantageous. This pregnancy gets me what I want. I don’t have to pretend to like anyone to advance, nor do I have to be conquered. I can benefit from your House and don’t have to worry that Kitara will be threatened by me, since I clearly can’t beat her in a fair fight, but even if I could, I don’t want to be scrapping my entire life with all the women who are going to try for the number one position in your House. Screw that. I’ve seen firsthand what that life is like. I will bear your child and raise it to know dignity and honor, I will even fight beside Kitara and defend your House as if she was my blood sister, but I will not be treated like a servant.”

Garcia quickly processed Larys’ rant and realized he might need to revisit it a couple times over a few days before he could ascertain all its implications. “Before I contribute to this dialogue further, may I ask a question?”

Larys crossed her arms, mirroring Garcia, and nodded.

“If I had made it an order,” Garcia began.

“I would have followed orders,” Larys said.

“Okay,” Garcia said. He nodded. He got her. “Look, I don’t have a clue about running a House, hiring staff, or directing servants, and I certainly don’t know enough about your culture to not make mistakes. But I am learning to delegate. Would you be okay if I put you in complete charge of the House?”

“Why would you do that?” Larys asked. Her tone seemed angry, as if she was anticipating being tricked.

“Do you want a list? I’m not good at social gathering in general. Um, I’m busy. Kitara’s busy. You have experience. I feel I owe you something.”

“You’ve never even looked at me before today,” Larys said.

“Not true,” Garcia argued, doubt evident on his face. “I’ve seen you.”

“But not taken the time to really interact with me?” Larys said.

“Okay, that’s not fair. I think most of the times that I ran past you was because I was actually running from or to a crisis,” Garcia said.

Larys laughed. “True. But you really wouldn’t ever see me. Talk to me. If it weren’t for the context of this job, we would never interact, and if not for this situation, I wouldn’t have even warranted a glance from you.”

Garcia held his breath for a moment as he weighed her words. “I don’t know. I have always considered myself a person who would rather speak with the servants than the actual guests, but I don’t know. I do know that you wouldn’t be in this predicament if you didn’t have something of value, because that’s the way I operate when influenced by the Kelvan tech. The evaluation process is not limited to genetic identity alone.”

“Maybe, but you can’t deny that it appears to be a pure numbers game. The more seeds you cast, the more trees that grow, and variety makes the forest stronger,” Larys

said. “These are all words mothers tell the children who aren’t the strongest and aren’t the prettiest or the tallest...”

“You think you’re not attractive,” Garcia restated for her.

“You are going to say I am beautiful?” Larys asked.

“No,” Garcia said.

Larys seemed surprised, having made the assumptions that all humans lied to be ‘nice’ and spare feelings. “Why?” was the only response that she could think of.

“I like you. I’m not going to argue with you, unless you just like arguing, but if that’s the case, I would like you to come back at me with a more defensible position than ‘oh, I’m too short to be attractive,’ kind of thing,” Garcia said. “Besides, my opinion carries more weight than it should and your opinion should count more, unless your opinion really is that you have less value, in which case your opinion sucks, and I can’t be your therapist because of our situation...”

“Have you ever been told you talk too much?” Larys said.

“Wow,” Garcia said. “Wall flower to Venus fly trap in thirty seconds. Nice. You’re going to be okay. Do you want the job?”

“Will you spend time with me before the child is born?” Larys asked.

“So, now you’re negotiating?”

“No, you are negotiating, I am participating,” Larys said.

“Nice. Schedule it with Tomoko,” Garcia said.

“I will organize your House party,” Larys said.

“Thank you,” Garcia said, wondering if negotiating with all the moms was a skillset he needed to master. He went to shake her hand just as she brought up a knife. His first reaction was defensive, but he realized it was not an attack or even a romantic gesture, but rather an offer for an alliance. He took his turn cutting his hand, and sealed the deal. There was a quiet, awkward moment as Garcia considered the depths of her eyes.

Larys interrupted the exploration. “Are you thinking of kissing me?” she asked.

“Yes,” Garcia said, his stark honesty surprising her again.

“Don’t,” Larys said, not releasing his hand.

“Okay,” Garcia agreed. Asking someone not to think of something was a sure fire way to increase the cogitation over that which one was supposed to be avoiding, and he wondered if she knew that, which meant she wanted to intensify his thoughts, or she was being direct and he needed him to focus on something else. He heard Troi in his head, “Aww, the problem with being a rock star.” And then he heard Ilona, “The problem with being a guy.” Duana added, “Problem just being Tam...” He squinted as he quickly reviewed the conversation between he and Larys to ascertain if he had missed something. His look was the same as that of someone being subjected to an unbearably loud noise. “Alright, I’m a little confused.”

“So I gathered from your look,” Larys said. “Don’t mistake my kindness for affection.”

“Okay, spell it out for me,” Garcia said.

“If I wanted intimacy, I would have picked a fight,” Larys explained. She squeezed his hand, emphasizing the deal they had made. “This is a business relationship, an alliance. I get all the benefits of the House and a child without having to be intimate

with you. And, yes, I know you have probably slept with business partners in the past, but that will not be happening here. Are we clear?"

"Perfectly," Garcia agreed, wondering why she still hadn't let go of his hand. Was this a test? His interest in her spiked and he heard the words of Rogue Troi in his head, 'sort of proves my point that you're only attracted to those who don't want you.' He pulled his hand free, and made his way around her. "If anyone needs me, I'll be in my quarters on the Tempest."

"You aren't more comfortable on the Path Finder?" Larys asked.

"I am. I just thought it might be quieter," Garcia said. He paused at the door, taking note that she was still watching him, tried to interpret her gaze, and then pushed on.

The Captain's quarters on the Klingon ship was spacious, not for need's sake, but to maintain the appearance of status. It was also quiet, comparatively. He could discern the sounds of life support and a variety of subtle electronic systems. The space was divided into two compartments. The outer room was for entertaining guests or war planning, the inner sanctum for rest. The metal bed was hardly ideal for humans, but the angle of the wall and accompanying window gave Garcia a pleasant view of Kronos. Laid out on the table were Gowr's personal effects. Garcia spent time with his sadness as he examined the items. When he was tired of this, he went and laid down on the metal hard bed that extended from the wall. As soon as he closed his eyes, he was asleep and dreaming.

Garcia found himself on a stage, a light shining down from above. He was surrounded by a multitude of miniature, hanging, cloth hammocks. The hammocks hovered at various heights, but none seemed to be attached to anything solid. They were suspended in air by tiny lights. Each one held a baby. He was holding a bag full of bottles. One bottle in hand, he proceeded to feed the nearest baby. The baby eagerly took the bottle and he moved onto the next.

"You really have your hands full, don't you?" came a voice from the dark. It was a crisp English accent, female. She stepped into the light. Gentle blond hair, drooping over one shoulder. A shadow rested on her forehead and the slopes of her cheeks that swelled with a brilliant smile that touched even her eyes. She brushed a stray hair from her eye, and advanced fast, playfully, both her hands lighting on Garcia's arm. "Oh, please, let me," she sang. She removed several bottles and offered them to babies.

"Do I know you?" Garcia asked.

"You should, I'm in your dream," she said. She sang. "It's just a Barnum and Bailey world..."

"Who are you?" Garcia interrupted. Babies cooed in the background.

"I'm the Daughter," she said.

"The Daughter?" Garcia asked. "Daughter who?"

"Oh, lovely, so you do know me. Probably ran into my father, no doubt," she said.

"Who is your father?" Garcia asked.

"Yes," she said, playfully. She sighed. "It's possible you haven't met him yet. Sometimes I get things out of order. I am rather new at this."

"Why are you here?" Garcia asked.

"To help you feed babies, of course," she said. She paused. "Oh, and to remind you: change is coming."

Garcia sat up, full awake.

“She was cute,” Duana said.

“Just another blond tart,” Ilona argued.

He would have responded to the conversation in his head, but was saved an argument by the serendipitous sound of an alarm; a ‘red alert’ Klaxon began to blare, giving him pause.

“Bridge to Captain,” came the page.

“Go ahead,” Garcia said. He cringed when he remembered he was admiral, but chose not to correct himself. Change is here! He thought, get with it. “Garcia here. Report.”

“There is an energy spike on the hanger deck,” Kletsova responded. “We have an unauthorized Gateway activation. It’s confirmed, it’s not one of our Gates dialing in.”

“I’ll be right there,” Garcia said.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

One obvious difference between Fleet and Klingon personnel was that on or off duty, Klingons tended to wear their battle gear. Consequently, when the alarm went off, Warriors had managed to assemble along the walls facing the invisible Gateway on the tempest before Garcia had even managed to arrive. The assortment of weapons trained on the “wall” where the Gateway resided revealed that his crew had been paying attention to their previous battles and were prepared for just about anything. Garcia took up position next to Kitara, just far enough back from the Gateway to allow their warriors to attack without getting in the way. There were only seven present who could actually see the Gateway, identifiable by the rings they wore, but the whole crew knew where it was and could access it with computer assistance. A preserver Crystal in the ceiling illuminated and Losira arrived.

“Sorry for the delay, Captain,” Losira said, addressing Kitara. She must have noticed Garcia’s look and imagined Garcia felt suddenly demoted, left out of the look, and she made to comfort him by touching his shoulder. “I’ve checked with the Gray queen, and there is no way to stop the incoming wormhole. I’ve delayed it as long as I can. It might be possible to shut it down after it’s made a connection.”

Garcia had one of the seven bearing rings to surrender one so he could witness what was about to happen. The final lock slid into place and the Gateway became active. Garcia stepped forwards. Unlike the connections to his own system of gates, he couldn’t make out the other side.

“I thought this was a closed system,” Kitara complained.

“According to the Gray it was,” Losira said.

“Was?” Kitara asked.

“She created our gates and so was able to assign the Gate addresses. If no one knows the addresses, then it’s a closed system. She failed to mention there are other gateways in existence that could theoretically access our gates,” Losira said.

“So, you’re telling me this is a random dialing?” Kitara said.

“Not likely. Someone we know must be dialing in,” Losira said.

“Then who’s dialing?” Garcia asked.

“Admiral, I want this thing off our ship!” Kitara said.

Two humanoids emerged, dragging a third.

“Hold your fire!” Garcia ordered.

A fourth emerged, practically flying down the ramp as if he had jumped through the Gateway backwards, firing his weapon back towards the Gateway. Tentacles emerged, reaching out towards the fourth human, some of which were taking hold of the edge of the gate as if it were dragging itself through. What appeared to be a head emerged through the gate, identifiable as such based on the eyes and the gaping mouth. It wailed, releasing a foul breath that brought tears to the eyes.

“Fire at that!” Garcia ordered, wishing he had brought a weapon.

“Shut down the gate!” the fourth person to come through yelled.

Losira shut down the gate.

The Gateway shut down, severing the creature in half. This provided Garcia with the hard data as to what might happen if the event horizon simply cut off while someone

or something was passing through it. The fourth person stood up and fired several more rounds of ammo into the face of the dead creature before turning to greet Garcia.

“Hello, Tam,” the fourth said, smiling.

“Jay,” Garcia said, not bothering to mirror the Iotian’s smile. “What’s that?”

“I don’t know, but it sure was scary, wasn’t it?” Jay asked.

“Yeah,” Garcia agreed. “What the hell?”

“I’m sorry I didn’t call before dropping in,” Jay said.

“I’m sorry to interrupt the pleasantries, but I could use some attention,” the said injured man, still supported by his two friends.

“You know who that is?” Jay asked.

“I know who it looks like, but I really don’t want to presume,” Garcia began.

“That’s Doctor Daniel Jackson,” Jay introduced. “Isn’t that just the craziest thing ever? And that handsome guy is Colonel Cameron Mitchel and this is Lt. Colonel Samantha Carter.”

“Those really aren’t your names, you know that, right?” Garcia asked.

“Of course they’re our names,” Mitchell said. “It’s written in the Book.”

Garcia found himself unable to respond, wondering which ‘book’ Mitchell was referring to, the gangster book, made no sense, but the scripts Garcia had given to Jay, along with media files, proving conclusively they were not who they thought they were, could have been upgraded to the ‘new book.’ Whatever the new game was, Garcia sometimes found the Iotians to be as slow as Pakleds.

“Nice to finally meet you, Captain Garcia,” Samantha said, repositioning how she was holding Jackson so she could offer her hand. Her enthusiasm to meet Garcia was not lost on anyone. She went back to supporting Jackson when he cried out in pain. Typically, Garcia would have noted Kletsova rolling her eyes out of the corner of his vision, but she seemed not to react.

“He’s been promoted to Admiral,” Losira corrected Carter.

“You’ve been promoted?” Jay asked.

“Yeah,” Garcia said, almost apologetically.

“But you’re still in charge?” Jay asked.

“There is evidence that I’ve never been in charge,” Garcia offered. “You realize, Jay, our friendship is starting to be fairly weird.”

“Yeah, I know,” Jay said, nodding. “I watched that entire television series you sent me and I found every single person living on Iotia.”

“So, you drafted them?” Garcia asked.

“Pretty much,” Jay said. “You got to play by the book.”

“I thought you understood that playing by the book wasn’t always a good thing,” Garcia said.

“Agreed. But if it has a movie with it, it’s got to be okay,” Jay said.

Garcia closed his eyes, touched the bridge of his nose as he took a moment, his suspicions confirmed. The Iotians had proven incredibly smart, but once again their penchant for ‘idiot savant’ was shining through, so much so that if Star Fleet were aware of this present situation, there would be new concerns over the fact that he had recently given them Warp technology. He took a deep breath. “You said you found everyone. Even Teal’c?”

“Yeah, but after seeing the script he didn’t want to play,” Jay said.

Garcia nodded understandingly. “So, there’s hope for Iotia,” Garcia said.

“Can we please hold this reunion after you heal me?” Daniel asked.

“Sickbay is this way,” Garcia said.

“I’ll page Doctor Jurak?” Kitara asked.

“No, I got this,” Garcia said.

“Yeah, you got everything,” Kitara said, and then lost it. “There is a dead creature on my hangar deck!”

“I see it,” Garcia said, trying to stay calm in front of his guests. “And Jurak might be interested in that, so invite him over. Definitely get a hazmat team in here. Meanwhile, we’ll be in sickbay. You’re in charge, Captain.”

Garcia led the way down to medical, which wasn’t too far considering it was on same deck as the hangar. Mitchell and Carter helped Daniel up onto one of the hard medical tables, listening to Garcia ramble apologetically about the comfort level, explaining this was a Klingon ship and not a Star Fleet ship. As Garcia rambled, he took inventory of a compartment, collected an item, and then moved to another compartment. Kitara entered while he was still looking for the tissue regenerator.

“Where’s the tissue...” Garcia asked.

“Over here,” Kitara said, opening the drawer.

“Uh? Oh! Thanks,” Garcia said, going right to it now that he could see it. He explained his confusion to his guest. “You’ll have to forgive me. I haven’t spent a lot time in this sickbay. Conscious, anyways.”

Garcia dropped the items he had collected on a rolling tray and brought it over to Jackson’s side. He took a scan of the injury, which proved to be mostly muscle damaged. There was some hint of the creature’s residual poison contributing to Jackson’s pain, causing the whole leg to appear red on the scan where dopamine channels were being repressed. There were several puncture wounds, each approximately two centimeters long, visible through tears in his clothing.

“You mind if I cut your uniform?” Garcia asked.

“If it helps,” Jackson said, a little teary eyed. It was to be expected, Garcia thought. He wasn’t really Daniel Jackson.

Garcia looked around for a cutting tool. Kitara pushed him out of the way and used her own knife, easily cutting Jackson’s pants leg almost all the way to the crotch. Jackson whimpered only a little.

“And you call yourself a Klingon,” Kitara said to Garcia.

“I didn’t think I needed a knife today,” Garcia said.

“Really? Where were we before we beamed up?” Kitara said.

“Good point,” Garcia said. To Jackson he added, “Always take a knife to apply for a wedding permit.”

“Oh, you’re getting married?” Carter asked, pouting.

“Don’t worry,” Kitara snapped. “He’s a polygamist.”

“Really?” Carter asked, perking up.

“It’s what I do,” Garcia said, grimacing at Kitara.

“Just thought I’d save you time,” Kitara said.

“Thanks,” Garcia said.

“If you could all focus on my leg, please?” Daniel complained.

“Sure,” Garcia said. He went to administer a hypospray to Daniel’s neck, but Daniel blocked, raising a hand. “No worries. It’s a pain killer. If you want it.”

Jackson consented to the pain killer and Garcia fired it into his neck. Jackson passed out cold. According to the biometric readers attached to the bed, vital functions were decreasing rapidly, multiple alarms going off. Mitchell and Carter became alarmed, but Garcia calmly worked the problem. He verified the medicine. He verified the dose. He used his tricorder to scan the wound. He sent the information to medical screen.

He hit his communicator badge. “Jurak, medical emergency, I need you in sickbay, now,” Garcia said.

“If he dies, you die,” Mitchell said.

“Okay, thanks. Would you go wait over there, please? You can kill me later,” Garcia said, coming around the medical bed.

Jay pulled Mitchel out of the way so his friend could work. Garcia pulled open a drawer and surveyed the instruments, closed it and opened the one beneath it. He found the item he was searching for and began unpacking it from its sterile container. Jurak arrived and pushed Garcia out of the way. A moment later, Jackson was breathing again.

“What did I do wrong?” Garcia asked, serious about the medicine.

“For starters, you administered a pain killer for a flesh wound,” Jurak said.

“It was a little more serious than a flesh wound,” Garcia said.

“Yeah, well, a Klingon wouldn’t have asked...”

“Well, he didn’t technically ask,” Garcia added.

“You gave someone an analgesic who wasn’t complaining?” Jurak asked.

“Pretty much,” Garcia said.

“To answer your question, the anesthetic reacted to the poison the creature injected into his wound,” Jurak explained, using the computer to display the offending protein and chemical break down on how it altered the applied medicine.

“The protein shouldn’t unfold like that,” Garcia mumbled, scrutinizing the screen.

“Don’t worry. I doubt it’s in the Star Fleet Data Base seeing how this is a Klingon hunting reserve issue. The only reason I knew what to do was I’ve seen this before. This creature exists on a moon in the Ko’ls sector. The moon orbits a gas giant which orbits a red dwarf...”

“Jay, is that where you were?” Garcia asked.

“I am pretty sure the star wasn’t a red dwarf and I’m pretty sure we weren’t on a moon. We had Earth normal G’s,” Jay began.

“I’ve never seen this creature outside the reserves,” Jurak said, skeptically, injecting a neutralizing agent into Jackson’s leg. The active scan on the leg showed the poison dissipating, as opposed to unfolding into a new shape.

Garcia frowned at the med screen as it mapped out the biochemical changes in real time.

“I know I am not as experienced as you all, and I don’t have a lot of tech toys, but I do know the difference between a yellow son and a red dwarf,” Jay said.

“Ko’ls is deep in Klingon space?” Garcia asked, still focused on the patient.

“Far side of the Empire from Earth’s perspective,” Jurak said. “Why?”

“Any temple ruins?” Garcia asked.

“No,” Jurak said at the same time as Jay answered, “It’s why we went there.”

“So, we’re obviously not speaking about the same place,” Garcia said.

“Let’s move back to the part where you used the Gateway to come here,” Kitara said, interrupting.

“We tried to dial home, but for whatever reason we couldn’t get through, so I dialed you,” Jay said. He removed an item from his vest pocket and handed it to Garcia. “This is a remote dialer. Just point it at a gate, dial the address, and then a moment later, you’re walking on another world.”

Garcia accepted the device. Kitara looked to Garcia, frowning. Garcia returned the look, not having an answer for her. The device looked very similar to the device Alexander had used. “Where did you get this?”

“It’s an artifact that we found on a planet,” Jay explained.

“So you used this to find other gates?” Garcia asked.

“No. Using the scripts you provided us led us to a hypothesis that other Gateways existed, and so we created a program to basically ping other gates and provide us with the addresses,” Carter said.

“Interesting,” Garcia said. “Just how many other Gateways are we talking about?”

“We found 2,337 before our program crashed due to the volume of incoming data,” Jay said. “Since the discovery, we’ve tentatively explored six of the planets. That remote has been a god send. It not only opens up gates, it can home in on Preserver tech.”

Garcia closed his eye and sent a text message via his implant to his daughter Okuda. “Please come and see me. Presently on the Tempest. Now would be nice.” Kitara noticed his eye movement and knew he was interfacing with his implant. She tried to put on a face of patience.

“Kitara, please have Sendak, Bri, and Gomez join us in your conference room, ASAP,” Garcia said. “Jay, would you walk with me, please.”

As they were leaving, Carter waved, “I guess I will just wait here with Mitchell and Jackson. Unless you need me for something.”

“Um, yeah,” Garcia stammered, realizing he was always a bit uncomfortable when a female hit on him in front of others. Had he and Carter been alone, it probably would have played out different. He forced himself to stay focus on the present need. Kitara’s direct way of addressing the obvious attraction had actually helped diminish some of the tension. “Um, Kitara, could you see that they get some refreshments and are at this impromptu conference we’re throwing. And you know what, I want the other Captains present.”

She gave him one of those look. Garcia sighed and departed the room faster than Jay was expecting, leaving him on the wrong side of the closing door. Garcia opened the door and motioned Jay to keep up. Garcia walked in silence, knowing very well Jay was observing everything. There was a small ‘interrogation,’ room next to the conference room. For the sake of expediency and privacy he brought Jay there. He motioned Jay to sit in one of the chairs and then sat on the table facing him.

“Jay, you know, I really like you,” Garcia began.

“Thank you,” Jay said. “I really like you too, but I am not gay.”

“That’s good,” Garcia said, slowly, wondering where that came from. “Cause I wasn’t going there.”

“Oh, that’s really good. Cause I do like you, I am just not gay. Not that there is anything wrong with that,” Jay said.

“Okay, we’ve established that we’re both heterosexual,” Garcia said. “When I say I like you, I am trying to express my concern for your wellbeing.”

“Oh, that’s cool. But I’ve been great since doctor Crusher fixed me up,” Jay said.

“That good. But I’m more concerned for your psychological health,” Garcia said.

“You think I’m crazy?” Jay asked, surprised.

“A little,” Garcia said, indicating a ‘little’ with his finger and thumb. “I showed you those media files from earth so that you could see that you are not who you think you are.”

“I know,” Jay said excitedly. “But the metaphysical convolutions of that are just staggering. Mind blowing. Who am I? Who are you? The Universe is you!”

“Excuse me?” Garcia asked.

“You don’t remember Joe vrs the Volcano! All the incarnations happening simultaneously. This is the message you brought us! The clarity between you and Kirk is tremendous,” Jay babbled on. “If we aren’t who we think we are, then we’re just basically playing a script, and if a human being can’t be limited to any one script, that means we can infer that we are not limited to the personalities and histories that we think define us, and therefore we can be anything we want. You know how liberating that concept is?”

“Why do I feel like you’re about to start a new religion,” Garcia asked, rubbing his forehead. “Look, I am who I am.”

“But that’s not all you are,” Jay insisted. “You are more than sum of your parts. How did Carl Jung say it? Never mind, I can’t do Carl Jung like you can quote Carl Jung, but you know what I mean. I mean, what are the odds that an Earth TV show would be so close to reality?”

“Quite good, actually, when you factor in Preserver god’s recreating specific historical and fictional tangents for their own whims,” Garcia said. “But even if you just go with secret agenda of fake gods, adding in the variations on themes, you can quickly deduce that science fiction is simply a projection of technology that can theoretically exist. Buck Rogers had a Star Gate. Larry Niven had teleporters. Heinlein had portals. Hell, even C S Lewis had a wardrobe, kind of like a Gateway. Ah, but again, you have me digressing. What I’m getting at is that’s not Jackson in there. That’s not Carter or Mitchell. You look like these people from Earth, but you’re Iotian.”

“But we still have the same number of chromosomes...” Jay said.

“Yes, we’re definitely related,” Garcia agreed.

“And I get that we are a product of our childhood, our physical and social environment, our internal environment,” Jay said. “But the realization that I am more than that and that I can choose to respond differently is huge. I’m not my genes. I’m not my IQ. I’m not even my personality. Now the world, the Universe itself, is just utterly, fantastically amazing, every moment a new discovery. It’s just so incredible knowing that we can be so different but that we’re ultimately all the same, because we’re all made up of the same stuff as stars! We’re star babies.”

“Yeah, yeah, but I get this feeling that you think it’s all a game,” Garcia said. “You were nearly eaten by a creature...”

“That was pretty close. There are things out there that will eat us, squash us, enslave us, or take our lunch money and send us home crying. And, I know that

compared to you, I'm just a child," Jay said. "But now that we know that we never really die, we can take greater risks."

"That's it right there! You can die," Garcia said. "Permanently. That's it."

"You're saying there's no afterlife," Jay said.

"I'm not saying that," Garcia said.

"So, there is an afterlife?" Jay asked.

"I can't answer that," Garcia said.

"Is that because of the Prime Directive?" Jay asked, touching his nose as if to communicate that he knows Garcia can't reveal everything because communications were being monitored.

Garcia rolled his whole head skyward as if crying to God, before reaching out to touch Jay's shoulder.

"I'm still not gay," Jay said.

"Yeah, neither am I, but now I am curious why you keep bringing that up," Garcia said.

"This looks like an interrogation room, and well, there are rumors about what aliens do in interrogation rooms," Jay said.

"Well, let's squash that one, okay?" Garcia said, bringing his hands back to himself.

"So you were just going to make a point," Jay said.

"Yeah," Garcia said, closing his eyes to collect his thoughts.

"Sorry I distracted you," Jay said.

"It's not all you. I've been fairly distracted lately," Garcia admitted.

"Anything I can do?" Jay asked.

"Got a spaceship to spare?" Garcia asked, sarcastically.

"The Daedalus," Jay offered.

"Really?" Garcia asked.

"I wanted to name it the Enterprise, but they wouldn't let me," Jay said.

"Just like in..."

"In the show! You see how crazy life is? But back to your point," Jay said.

"My point? My point!" Garcia said, rubbing his forehead. "I have personal beliefs and I have personal experiences going all the way back to childhood which suggests there is an afterlife, that there is more to the Universe than we can scientifically measure. There are many people who report having some life changing, transcendental experiences, but there are many more who have had no experiences. I can tell you my hopes and dreams and interpretations of my experiences, but I can't tell you with a hundred percent certainty that there is anything more than what we have right here and now."

"But you've seen the evidence!" Jay said. "You showed me the tapes! I lived on Earth three hundred years ago! Tell me you didn't live on Earth three hundred years ago."

Garcia hesitated. "I have memories of experiences on Earth that I can't explain, some that I have remembered lately that go beyond my childhood obsession with living in a virtual environment of old Earth," Garcia said. "But Jay, you have to believe me. If you die, you will not be in the here and now. I want you in the here and now. You are my friend and I want you and your friends and your people to be safe."

“The Universe is inherently unsafe,” Jay pointed out. “Even you quoted Kirk as saying, ‘risk is our business.’ We are living as bravely and as honestly as we can. Are you saying you disapprove?”

“No,” Garcia said, almost touching Jay’s arm. He grabbed his left wrist. “You inspire me. I just don’t want you rushing out into danger on some misunderstanding or a metaphysical philosophy that may or may not be true. I don’t want you dead because I mislead you.”

Jay responded by taking Garcia’s left hand in both of his. “You have not mislead us. You have freed us. From our past. From our prejudices. And we may still have some prejudices but we will examine ourselves with the same courage with which we face exploring the Universe.”

They spontaneously hugged, and then separated, looking around as if to make sure no one saw.

“Okay,” Garcia said. “That’s all I got.”

“Cool. To the meeting?” Jay asked.

Garcia nodded and led the way. Before they were out the door, Jay tapped Garcia on the shoulder.

“Do you think I will hook up with Carter?” Jay asked casually.

“Do you want to?” Garcia asked.

“Yeah,” Jay said.

“Well, why don’t you start with that and see where it goes?” Garcia asked, and entered the conference room before he could respond.

Carter smiled at Garcia as he took his place at the table.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

As impromptu meetings go, the discovery that the lesser Gateway connecting Garcia's two planets and four ships were not isolated amongst themselves, but were capable of connecting to a greater network of already existing Gateways, simply exploded into a conversation of: how is that possible, why didn't we know about it sooner, and do we dismantle the gates. Princess Okuda, speaking on behalf of her mother, the Gray Queen, explained again that the technology was the predecessor of the Iconian Gateway. Comparatively, the Lesser Gateways were more stable and energy efficient than the Iconian Gateways, but they had limitations. The most obvious was that you could only travel between existing Gates, whereas the Iconian Gateway you could step off to any world you happened to dial in, without a secondary gate. In many ways, even the Guardian of Forever was a superior Gateway and still a precursor to the Iconian Gateway.

They took a vote on whether or not to keep them on their ships. Given the nature of their mission and the flexibility they had become accustomed to, getting rid of the Gates at this point was just not an option. They established a new protocol for Gateway use, identifying inbound teams by transponder codes. A team would have to be given the okay before crossing over, or risk being shot, or destroyed when they hit a shield.

The next thing Garcia wanted was to have Jay provide them with all the Gate addresses that they had uncovered through 'pinging' the system. There was a bit of haggling as Jay attempted to secure proprietary rights to land or technology. When a tentative, reasonable deal was struck, he turned over the data and the program they used for finding the Gates, which he carried on a memory stick and an Iotian style PADD. Sendak was immediately impressed by the simplistic nature of the program. The only down side to the program was that the algorithm they utilized gave them actual addresses for gates, but failed to correspond with specific locations in space and time.

"Can't we correlate the other gates' locations based on where our gates are?" Undine asked.

"Not using this method," Sendak said.

"I would be hesitant to allow a team to go to a planet that I couldn't transwarp jump to if they needed an alternative escape route," Losira said.

"We were thinking of sending probes through and determine location based on observable astronomical observations," Carter said. "But we decided that that will only work if the probe can identify star patterns in our quadrant. Specifically, you need a minimum of two neutron stars to extrapolate position."

"Why don't we just send our resident Medusan?" Jurak asked. "She always knows exactly where she is in space/time."

"That would be fine if you want to risk driving crew or innocent bystanders insane when they chance see her," Simone asked.

Garcia started drumming the table, staring off into space. "You know," Garcia said. "Our Medusan has a name. Her name is Dryac. And I would like people to use it. Further, I've been considering this for a moment, because I really hate that Dryac is stuck in her room 24/7 which only adds to this phenomena of not knowing her name. Sendak, Jurak, I want you to build Dryac a mobility device. Consider it like a wheelchair, but a

completely mobile and fully self-contained environmental system that will enable her to go about the ship and interact with fellow crew members.”

“Really? You’re going to give her a hamster ball?” Kitara asked.

“In effect,” Garcia said. “Just not a see through one.”

“That can be done,” Sendak said. “Perhaps if she visits a few worlds we can determine a pattern for Gate positions.”

“Okay, then,” Garcia said. “Let’s put the Medusan Mobility device at the top of the to do list.”

“You could ask Athena to provide you with all the gate addresses and locations,” Okuda said.

“You think she has access to that information?” Undine asked.

“The Preservers created this line of technology in order to ensure the distribution of life,” Okuda said. “Life is too uncertain to bet the evolution of intelligence to a solitary planet. The greater the distribution, the greater the odds.”

“I guess you will have to go have a chat with Athena,” Kitara said.

“I’ve been meaning to go see her, anyway,” Garcia said. “Okuda, I want a team over there to upgrade her Gateway first off. Put a shield on it. There will be trouble if Apollo finds her gate address by accident. Anything else for the table?”

“You wanted us to send the Daedalus somewhere?” Jay asked.

“Umm, not yet,” Garcia said. Then thought about it further. “Does it have a Gateway on board?”

“Not yet,” Jay said.

“Not yet?” Garcia asked.

“We were hoping of borrowing one from one of the worlds that was uninhabited, provided we could figure out how to get there by ship,” Jay said.

“How about I just send Okuda over with some Gray drones to build you one,” Garcia asked.

“Okay,” Jay said, enthusiastic about that idea. “But we’re still planning on moving some existing gates.”

“Jay? You said you watched the show I sent you, right?” Garcia asked.

“Good point,” Jay said.

“Just out of curiosity, why are our in-common gates translucent to us, but non gates are opaque,” Mitchell asked.

Garcia turned to Okuda.

“Because Mother made them, she is able to control for quality and the harmonics are fine tuned to allow higher performance,” Okuda said.

Garcia turned back to Mitchell. He seemed satisfied.

“Cool. Anything else? Very well, Okuda, if you will take a team of drones back to Iotia to put a Gateway on the Daedalus, I would appreciate it,” Garcia said.

“The Iotian Gateway is still not responding to dial in,” Losira said. “I managed to contact them via the preserver communication crystal and have ascertained they are having a power system failure. They expect to be back online in four days.”

“We don’t mind staying with you,” Carter said.

Garcia became aware Jay was staring at him.

“Um, no, we can get you home,” Garcia offered.

“With our luck, we would blow out the coils and miss the House party,” Kitara said.

“You’re having a party?” Mitchell asked.

“You could leave Garcia on Chronos,” Simone said.

“No she can’t,” Losira said.

“What if we put a Gateway on Chronos,” Okuda said.

Garcia and Kitara stared at each other and then the debate started over. By the time the debate was finished, not only had they decided to leave a Gateway at their new estate, but they decided they were going to approach Trolos to have one put on his ship.

“There is no rush to get us home. We’d be happy to stay with you a few days,” Carter said. Garcia had to remind himself that this was not Carter.

Garcia noticed anger flash across Kitara’s face and he suspected she was angry by another potential distraction from their personal goal as opposed to Carter’s obvious flirting. He was angry at himself, too. Jay was doing his best not to reveal he had some feelings about the flirting, but whether it was love for Carter, appreciation for his friendship with Garcia, or his overwhelming need to align his real life with the fictional life of the character he resembled was hard to tell.

“Okuda, bring some drones over and start building a Gateway at our estate. Kitara, go speak with your brother about upgrades to his ship. We need him,” Garcia said. “As soon as the Gateway on Chronos is up and running, I want you to take the Tempest in pursuit of Balat. Jay, you and your team are welcome here as guests until we can expedite you home.”

“Balat?” Losira asked.

“Another assignment handed to Garcia,” Kitara said.

“Which I’m delegating to you. Alright, unless there is anything else?” Garcia asked. No one had anything else to say. Garcia gave a fake smile, slapping the table. “Great, back to work.”



Garcia arrived on the Yonada space station through the Gateway. As he walked the corridor headed towards Athena’s normal haunts, it occurred to him that the station felt cold. It was no doubt more comfortable than a prison, but it was still solitary confinement. How to change this was foremost on his mind when Athena met him suddenly and so enthusiastically that the encounter led to prolonged intimacy. He actually fell asleep in her arms. She lay beside him, one hand supporting her head as she studied him sleeping, her other hand tracing circles on his chest. It was obvious to her that he was dreaming, but she could only wonder what stirred his mind. She came close to waking him at several points, due to sounds of discontent he was making as he dreamed. When he did wake, his transition from sleep to wake was sudden, as if he were in danger.

Garcia sat up, one hand coming up as if to defend from a blow. He locked onto Athena’s arm with this other hand, but quickly orientated on where he was and who he was with; he eased up on his grip.

“Bad dream?” she asked, kissing him.

“Something like that,” he said, forcing himself to relax. He spent a moment observing the room, wondering if the knowledge of how old this place was influenced his belief that it felt old, smelt old. He laid back down.

“I’m sorry for your discomfort, but know, even asleep, your presence here has brought me joy,” Athena said. “Thank you for keeping your promise to visit me.”

“You’re welcome,” Garcia said. Snuggling into her, he rested his head on her shoulder and draped an arm across her chest.

“I heard you encountered Gaia?” Athena said.

“Yeah,” Garcia said, yawning. “She didn’t seem real happy with me.”

“She is not generally known for her good disposition,” Athena said. She kissed his forehead.

Garcia sat up. “How did you know about Gaia?”

“Kitara,” Athena said. She didn’t tell him about the confrontation. He seemed suddenly lost in thought. “How long can you stay with me?”

Garcia looked up and to the right, accessing the chronometer on his implant. “Another hour,” Garcia said, laying back down. He scooted in towards her, arm under her head. He stared at the ceiling.

Athena was sad, but she said nothing. She moved the palm of her hand to various energy points on Garcia’s body as if she were doing a Reiki treatment. She observed a sense of contentment on Garcia’s face and could feel him relaxing. She continued to study the effects of her touch on him as he transitioned into sleep. He was gone only for a moment before a dream aroused him. He sighed heavily, tightening his grip on her in a gentle hug.

“It’s okay, Tam,” Athena said. “I will watch over you.”

“Maybe you should come spend time with people on the New Constitution,” Garcia invited, sleepily.

“No,” Athena said.

“You shouldn’t have to stay here alone. You can always retreat back here if the need arises,” Garcia said.

“No,” Athena said. “This place is secure for now.”

“Okay,” Garcia said, not wanting to argue. He told himself that he was either going to have to get up and walk around or begin round two of foreplay or he would definitely be falling asleep again. “Any chance you can you tell me how I might get in contact with Apollo?”

Athena’s eyes narrowed and anger flashed across her face. She pushed him off her. “You didn’t come to simply visit. You came to pump me for information!”

Athena got up and grabbed her toga from the end of the bed. Garcia was confused for a second, but quickly became more alert.

“Now, wait just a minute,” Garcia said.

“You should leave,” Athena said, preparing to dress.

Garcia grabbed her by the arm and pulled her back to bed. She resisted a little, but her fight was obviously not in her. The tears in her eyes were genuine signs of hurt. Garcia maneuvered her so that he was on top, pinning her wrists together above her head. She let go of her clothing. He kissed her tears.

“Athena,” Garcia said. “I’m here with you. This is genuine. I needed the rest you gave me. It is also true that I need help contacting Apollo. I want to end the conflict between us. Will you help me with that?”

“You know I cannot ascend while in this condition,” Athena said.

“Ascend?” Garcia asked.

“Leave this body and return to my realm,” Athena said.

“Help me understand this better. This body is little more than an avatar, so doesn’t that mean you still reside in your natural realm?” Garcia asked.

“I don’t have the analogies to explain, but it is true, I am not here, but I am here,” Athena said. “I cannot leave. My presence is required for the imprinting to take place.”

“Imprinting?” Garcia asked.

“Our children will have the DNA of this body and yours, but they will have my spirit, knowledge from my realm, and a connection that will allow them to communicate with that realm, with me, and call upon forces that you might consider supernatural, but to me is simply natural forces of nature,” Athena said. “If I leave this body, someone else could claim it and alter or block the imprinting, or turn the body off and kill the fetuses. I am here until my job is finished.”

“When is the job finished?” Garcia asked.

“When they are born. It will be your job to raise them,” Athena said.

“Nice. What am I a male seahorse? You won’t be participating at all?” Garcia said.

“I will meet their spiritual needs. You will meet their physical needs,” Athena said.

“And if I needed your help, how will I contact you?” Garcia asked.

“Knock, ask, seek,” Athena said.

“It’s that simple?” Garcia asked.

“It has always been this simple. You humans make things so complicated,” Athena said. She touched a point on his forehead, then touched his lips, and then touched his heart. “You may choose to channel love, peace, intellect, hope, fear, or hate. You are what you think and you will manifest what you emphasize.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I’ve heard all of this before, but I have to say, I’m getting a lot of crap I don’t remember asking for,” Garcia said.

“Your entire life you have dreamt of being a hero, being someone important,” Athena said. “Did you really think you could have that with not having great obstacles or adversaries? Did you not imagine carrying that for so long has given you momentum, so even if you change your mind this very moment, you’re not going to change what you put in motion?”

“So, you’re saying my reality is my fault and there’s no stopping what’s to come?” Garcia asked.

“Yes. You are the author of your life,” Athena said. “But no, you still have choice how it ends up.”

“Please, I was born into a game already in play. People had designs on me before I arrived,” Garcia said.

“You can either assume the role of victim or the role of survivor. Which do you prefer?” Athena asked.

“I can take responsibility for most things in my life, but certainly not everything,” Garcia said. He forced himself to stop, breathe, and focus back on his original task. “You know, I didn’t come here to discuss ‘positive’ philosophy with you. I’ve discovered that the lesser gateways can be used to access other worlds. Can you give me a list of addresses where I might find tech?”

Athena pouted. “What specifically do you want?”

“A fully operational Iconanian Gateway would be nice,” Garcia said.

“I can’t give you this,” Athena said.

“You have to give me something. One of your Preservers is using a Temporal Gateway to send agents back through time to kill me,” Garcia said.

“Are you certain?” Athena asked, concerned. She rolled him over so that she was in the superior position. “You are certain!”

“Fairly certain,” Garcia said.

“That can’t be,” Athena said, confused. She looked upwards, staring at the ceiling. “We have a truce.”

“How good is your truce?” Garcia asked.

Athena’s eyes came back to Garcia, took offense, and then tried to get up. Garcia held her and she again surrendered without too much protest. “If one of the players is trying to change the timeline, you will be protected, somehow, someday. Zeus will keep his promise. You must be alert, aware of your surroundings. It will most likely be innocuous. Very rarely do you get a gift with burning bushes or lightening or double rainbows. That stuff draws too much attention. Be open to weird encounters. People who just want to talk, or might need assistance. Gifts are usually dispensed on merit. Oh, and go talk to Guinan.”

“Guinan?” Garcia asked.

“She has access to subtle information. She may see something you don’t because you’re caught up in it,” Athena said. Athena pouted for a moment more. “Time is much more fluid and dynamic than your species has ever imagined and you need to stop thinking so linearly. Even Einstein called time a persistent illusion.”

“He did, but I doubt that that means what you seem to be conveying it means,” Garcia argued. “None the less, a gateway might even the playing field.”

Athena shook her head. “Tam, I cannot give you an address to any Iconian Gateways...” She hesitated. “You have to understand that they are dangerous. Not all the Temporal Gateways are user friendly, like the Guardian of Forever. Some of them are disguised as common day objects and are accessed through mundane means. Some of them are rigged for misdirection or booby trapped. Some of them are designed to summon the gods. And if the gods knew you had one, it would only escalate this war. Giving you this would put you in harm’s way. If you were to find one, I could not protect you. And I cannot tell you how to operate it, because again, they’re all different.”

“It’s okay, Athena,” Garcia said. “I will figure this out on my own.”

Athena sulked, laying her head on his shoulder. “If you were a grave robber, I might suggest a place.”

“A grave robber?” Garcia asked, amused.

“Yes, I would send you back in time, right before Beta Niobe went supernova in 2269. The planet Sarpedion had an Iconanian Temporal Gateway. They called it the atavachron, but it was ours, and we locked it to their planet’s history so they couldn’t leave their solar system. We gave them that technology to see what they would do given the pending crisis.”

“Why am I not surprised,” Garcia said, anger bleeding through.

“What?” Athena asked.

“Well, for starters, you did something to their technology that messed with their biology, making them jump through unnecessary hurdles just to time travel,” Garcia said.

“Well, not me personally,” Athena said. “But that feature was added to force the biological evolution of the species from advancing within the loops they were creating.”

“Secondly, and probably most importantly, you caused their star to go Nova,” Garcia said.

“Again, not me personally,” Athena said.

“But your species did,” Garcia said.

“It was necessary to add a social imperative to get all the players to comply with temporal travel,” Athena said.

“Right. How is forcing people to choose a particular path compatible with your philosophy that we are the author of our lives?” Garcia asked.

“You get to choose.”

“Oh, yeah, like those books where you have to choose page 21 or 42 to find out where the story goes next,” Garcia said. “And so, if I were a grave robber, I suppose I could go and steal their technology with no consequences. I would be able to do anything I want with impunity, theft, murder, take slaves, because the star would blow and destroy all the evidence. The only potential for minute Galactic historic change would be altering Kirk, Spock, or McCoy’s trajectory while they were visiting there. Oh, or are you suggesting becoming a grave robber because this is also a test? Is everything a test with your people?”

“This is not a test,” Athena said. “I wasn’t suggesting becoming a grave robber as much as just saying if you were... Forget it. But know my being with you is not a test. I chose this path.”

“You mean you were ordered,” Garcia said.

“I have free will, Tam. I chose you,” Athena said.

Garcia sulked.

“We still have about thirty five minutes,” Athena said. “We could spend our time arguing or..?”

Garcia tried to pout, but gave in to Athena’s kisses. Garcia’s communicator badge chimed. He ignored it, but with each consecutive chime it increased in volume. Athena seemed quite cross when he paused to reach for it.

“Really?”

“It could be important,” Garcia said, barely reaching his shirt from the bed. Just as he grabbed it with his fingers and started sliding it towards him, he found himself suddenly on the floor.

“Hey!” Garcia said.

“Come back when you can give me your full attention,” Athena said, grabbing her clothes and departing.

Garcia sat there a moment. He answered the communicator just to silence it.

“What?!”

“Admiral, this Barona Shi. You should come to the Path Finder, now,” Barona said.

Garcia closed his eyes. “I will be right there,” he said, and closed the channel.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Garcia arrived on the Path Finder via the Gateway to find Barona and Losira waiting for him. Losira went straightway to her welcoming procedure for Garcia, who complied without complaint. While she was doing that, Barona Shi, was speaking her peace: “The Pirates are about to leave our Jurisdiction.”

“I’m sorry, Admiral,” Losira said, ever polite and personable. “I do have things under control, but she was insistent on you being here.”

Garcia turned to Barona. “You do know my staff is quite capable of handling things without me,” Garcia said.

“But we commissioned you to handle this, not the ship’s computer,” Barona Shi said.

“Losira is quite capable. In fact, it is that kind of prejudice that would have me walk away from this assignment completely just to prove a point,” Garcia said.

“It’s okay, Admiral,” Losira said. “I take no offense. If you will accompany me to the Bridge, I will fill you in on the change in the situation.”

“I will go with you,” Barona Shi said.

“No. It would be best you wait in your quarters,” Garcia said.

“I need to get out of that room. I am here to assist you,” Barona Shi insisted.

“The longer we debate this, the more time we give the Pirates to get away,” Losira said.

Barona Shi shot an angry look to Losira, followed by a pleading look to Garcia.

“I promise to contact you if I need anything,” Garcia said.

Barona was clearly not happy, but surrendered to Garcia’s wishes. “The room is kind of cramped. And I was so hopeful that I would be spending time with you...”

Only Garcia caught the smile Losira was beaming, as if she were trying not to laugh out loud.

“I’m sorry,” Garcia said, communicating something back at Losira with a micro-expression. “I’ve been rather busy. We’ll talk later. Promise.”

Barona Shi touched Garcia’s chest, hand over his heart as if she were measuring his sincerity. Seeing his resolve in the matter, and accepting the promise, she departed for the guest quarters. As soon as Losira and he were in the turbo lift alone, she parroted: “And I was so hopeful that I would be spending time with you...”

“Oh, please don’t,” Garcia said.

“But how will I master socializing if I don’t practice teasing?” Losira asked, feigning innocence.

“You mastered teasing,” Garcia said.

“I have,” Losira asked, stepping into him, bringing her lips in closer as if she might kiss him, but delaying.

Garcia felt flush. “Yep. Do we have time?” Garcia asked.

“For a kiss? Always. Have you ever kissed a Captain before?” Losira asked.

“Ummmf,” Garcia said. “Catch me up to speed?”

Losira pouted playfully and filled him in. After receiving a communiqué to rendezvous with some buyers, the Orion pirate ship had changed course for the Tanglar system. It was now game time. If they were going to capture and release the hostages,

they would have to act fast. As the lift doors slid opened, the accompanying Losira agent dissipated in favor of the Losira agent already on the Bridge. The Losira agent on the Bridge was in the command chair. She had spun the chair to face the opening lift and beamed a smile at him that was even brighter than the agent he had just been with. She uncrossed her legs and stood, saluting.

“Admiral on the Bridge,” Losira announced.

Garcia returned the salute. “Carry on,” he said.

Losira was alert to Garcia’s eye movement, knowing full well that he had taken inventory of her in her new Uniform, silver with gold highlights, mini skirt option. Her only addition was sparkly, gold hose. She touched him on the shoulder as he took the command chair, knowingly, as if communicating that she knew he wanted more than a kiss in the lift. She had learned to read him that well, was suspecting the probability that the more inopportune the timing, the more he was likely to give in to the impulse. Something she recorded as an important ingredient for increasing her potential “sessions” with him.

“Admiral,” Losira said. She leaned into him and gave him a small kiss on the cheek, and added: “I’ve been doing a little research and it would seem as if every time an Admiral took authority over the acting Captain, there was usually some trouble. Take Kirk, for example...”

Garcia held a hand up, communicating: “Stop, please.” She seemed to be glowing. Was it her enthusiasm for her new rank and her new role within his growing Fleet? Or was she just messing with him by communicating that though she wasn’t offended by Barona Shi’s lack of faith in her ability to Captain, she was still hopeful that he wasn’t going to interfere in her command. He had to dismiss that last thought, as it was not in Losira’s character, or at least, hadn’t been.

Losira laughed. “Don’t worry, you shall always be my Captain, Admiral,” Losira said.

“Would you like to do this?” Garcia asked.

“No. I’m yours,” Losira said.

“You mean to say ‘the ship is yours,’ right?” Garcia corrected.

“Same thing,” Losira said.

“Nice,” Garcia said, easily ignoring the flirt, but not so easily turning his eyes away from her legs. Taking in the Bridge, the staff, and the activity level helped somewhat as he ascertained their situation. He was actually glad to be useful and not just watching others work. Losira handed him a coffee, which he gratefully accepted as he gave her a second glance. Then it was back to work. “Okay, folks. What are our options?”

“If we are going to take them, we should do something now,” Tuer said. “The Tanglar system is outside of Star Fleet’s jurisdiction. Also, our Klingon cloak will be ineffective in that Star System.”

“Of course,” Garcia said, a little grimace leaking through. Pirates knew how to conduct business. Pick a place where someone was less likely to sneak up on you or double cross you.

“If the goal is to save the hostages, the best plan is to allow me to beam over, shut off the shields, and beam everyone off,” Losira said. “I can perform this task within 7 seconds.”

“The problem is, if they’re boarded and decide to self destruct, they could destroy the ship in 5,” Sendak said.

“We would have the element of surprise, and even if they trigger the self destruct as the shields are coming down, there is a 90 percent probability that the hostages would be already safely in the transporter buffer.”

“And given our proximity, we could take damage which could jeopardize the transport, or the lives of the crew,” Tuer said. “Further, it is crucial we capture the pirates in order to gather intel.”

Garcia nodded. “I could have everyone off of that ship using the Kelvan transporter, shields or no shields,” Garcia offered.

“And since that isn’t going to happen, how would you like to proceed?” Losira asked again, speaking what the rest of the Bridge crew were thinking, based on their face expressions.

Garcia took the velcro grip protectors off his chair. “I want my option. No one should have to die today. Losira, be ready to beam over to lower their shields, but also be ready so that if they hit the self-destruct, I can access to the Kelvan Tech for a minimum of five seconds.”

“You know how much damage you can do in five seconds?” Losira asked.

“Is there anyone on board the Path Finder who isn’t already pregnant?” Garcia asked.

“The hostages,” Sendak said.

“Barona Shi,” Losira said.

“I want it as an option, Losira. You can be the on/off switch, but I want that option,” Garcia said. He caressed the grips to his arm rests unconsciously as he spoke, the same way a meth addict might caress a pipe.

“Aye, Admiral,” Losira said.

“Now, let’s do this before we are clearly out of our jurisdiction, and before we are in short range scan of the Tanglar system. Take us to yellow alert, have Away Teams standing by for an assault. Losira, employ the Tempest’s skin, and deactivate the Klingon cloaking device. Jam subspace communications. Sendak, open hailing frequencies, ship to ship, communication lasers only.” Garcia glanced at the screen to his right to discern the name of the pirate ship and then looked forward to the main screen, aware that he was now the main show. “Attention Orion ship Okan. Drop out of warp and prepare to be boarded.”

The Captain of the Pirate ship appeared on the main viewer.

“Who are you?!” the Orion Captain demanded.

Garcia smiled appropriately, as if appreciating a great card game. A casual glance to Sendak gave him enough relief that the Orion Captain hadn’t armed his self destruct system yet. The longer the system stayed unarmed, the more likely he wouldn’t engage it. The computer managed to identify the Pirate ship’s Captain utilizing face recognition technology. His name appeared on Garcia’s primary monitor. “Captain Loneler, I’m surprised you don’t know me,” Garcia said. “I’m the dread pirate Roberts.”

“Excuse me?” Captain Loneler asked. He turned to hear a whisper from his first officer. Captain Loneler paled, visibly. “Captain Tammias Parkin Arblaster Garcia?!”

“Oh, well, yeah, I go by that at as well. So, apparently, today is your lucky day. We’re going to play a game. I’m going to give you one of three options. Whichever you

choose, you are going to be boarded and your ship inspected. So, we can either play by Starfleet rules..."

"Starfleet has no authority in this sector," Loneler snapped. "Why are you jamming subspace communications?"

"Sigh. So, apparently you don't favor option one," Garcia continued, unperturbed. "Because if you are carrying illegal commodities for trade or sale, Starfleet protocols would allow me to detain you, confiscate any illegal contraband, and, depending on my discretion and the degree of your cooperativeness and the nature of the potential infractiopns, you and your crew could merely go on your way, or be turned over to the authorities at the nearest Starbase. Option two, Klingon rules. If I'm not mistaken, a Klingon Captain has the right to execute criminals in the field if found guilty of transporting slaves, or sending pirates straight to a prison planet without an intervening governing body that has checks and balances. The life expectancy of a non Klingon on a Klingon prison planet is pretty short. Is that correct, Lt. Tuer?"

"It is, Admiral," Tuer confirmed.

Loneler swallowed. "You mentioned a third option?"

"Oh, good, you do want to play," Garcia said, smiling deviously. "As a fellow pirate, and member of the Orion crime syndicate, I could just confiscate your goods and ship, and you swear allegiance to me, which is much better than me blasting you out into space."

"You really are Garcia?!" Loneler asked again.

"I thought we established that. I apologize if my attempt at humor confused the matter," Garcia said. "Yes, I am Garcia. I want you to lower your shields and prepare to be boarded."

Fear flashed across Loneler's face for the briefest moment, replaced with an ill placed determination to go head to head with a ship that clearly outmatched him. He puffed up his chest and stood defiantly on the screen. Garcia was alerted by crew and tech that the pirate ship was arming weaponry. "We would rather die by destroying our ship than surrender to the likes of you!"

The second in command of the Okan pulled out a phaser and stunned Loneler at point blank range. He stepped up to the screen as Loneler fell to the floor. "Um, Captain Garcia," he said, quickly. "On behalf of the crew, there is no need to destroy us. We will comply with your request. We're dropping out of warp and lowering the shields. All personnel will be more than happy to assist you and your crew in facilitating your inspection."

Sendak raised an eyebrow of skepticism.

"Thank you, um..." Garcia said, fishing for a name. The facial recognition system was still shifting through several databanks, with graphics mapping and framing various features of the Orion's face as it made comparisons. It appeared that the man was not in the system.

"Chase. You can call me Chase. I'm hoping we can all profit from this encounter," he said, bowing.

"We might indeed," Garcia said, giving the 'cut the signal' sign as he turned away from the screen. Facial recognition added 'Chase' to the search list, but was still failing to find a confirmation match.

“That went rather well, don’t you think?” Garcia asked Tuer as they headed for the lift.

“It’s a trap,” Tuer said.

“You think everything’s a trap,” Garcia pointed out.

“Everything is,” Tuer said.

“Well, I happen to agree with you,” Garcia said. “That was much too easy. And since, the only way to really examine a trap is to spring it, let’s go play. Losira, the Bridge is yours,” Garcia said, heading towards the lift. “Don’t leave without us.”

“Admiral,” Losira interrupted. “You’re not thinking of leaving the ship, are you?”

“Why, yes I am, Captain,” Garcia said.

“I can’t allow that,” Losira said, point blankly.

“Not only do I outrank you, I put you in charge,” Garcia said.

“You put me in charge, and it is my job to see to your safety,” Losira insisted.

“And you are not leaving this ship, at least not until the area is secure and I am satisfied that this is not a trap to capture or kill you.”

“Losira is right, Admiral,” Tuer said.

Garcia frowned. “Tuer, secure the Okan.”

“Aye, Admiral,” Tuer said, turning to leave, but paused. “Um, Sir, if I may ask, using an Earth colloquialism: what is up with all the frivolous dialogue?”

“You don’t approve?”

“No,” Tuer said, point blank.

“I find it rather cute, disarming...” Garcia said.

“It’s distracting,” Tuer said.

“Exactly,” Garcia agreed. “It calms the natives. Yeah, to you and them, it may sound like meaningless dribble, and makes me seem crazy, but I think it gives me the unexpected edge, since you never know what I’m going to say or do.”

“It’s much faster to say surrender or die,” Tuer said.

“Fine, I will on brevity,” Garcia said. “Bring the hostages over first thing. Losira, my ready room, now.”

Garcia entered the open lift and turned to face out. Losira stepped in, standing right in front of him. She was practically beaming, as if she had won a chess match. He pressed a button and took them up to his Ready Room. He could almost feel her stare, but he didn’t meet her eyes until the lift came to a halt and they were sealed off from below.

“What the hell,” Garcia said. “I can’t leave my own ship?!”

“Admiral, you might as well get use to the fact that you are not going to be putting yourself in harm’s way as long as I am the Captain of this vessel,” Losira said.

“And another thing, if you are going to demand that the Kelvan tech be an option, then I respectfully ask that we evacuate the entire crew to the New Constitution or Tempest.”

Garcia was so surprised by the second request that he forgot his grievance on the first. “Excuse me?”

“I don’t need a crew. It could just be you and me and your mental entourage. When you plug into the Kelvan tech, your self control goes out the window. I cannot allow you to put my crew at risk just so you can have your quick resolution and your fix,” Losira said. “So what is it going to be? Do you want me to entertain a crew, or transfer the crew? Like I said, I certainly don’t need one, but I like having them aboard. It’s less lonely.”

Garcia blinked, pouted for the briefest moment, and then surrendered. "You're dismissed."

Losira stepped closer to him. "I love you," she said.

"I believe you," Garcia said.

"That's it?" Losira asked.

"No," Garcia said, and engaged her in a kiss.

"That was nice," Losira said, when they parted for breath.

Garcia's eyes were still closed.

"And nice touch with the Dread Pirate Roberts allusion," Losira said.

"Yeah, no one got it," Garcia said.

"I got it," Losira said. "And, I think you look great in black."

"Well, thank you," Garcia said.

"I predict we have seven minutes," Losira said. "Quickie?"

"As you wish," Garcia said, surrendering to her.



The crew of the Okan had been rounded up and handcuffed by the time Garcia arrived on the bridge of the pirate ship. The air smelled bad, and he suspected filter issues with the life support. There were other hints of disrepair as he took inventory, definitely not to code by Fleet standards, but held a certain unsuspecting promise. The Captain was bound and lying on the floor, unconscious, but alive. Sendak was going through data files. Security officers were opening panels, looking for narcotics or illegal weapon stashes. Chase stood in front of Garcia, visibly afraid, but cooperating. Tuer stood to Garcia's right, supplying him with information that was meant to be heard in front of the Pirates. The game was on.

"Sir, we have discovered fifteen Orion females locked in detention on the lower deck. No accompanying paper work to suggest that they're indentured servants, nor was there any paper work suggesting they are criminals that warranted their being restrained. We're still looking for the Captain's safe or a dedicated computer system that might supply us with missing information," Tuer said. "We suspect an independent system due to the fact that there is no flight plan or crew personnel list to be found on the ship's main computer. It would appear, by definition, that these are indeed pirates."

"Pirates?" Garcia asked, looking to Chase. "Could it be that it's just a computer glitch?"

"May I address you as a fellow pirate?" Chase asked. "The third option you were speaking of? Can we parlay?"

"Ah, my little Jack Sparrow want-to-be," Garcia said. "I appreciate your honesty, but wonder if it was wise to admit that you're a pirate in front of my Klingon Officer. You're not an orphan, are you?"

"Orphan, sir?" Chase asked.

"Ah, never mind," Garcia said, sighing. "So, you're a pirate, and those were slave girls."

"Do you understand that there was a time in our history when the men were the slaves to women?" Chase asked.

"Philosophical discussion amongst pirates? Interesting. So, males skipped equal rights and went right into dominating the females?" Garcia mused. "Yeah, well, I don't think 'they did it first' constitutes a legit legal defense."

“It’s not a defense, sir,” Chase said. “But if I told you we were presently the slaves, perhaps you would be more lenient with us?”

“You’re the slaves,” Garcia said. “Okay. I’ll bite. The females in the cargo hold are really in charge here, and you’re doing their bidding? Or perhaps you meant you are a slave to circumstance? Why don’t we just skip to the part where you tell me where you were taking the females?”

“We were to rendezvous with a ship in the Tanglar system,” Chase said. “I don’t know the buyer personally, or the ship. They were supposed to contact us when we got there. We’re just following orders.”

Loneler started to come around. A leg cramp accelerated his waking. He hollered in pain and spun around on the floor trying to stretch it out. He found some relief when he pushed it against the bulkhead.

“I don’t remember approving this sale of goods,” Garcia said. “Tuer, did you find my trade mark on these slaves?”

“I did not,” Tuer said.

“I also don’t remember being compensated,” Garcia said. “Did you receive a letter showing our commission?”

“No, Sir, I don’t remember seeing one of those, either,” Tuer said. “Another thing you should be aware of, Sir. Two of the girls are minors. A seven and nine year old.”

Garcia looked to Chase for an explanation. “Sir, it is common practice to put them in training when they’re young. They’re more compliant.”

“Seven and nine?” Garcia asked, not hiding his anger.

“Usually younger. Nine is generally considered too old to start the training,” Chase said.

“Did you get my memo on slave transactions?” Garcia asked, no longer amused. “No minors, and all ‘slaves’ are to be volunteers to the business, no one coerced, or otherwise forced into servitude, and everyone gets compensation and the right to refuse service.”

Chase laughed. “Yeah, we saw that,” Chase said, and then quickly recovered. “But, you know, in the field, the pirates aren’t really taking that seriously. No disrespect intended.”

“None taken,” Garcia said, a little more angry. “Tuer, if peoples aren’t taking us seriously, I guess we should make an example of these folks. Nothing personal.”

Chase paled. “Wait, we’ve complied, and assisted you and...”

“I’m going to kill all of you!” Loneler yelled, furiously.

“Transporting minors,” Garcia said. “Someone has got to go to jail or die.”

“You’re a hypocrite! Four hundred years ago on your own planet, females were sold or married off as early as 8 years old,” Loneler said, spitting in disgust towards Garcia. “And the sale of sex slaves of all ages was still going on well into your twenty second century...”

Garcia pulled out a phaser and stunned Loneler again. Chase was squinting as if expecting the worse. Garcia holstered his phaser.

“Where was I?” Garcia asked.

“Prison or death,” Tuer reminded him.

“Surely we can work something out,” Chase said. “Your reputation as a warrior says you can’t be beat in a fair fight, but also, you are known for your compassion.

There's no need for you to kill us. I know the combination to the Captain's secret vault, and it's practically full of gold pressed latinum."

"That's a good start," Garcia said, musing. "I do have a lot of crew to pay. But, they're also kind of looking for a fight, and you guys didn't really offer us much of a fight. You know how warriors get when they don't have a fight?"

"I do," Chase said, sizing Tuer up and nodding. "But, we really wouldn't satisfy you in a fight. That's just me being honest."

"Perhaps he could suggest someone else," Tuer said. "Someone that likes to fight?"

"Who do you have in mind?" Garcia asked.

"Well, they're obviously the middlemen, delivering these slaves for someone else. Maybe he could give us the top person," Tuer said.

Garcia looked to Chase. He was sweating. "She'd kill us," Chase said.

"I could kill you," Garcia said.

"Look, I don't know where she gets her products. It's like a friend of a friend deal, and we don't ask questions," Chase said.

"Does this friend of a friend have a name?" Garcia asked.

"Byaus," Chase said, swallowing. "He practically lives at Madam Dahlias place, Wrigley's' Pleasure Planet. That's where we got this shipment."

"Do you have a family, Mr. Chase?" Garcia asked.

"No, Sir," Chase said. "In this business it's not wise to have a family. Black mail and all being the way it is."

"Any of your crew?" Garcia asked.

Only one of the crew nodded.

Garcia stepped away from Chase, motioning for Tuer to follow.

"What do you think?" Garcia said, speaking low but knowing full well they could be over heard.

"Someone has to die," Tuer said.

Chase whined.

"We could turn them over to the nearest Starbase," Garcia said.

"And they'll be out in a year and back to piracy," Tuer said. "You can't rehabilitate someone when they are mentally stable and capable of rational decisions. They went into this venture knowing the risks. You wanted to Captain a Klingon crew, well, here it is: your duty to the Empire demands that you set an example. Let these people live and they will think the Empire has grown weak and every drunk with a shuttle will be taking pot shots at the nearest Klingon vessel. There is no honor in killing drunks or retards."

Garcia scratched his chin. "Very well, incarcerate Loneler in the Brig. He'll be going to the nearest Klingon Prison planet. As for this band of pirates, they're flying days are over. Tag them with identifier chips, and employ them at Sherman's planet, clean up or construction, hard labor, a minimum of one Klingon year. Fair enough?"

"So, you're not going to kill us?" Chase asked.

Garcia ignored him, and motioned Tuer to follow him out into the corridor. When the door closed, he continued. "We're not turning Loneler over just yet. I have an idea for getting him to tell us where the slave base is."

“I know his type. You won’t get any reliable information out of him through traditional means of torture,” Tuer said.

“Torture? I’m not going to torture him. Exactly,” Garcia said, contemplatively. “Still, I doubt Star Fleet will approve of the method. Let me think on it a moment. Meanwhile, assign a flight crew to take over the Okan. I want to make that rendezvous with the buyer. Take some detailed bio-measurements of the slaves and upload their statistics into the holographic display of the Britney Bots. Let’s see how far my bots will go before they’re discovered as fakes. I want to be able to trace them and recover data if possible. As soon as the bots are sold, have your flight crew take this ship to Planet Bliss for modifications and report back to the Path Finder via the gateway.”

“You want another ship?” Tuer asked.

“I need another ship,” Garcia said. “Let me know as soon as your flight crew is ready to depart. I’ll be in the War Room.”

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Garcia was studying the game table when a second Losira agent arrived at the war Room, escorting Captain Weisberg. The Losira agent directly to Garcia’s right acknowledged ‘herself’ as Garcia continued to scrutinize table information. A two dimensional galactic display of the Milky Way and Andromeda Galaxy was visible, each with a specific solar system prominently boxed, and a wormhole linking the two systems. Blown up views of the solar systems were pulled to the side of the table. The star system in the Milky Way galaxy was known, but the other end of the wormhole was conveniently labeled “point B.” Because the system was not mapped out, it was represented by a generic symbol for solar systems. A notch on the line that represented the wormhole indicated the approximate position of the Kelvan ships that had escaped through the wormhole just over a year ago. It had taken the Kelvan crew that Kirk had met more than three hundred years to cross the void between Galaxies using their technology, but with the artificially created stable wormhole, the Kelvan had cut that time down to twenty five years. That meant Garcia had time to prepare for the invasion, but no Starfleet technology was going to stop it. Present day mines wouldn’t stop a Kelvan ship. The entire fleet of Starfleet ships wasn’t going to stop one either. A Starburst weapon would do the trick, he wagered, if he set one off just prior to a Kelvan ship emerging from the wormhole.

Of course, if they found an Iconian Gateway and could open a passage to the other side of the wormhole, they could be there waiting for the Kelvan to arrive, preventing them from regrouping with whoever was left on the Kelvan home world. He wondered if the Kelvan species’ technology had improved in the four hundred years that Kelinda and her crew had been away.

“Admiral Garcia, I would like to speak with you,” Captain Weisberg said.

“I heard,” Garcia said, minimizing the windows displaying the two galaxies. “The computer’s messaging system is still functioning, you know.”

“I got tired of you ignoring them, so I came in person,” Weisberg said.

Garcia opened up a new window, zooming in on the Milky Way Galaxy until Wrigley’s Pleasure planet was dominant. He activated the intercom on the table. “McKnight, you should have new coordinates coming up on your screen. I’d like to go there as soon as the Okan is on its way.”

“Wrigley’s Pleasure planet,” McKnight said, with questioning overtones. She reigned her disbelief in fairly fast. “Aye, Admiral.”

“What, are you so bored with your holodeck women, you have to go to a whole new height in your depravity?” Weisberg asked.

“I intend to visit Madam Dahlia’s place,” Garcia said, not looking up or bothering to explain himself. He began reviewing nearby systems that might hint at a star system that would make a good way station for slavers. The Tanglar system was an ideal place to pass through if you wanted to decrease the likelihood of being followed by a cloaked ship, but seemed a bit remote from the Orion system to be practical for standard snatch and grab missions. When coupled with Wrigley’s pleasure planet, a dozen more likely possibilities presented themselves.

“Dahlia’s place is off limits to Starfleet Officers,” Captain Weisberg said.

“So?” Garcia said.

“You’re top brass now, aware of state secrets,” Weisberg said. “You can’t just go into that place. Forget that Madam Dahlia’s is renowned for being the greatest telepath in the known Galaxy for just a moment; just knowing your predilection for women alone makes you easily compromised.”

Garcia rolled his eyes. “Really? This is like just general, tabloid like information,” Garcia asked.

Losira nodded. “Honestly, Admiral? It’s not a secret,” Losira said, mater of fact.

“Oh, bloody hell,” Garcia grumbled. “I can resist when I want.”

“What you resist persists. Didn’t you learn that in counseling school?” Losira asked.

“So, are you saying stop resisting you?” Garcia asked.

“Oh, please, you can’t resist me. That’s why it’s so fun,” Losira said.

“Are you two really doing this in front of me, or is this one of your games as well?” Weisberg said.

“I’m going to Madam Dahlia’s,” Garcia insisted.

“Weisbeg does have a point,” Losira said.

“Thank you,” Weisberg said.

“You can’t just walk into that club,” Losira continued. Garcia met her eyes. “It’s members only. New members can only be introduced through members in good standing.”

“So, we need to find a member to introduce me,” Garcia told her.

“None of the people currently employed in your command are likely to be members,” Captain Weisberg said, approaching the table. “That place is for the super elite, members preoccupied with the collection of material wealth and status, and it is notorious for harboring members of the Orion Crime syndicate.”

“Hence, why I’m going,” Garcia said. “I mean, if I were to truly personify this role of pirate that Star Fleet wants me to play, I would have to associate with pirates, and dabble in vice.”

“Oh, you can do better than merely dabble,” Losira said.

“Great point, Losira. In for a penny, in for a pound I always say. Get me Brock on the line,” Garcia said. He turned to face Weisberg, putting his back to the table. He leaned against it. “Was there something specific you wanted to talk to me about?”

“Did you go over the list I provided you?” Captain Weisberg asked.

“The planets most likely holding secret caches of Preserver and Iconian tech?” Garcia asked. “I did.”

“The sooner you turn the Path Finder over to me, the sooner I can get that mission underway,” Captain Weisberg said.

“And, again, not giving you my ship,” Garcia said.

“Then give me the Tempest,” Weisberg said.

Garcia laughed. “You would be killed before you issued your first order,” Garcia said. “You don’t have a clue what it takes to command Klingons.”

“If you can do it, I can,” Captain Weisberg said.

“Are you prepared to kill?” Garcia asked, taking a knife from a sheath on his belt and handing it to him hilt first. He wasn’t going to be caught without one again.

Weisberg didn’t take the hilt, even though Garcia tagged his chest with it.

“Are you ready to kill? Cause that’s what it’s going to take,” Garcia said.

“Starting with me.”

Weisberg took the knife and tossed it to the game table. “You’re being stupid,” Weisberg said.

“A privilege of command,” Garcia assured him.

“Brock on line one,” Losira interrupted.

“Brock, this is Garcia,” Garcia said, staring down the angry Weisberg.

“You do know I am quite busy,” Brock said.

“I need a favor,” Garcia said.

“Favors for you tend to be expensive,” Brock complained.

“I would like to visit Madam Dahlia’s place on Wrigley’s planet. Know anyone that might introduce me?”

“Absolutely,” Brock said, a noticeable change in interest level.

“How soon can you get him here?” Garcia asked.

“Twenty minutes?” Brock asked.

“Nice,” Garcia said, doing the math. “That’s about right. What’s this favor going to cost me?”

“Nothing. I’m more than happy to do you this favor,” Brock said.

“That much, eh? Fine,” Garcia said, sighing. “Garcia out.” He rubbed his forehead.

“You’re really going down into that den of iniquity?” Weisberg asked.

Garcia massaged his forehead more vigorously. “I have found, as a Captain, when you need to get things done, you have to get your hands dirty,” Garcia said. “As far as your mission goes, it’s on my to-do list. Just not the top priority list.”

“You could at least allow my team to familiarize themselves with the Path Finder,” Weisberg said.

“Not today,” Garcia said. He frowned. “Losira, let me know when Brock’s guest arrives. I’m going to the NC. Walk with me, Weisberg.”

Weisberg accompanied Garcia back to the lesser gate, allowing passage to the New Constitution. Though Weisberg was unable to see it, he had been given a basic introduction to the gates. Garcia stared at the gate, watching the portal come to life, and then stared silently at the New Constitution’s holodeck as if looking through a sheen of water. He touched his hidden tech button on his sleeve that transmitted the signal that he

was intending to pass through. A portion of his sleeve illuminated assuring him it was safe to proceed.

“Is it not working?” Weisberg asked, curious as to the hesitation. His previous passages had been unceremoniously swift.

“Ummm? Oh, yeah,” Garcia said, and from Weisberg’s perspective, walked through the wall. Regardless of the assurance from his sleeve, a part of his brain was reluctant to trust that the shield was actually down and that he was possibly walking to his death. He considered letting Weisberg lead the way, but then pushed through the translucent energy field to the other side.

Weisberg followed, arriving on the New Constitution just slightly behind him.

“Is it possible to modify your lesser gateways to act like full Iconanian Gateways?” Weisberg asked.

“No,” Garcia said, trying to keep the small talk to a minimum. “Here’s the deal. I’m stretched pretty thin and I need to put another ship into service. If I get you a ship, can I trust you to work with me?”

“You know what my mission is,” Weisberg said.

“Yeah. And I’m going to make it happen. I suspect there may be an operational I-Gate on planet Thasus,” Garcia said. “At least, it was operational about a hundred years ago, when I was there.”

“The planet you rescued Yeoman Rand from,” Weisberg said.

“Yeah,” Garcia said.

“What about Charlie Evans?” Weisberg asked.

“I have reason to believe he is no longer on that planet,” Garcia said.

“But you’re not certain,” Weisberg said.

“I am not,” Garcia said. “But if he is there, he will most likely try to steal your ship in order to escape. If he is trapped on that planet, I prefer he remain trapped on that planet. But if he steals the ship, I want to booby trap the ship to leave him trapped between stars.”

“And what about the Thasians themselves? Will they care if we’re on their planet?” Weisberg asked.

“I don’t know. I don’t think so. Ever since they’ve Ascended, I think they’ve avoided dealing with the material plane,” Garcia said.

“They took enough interest to intervene in Charlie’s life,” Weisberg pointed out. “Gave him incredible powers.”

“I don’t pretend to understand. Maybe he wasn’t evolved enough emotionally to make a complete transfer of conscience. Maybe being trapped in a human male body, with all the wants and desires that comes with that makes it impossible, or maybe it’s just too hard to let go of our flesh and blood security blanket. He is clearly a little on the mentally disturbed side of the mental health continuum,” Garcia said. “But you have a point. The Thasians took interest in him, and possibly are biased towards him, and so if he is threatened, they might protect him. But we also know they demonstrated compassion on Kirk’s crew.”

“We can’t go up against them or Charlie for that matter,” Weisberg said.

“I agree. It’s why I didn’t initially want to go there, but maybe it’s a risk worth exploring. Talk it over with your team,” Garcia said. Garcia surprised Weisberg by taking his hand. “I need you.”

Weisberg was taken aback by the gesture. "I'll talk to them. Would you give Doctor Soran access to the Path Finder's weapon system?"

"No!" Garcia said, and then realized he didn't know who Soran was. "Who is Soran?"

"The civilian on my team. Doctor Tolian Soran. He's an expert in weapon systems and he believes he could refine your Starburst weapon," Weisberg explained. "It's why we brought him, actually."

Garcia fumed. He was angry at himself for having not gone over the profiles of Weisberg's team, but knowing someone wants to modify a weapon already capable of taking out a solar system bothered him. "What do you know about the Starburst?"

"Not much. I hear it's a formidable weapon, capable of taking out a Borg ship," Weisberg said.

"I will get back to you on that one," Garcia said. "If you'll excuse me."

Garcia departed briskly, not waiting for Weisberg's permission, and went directly to the quarters where they were keeping Panays. He rang for admittance out of courtesy. The door opened and he walked in. He saw Panays sitting on a couch, staring out into space. The door closed behind him.

"Do you mind seeing me like this, or would you like to see Leeta?" Panays asked.

"When you assume a personality, you take on some of that, don't you," Garcia said.

Panays looked at him. "I am an improvement of her. I become the 'her' that you imagine. If you want to know if she really loves you and that you have a chance with her, you should check with her."

Garcia didn't like her insight, but he couldn't argue with the cold hard facts of his psychological reality while confronting them head on. In some ways, it was nice that she could reveal the disparity between the fantasy and reality, but it was also something that made him want to run. The fact that he didn't run revealed both strengths and weaknesses, but what stood out to him were the weaknesses.

"Do you have a recall device?" Garcia asked.

"A recall device? Oh, you mean a key to open an I-Gate remotely," Panays said.

"No, Mars is not very generous with his keys. I simply return to the drop off point, knock the secret knock, and then I can step over."

"So, Mars is present to let you back in when you knock?" Garcia asked, his hope for taking a surprise visit to Mars' base of operation diminished.

"Not always. It's automated. The computer monitors that location for the signal and then it opens the I-gate for return," Panays said.

"Can you get me and a team passage?" Garcia asked.

"Could I? Yes. Will I? No," Panays said. "I will not put my child in danger."

"You wouldn't have to cross over yourself," Garcia said.

"No. I've already signed my death sentence by sparing you," Panays said.

"Can you tell me the location of your return point and teach me the knock?" Garcia asked.

"You really want to meet Mars?" Panays said.

"If he is there and will talk, yes. If he isn't, I might just look around, borrow some tech," Garcia said.

“Ferenginar,” Panays said. “The last time I used it, it was stationed at the Minut district. A gated community where some of the wealthier Ferengi’s live. Here, let me touch you...”

Garcia hesitantly let her touch him, his hand on her wrist as if he had the strength to stop her if she chose to kill him. Her touch was gentle, but not as gentle as a Vulcan mind meld. The location of the I-Gate’s “monitored perspective,” or the drop off point, became visible in his mind, as if he had visited there all his life.

“Nice,” Garcia said.

Panays pulled away and moved to the far side of the room.

“What’s wrong?” Garcia asked, having a reaction to her sudden withdraw. Her proximity and physical touch supplemented her mental intrusion, and the absence of it resonated with his loss of the psychic bonds of Vulcan. He stepped towards her.

Panays looked at the floor. “It’s nothing. You should go now.”

“No, really, what’s wrong?” Garcia insisted, touching her face, gently.

“Tam, we were intimate for two weeks. I can’t touch your mind and not want to give in to that impulse,” Panays said. “So unless you really want to go there with me, you best leave.”

“You actually want that with me?” Garcia asked.

“You understand the Stockholm Syndrome, right?” Panays said. “It’s similar to that. You can’t learn to manipulate someone without also losing part of yourself. We are, for lack of a better term, psychologically tangled, and I want you, and it’s compounded because I am here alone and I am a social creature, and compounded by the fact you have ultimate power over me and...”

“All of those reasons are the very reasons why we shouldn’t be intimate,” Garcia said. “You shouldn’t be intimate with someone because they have authority over you.”

“I know,” Panays said. “Your ethical boundaries are much stronger than you imagine. Besides, you can’t let me be with you, nor allow yourself to give in to your very real impulse to be with me as Leeta again without feeling manipulated.” She started to sob, her back to the corner. She slid down to the floor, her hands covering her face. “I can’t win.”

Garcia went and knelt down in front of her, touching her arm with compassion. He was suddenly looking at Leeta. He tilted her face up towards him, drying her eyes. Given her present emotional state, Panays was projecting a “Leeta” that was not only more alluring than the actual Leeta, but it was even more alluring than any previous projections, as if she were the cover girl on a magazine that had been airbrushed to enhance her physical attributes and downplay any flaws. Even the air around her was brighter, as if stage lights were being solely devoted to her while the rest of the stage was shadowed out.

“We’ll figure this out,” Garcia said, going to his knees and pulling her towards him.

Panays/Leeta embraced him and they began to kiss. The door to her room opened and security entered, as well as Captain Undine and Captain Losira. They did not pause in their passion.

“Captain, I need you to come with me,” Undine said.

When they didn’t respond, security raised their weapons. Panays stopped, pushing Garcia away. Garcia wanted more, his eyes still on Panays/Leeta.

“Now,” Undine insisted.

“We’re kind of busy here,” Garcia snapped at them.

“Outside now!” Undine said.

“It’s okay, Tam. Go,” Leeta said, her appearance changing so as not be so vibrant.

“We’ll talk more later,” Garcia assured Panays/Leeta.

Garcia stormed past the security detail and departed the room ahead of Undine.

Security followed, securing the door behind them. Losira stayed till the door was closed.

“That was not wise,” Losira said.

“I really am lonely,” Panays insisted.

“I understand that. And you may hold a conversation with me for as long as you want,” Losira said.

“I can’t read you,” Panays said.

“No, you can’t manipulate me,” Losira corrected. “That means we are on equal footing. Now, would you be interested in a game of scrabble?”

Halfway down the hall and confident they were outside of Panay’s psychic sphere of influence, Undine hit the Garcia on the back of the head. “Have you lost your mind?”

“I was just trying to collect some information,” Garcia insisted.

“Yeah, we saw, got it on video,” Undine said. “What were you thinking?”

Garcia frowned. “It made sense at the time.”

“This is my ship, Tam. No more unsupervised visits with the salt vampire. You go through me, clear?” Undine asked.

“Yes, Captain,” Garcia said, too overwhelmed by his feelings to rebel against being scolded. He was trying to determine if he was experiencing shame, embarrassment, or both. The fact that his encounter had nearly been an unintentional porno for the security team monitoring Panays hadn’t yet sunk in. “If you’ll excuse me. I need a cold shower. I’ll be in my quarters if I’m needed.”

“Do you want me to send the Counselor?” Undine asked.

Garcia shook his head. “No, I can shower by myself, thank you.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Undine said.

“I know that’s not what you meant,” Garcia said, trying to not sound angry. “I don’t want to see the counselor now.”

“Perhaps I could be of assistance,” Undine asked.

“No, I’m good, thanks,” Garcia said, and hurried off towards his quarters. He was halfway down the corridor when he suddenly wondered if Undine had just made a pass. He talked himself out of it because she hadn’t ever done so before and blamed his suspicion on his present feelings and the overdose of erotic suggestion from the salt vampire. Still, as he explored that thought further, he wondered if he had wanted her to hit on him might be a better explanation for his interpretation of her words, which could have meant anything. It would have been better to have just asked for clarification. But then he wondered what he would do if she was actually implying what he was inferring... He quickened his pace to his quarters.

Garcia was undressing before the doors to his quarters cycled shut. He was under a stream of cold water before his clothes had recycled from the floor. He leaned against the wall, the water hitting the top of his head and running down his back. He felt a hand touch his shoulder and he jumped. He turned to see Rogue Troi, naked and in the shower with him.

“Are you sure you don’t want assistance?” Troi asked.

“Please, get out,” Garcia insisted. Closing his eyes didn’t help. She was in his head.

“Just admit you’re insatiable and need a fix,” Troi said.

“Get out,” he insisted, softer.

“What feels worse, the fact that Panays played you by speaking truth, or the fact that you were recently intimate with Athena and you still want more?” Troi asked.

Garcia shoved her. Troi fell, bumping her head on the tub. She instantly started crying. Garcia instantly regretted his action, kneeling down to her, apologizing profusely, hugging her to him. She started kissing him and he gave into her, the cold water no longer a factor.

“See,” she said, whispering in his ear. “I can play you, too.”

Garcia opened his eyes. Troi was gone and his arms were empty. Cold water rained down on him. He leaned his head against the wall and shut his eyes.

“Computer, is Lt Rossi available to speak with?” Garcia asked.

“Counselor Rossi is presently occupied,” the computer responded.

“Fine,” Garcia said. “Alert me when the Path Finder has arrived at Wrigley’s.”

The “command accepted” tone chimed and Garcia leaned back in the tub, electronically repositioning the shower head so the shower sprayed him directly in the face.

♪♪▶

“I haven’t seen you in eight months and I haven’t heard from you in over six weeks! I didn’t sign up for this.”

“Peter,” Rossi said. “I was very clear before we married that I worked Internal Affairs and that I would have to go undercover for unspecified lengths of time.”

“And I’ve had a change of heart. I don’t like not knowing where you are or if you’re safe,” Peter complained. “And you still haven’t told me anything about your mission.”

“I shared with you what I was able to share,” Rossi said.

“About that. I’ve been reading up on this Captain Garcia. Apparently he’s Kelvan?!” Peter said.

“He’s a Human Vulcan hybrid, a product of Kelvan engineering, imprinted with Kelvan intelligence,” Rossi said.

“Is he your assignment?” Peter asked.

“I can’t talk about the mission,” Rossi repeated, persistence and patience blended.

“Are you sleeping with him?” Peter demanded.

“No! Why would you ask such a thing?” Rossi asked

“Because I hear spies have to do that sort of thing,” Peter said. “That’s basically what you are, right? A spy? Now I understand why you love your job.”

“I did not sleep with Garcia,” Rossi said through clenched teeth.

“But you would sleep with other people, just to keep your cover?” Peter asked.

“I’m not having sex with anyone,” Rossi said, not using the euphemism “sleeping around” in order to increase clarity.

“Would you tell me if you did? And what about these Garcia babies in the news? Some of his crewmates were accidentally impregnated? Accidentally? He accidentally

slept with most of his crew?" Peter said more than asked. "I don't guess you can explain that to me."

"It's complicated, but yes, we need to talk about that," Rossi said.

"Oh, so now you want to talk about something..."

"I'm pregnant," Rossi said.

Peter's face was unreadable. His face retreated from the monitor as he reclined back in his chair. "You said you couldn't get pregnant."

"I said I couldn't get pregnant without medical intervention," Rossi said.

"So you had medical intervention, after you clearly told me that you didn't want to have children," Peter said.

"I didn't want to have children while we are in Fleet," Rossi said, with a tone that suggested her patience was running thin. "You're on a ship. I'm on ship. I don't want a broken family."

"Well, what the hell is this?!" Peter demanded.

"This is not my choice, Peter. You knew this was going to be complicated when we married," Rossi said.

"Yeah, but I didn't think you would be carrying someone else's child kind of complicated," Peter said.

"What would you have me do?" Rossi said.

"Get an abortion," Peter said.

"Well, that isn't an option for me," Rossi said.

Peter sighed. "This isn't working out," he said.

"And what does that mean?" Rossi asked.

"Oh, don't try your counseling crap on me," Peter said.

"Crap? I'm asking you to speak your mind without cryptic, meaningless phrases," Rossi said. "This isn't working out. So, you want to transfer to the New Constitution, because I could make that happen."

"No, I don't want a transfer," Peter said. "But you could transfer to my ship."

"No, I can't. I can't quit my assignment," Rossi said.

"You mean you won't quit," Peter said.

"I will quit when my task is complete," Rossi said.

"What? Too busy saving the Universe by having babies?" Peter jabbed.

"Are you going out of your way to be hurtful?" Rossi asked.

"Do you love him? This Garcia?"

"I loathe him," Rossi said.

"That much, eh? If you don't want to be with me just say so," Peter said.

"I wouldn't have married you if I didn't want to be with you," Rossi said.

Peter leaned forward, putting his arms on the table. "I want a divorce."

"You and I purposely chose not to have a short term contractual marriage because we were going to be married forever. You wanted that. You assured me that you would not bail on me, that there was nothing in this Universe that could stop our love for each other," Rossi said.

"I didn't know I would feel this way! I didn't know I wouldn't see you for months at a time. I didn't know you would be carrying someone else's child!" Peter snapped.

"But you jump right to divorce? You're not even going to take time to consider your options? You really don't even understand my situation. Maybe if you took the time

or put in some effort you might have more compassion, or at least a resemblance of the love you once professed you had for me,” Rossi said.

“I really can’t see you selling this baby to me,” Peter said. “It will be a constant reminder that you had an affair.”

“It was not an affair,” Rossi said.

“Fine. So, I presumed you filed criminal charges against Garcia?” Peter said.

“Would it matter?” Rossi said.

“Yes. Ok, probably not. I would still see the child as a reminder that someone did something to you that I couldn’t prevent,” Peter said,

“You can’t protect me from life. Life happens,” Rossi said,

“Apparently. Just not with me,” Peter said.

“You can still be a part of this. The child will need a father,” Rossi said.

“I’m sorry. I just can’t,” Peter said. He moved forward in his chair, leaning on the desk. “I can’t compete with Garcia. Apparently, on quite a few levels. Yes, counselor, I realize I’m jealous and being petty. I will file. Just sign the paperwork when you get it.”

“If that’s what you want,” Rossi said. There was no emotion in her response. It was as neutral as neutral could have been. A Vulcan couldn’t have been more neutral. This was the running commentary of her self-analysis.

“It is,” Peter said. He terminated the call.

Rossi stared at the blank screen for a long moment before she got up, her right hand resting on her stomach. “Not your fault,” she said out loud. “Don’t ever think it’s your fault.” When she did get up, she stood up slowly, as if she had been ill and hadn’t stood for a spell, or had been working in zero G for months without exercise. It took some willpower, but she managed to push herself to the bathroom, floss, and brush. She rinsed, spat in the sink, and stared at the mirror for an even longer moment. She crawled into bed, not bothering to turn the covers back. She lay on her side, a pillow between her legs, a pillow to her back, and holding another pillow tight to her stomach. She forced herself to take deep, deliberate breaths, pushing into the pillow she clutched. She felt herself about to doze off when the urgency to urinate drove her back to the restroom. She was bothered by the increasing frequency to pee, even though she knew it was a normal part of pregnancy. She returned to bed, made herself comfortable again, and lay there, unable to sleep. She noticed anger rising the more she failed to reach sleep, and then decided to meditate. Trance work, focusing on a mantra, would not be as deep as sleep, but it would allow her to function when she did have to finally get up. Better than being bothered or angry all night, she thought. Just a few minutes of anger could flood your body with toxins that would take hours to process out. This colored her babies environment, but being upset about an emotional response could cause things to emotionally spiral out of control fast and then you’re lost in negativity. ‘Cascade failure, eject the core,’ she jested, and returned to the process. She recognized the emotion. She traced it back to a belief. She changed the belief. The emotion lessened.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Game Table was displaying a live image of Wrigley's Pleasure planet, which from 20,000 kilometers, looked fairly much like any other planet. Sure, one could find landmarks to identify it, and most Star Fleet personnel had seen, at minimum, pictures of the continents and so they could easily identify it, but nothing unique truly stood out. Most of the land features revealed rain forests and tropical islands. There were places where the oceans were shallow, giving way from black seas to variations of aqua blues and greens. It was beautiful, but then, all planets are beautiful from a distance, Garcia thought. Losira circled an area on the game table and the area capture zoomed into reveal the architectural masterpiece of Dahlia's city. It was as if Las Vegas and Frank Lloyd Wright had had a collision.

"You okay?" Losira asked Garcia.

"I'm fine," Garcia said, not meeting her eyes. He took inventory of the city.

"This is Madam Dahlia's main club here," Losira said, touring him though the facility. "It's shielded against transport, so the only way in is to walk or ride in from outside this grid. There are trains into the club here and here, space port here and here. This whole region here, referred to as a city state, is by the far the most successful in terms of trade and financial exchange. The planet's ecological balance is contributed to the success of Dahlia's, as she only supports environment friendly development."

"There's a shuttle pad at grid C4," Garcia observed.

"It's private," Losira said. "Shielded and protected with cannons."

"Is this a pleasure club or a fortress?" Garcia asked.

"Where ever you have pleasure, you have security, because there's always someone who wants more than his fair share," Losira said.

Garcia frowned. Though she didn't say that could apply to him, that's what his mind registered. Losira touched him gently, displaying empathy.

"Tam? You should talk about it," Losira said.

Garcia met her eyes and made the realization that she knew. "No," he said.

Losira nodded and withdrew her hand. "I really don't like the idea of you going down there," Losira said. "It's risky."

"It's a pleasure palace, what trouble could I get into?" Garcia asked, reaching for his chiming comm. badge. "Go."

"Admiral, did you give Brock permission to use the gateway to arrive on the Path Finder?" Tuer responded to the Captain.

"Not exactly," Garcia said. "Let him through, keep him in the gate-room. I'm on my way."

Losira accompanied Garcia as he made his way to the hangar bay that doubled as the gate room on the PF. As they walked, Losira listed a myriad of items that could happen to an average person at a pleasure palace, and then she started to list things that Garcia might encounter. They both entered the hangar bay together.

"I can't live on what might happen," Garcia interrupted her. "I understand it's your job to protect me, but sometimes you just have to trust that I can take care of myself."

"I do that more often than you think," Losira said

Garcia wanted to respond to that, but Brock arrived. Losira smiled. Garcia nearly laughed. Brock was dressed better than Garcia had ever seen him, weighted down with gold chains, a fancy hat, polished boots, and felt gloves. It could have been the modern day rendition of a Zoot suit.

"I'm sorry, Brock," Garcia said. "I obviously miscommunicated with you. You're not invited to join me. I just need your friend to introduce me to Madam Dahlia so I can have access to her club."

"I'm hurt," Brock said in exaggerated tones.

"This is business," Garcia said. "Not pleasure."

"At Madam Dahlia's, all business is pleasure," Brock said. "And I'm your guy."

"You're my guy?" Garcia said.

"Yeah," Brock said. "Who did you think was your chaperon?"

"I imagine the guy that's getting me into Dahlia's club was someone other than you," Garcia admitted.

"Again, I'm hurt," Brock said.

"Who do you know that would invite you here?" Tuer asked.

"I know you think Ferengi aren't movers and shakers, but we have game, and we can get it on," Brock said. "Our population is three times that of Klingons."

"Because you are weak and don't fight," Tuer said.

"Or because we're better at it," Brock argued. "Control a population's affluence and you can control worlds."

Garcia interrupted them. "Brock, this is serious."

"I'm very serious. I already have tentative approval to bring you as my guest," Brock said.

"You called ahead?" Tuer said.

"Yeah. I had to register my companion," Brock said.

"Admiral, Byaus will probably have been warned of your potential arrival and may anticipate a conflict and set a trap, or perhaps has already fled the area," Tuer said.

"Obviously, neither of you have been to Madam Dahlia's club. No one can get hurt. She can read minds, and if she believes that anyone at her club is going to cause harm, security escorts them out," Brock said. "So if this Byaus knew you were looking for him and was afraid, his best bet is to stay in the club. Dahlia club is a sanctuary, a church, an embassy, and a sovereign, city-state all unto itself. So, if you're thinking about hurting someone beyond negotiated pleasure, you better just forget it."

"We're not going to hurt anyone. We're just going to talk," Garcia said.

"When you talk, someone always gets hurt," Brock said.

"Not always," Garcia corrected, concerned for his reputation.

"It sounds as if this Dahlia person protects her own," Tuer said. "She isn't likely to introduce you to Byaus."

"Of course she won't," Brock said. "No one meets Dahlia. Ever. But I know Byaus. I'll introduce you."

"You know Byaus?" Garcia asked.

"Yeah, sort of. He's a regular here at the club, and a friend of the friend who helped me get my membership," Brock said.

"I don't like this," Tuer said. "I will assemble a squad to escort you."

“No weapons allowed,” Brock said. “And for that matter, no Klingons allowed. They don’t really mesh well with the whole, don’t hurt anybody type of pleasure seekers.”

“Hurting someone and being hurt can bring immense pleasure,” Tuer said.

“Yeah, it’s why I’m not inviting you. That crowd is at a whole other level. It’s just best to avoid those kinds,” Brock said.

“We’re not taking a team in,” Garcia said.

“You should take Duana and Ilona,” Losira said.

“Oh, definitely. And maybe a couple of other females,” Brock said. “It would make us look good having naked females hanging on us. Let’s get Counselor Rossi to join us.”

“We’re definitely not inviting her,” Garcia said.

“But I bet she’d look great naked,” Brock went on.

“Aren’t there women in the club?” Losira asked.

“Oh, they’re lots in the club,” Brock said. “But their prices are steeper when you go in solo, as opposed to when you go in with girls already in tow. They have to work harder to get your money.”

“Klingons would never pay for that kind of attention,” Tuer said, disgusted.

“Judging by the bruises Garcia often has after spending time with Kitara, I would say, someone always pays for that sort of attention,” Brock said.

A second Losira agent entered the hangar bay and handed Garcia his two manifestation orbs. He summoned Duana and Ilona, and they promptly made themselves manifest, matching outfits that differed only in color. Duana’s wore black, and Ilona wore white. They both hugged Garcia.

“Thank you,” Duana said. “This is going to be so much fun.”

“Losira, beam us down to station four,” Garcia said. “We’ll take the sky tram into the club.”

Losira kissed him before sending the Away Team of four down to the planet. They arrived with little fanfare, as the other tourists at the station were busy attending to their own affairs. A transporter attendant motioned them out of the receiving bay so that another group could be received.

“Follow me,” Brock said, and led the way over to the clerk who sold access to the tram. He removed a small item from his chain and handed it to the clerk.

The clerk set the item on the desk and Brock’s information came up on his screen. Garcia’s information came up next to Brock’s. No information on Duana and Ilona came up, causing the clerk to pause. He gave them a casual look over and decided they met the minimum ‘look’ requirement for escorts, but he was perturbed that they had no bios.

“I’m sorry, sir, but the ladies require the same level of screening that your friend does,” the clerk began.

“They’re all three with me,” Brock said. “The girls are slaves and you don’t need to see their identification.”

Duana and Ilona gave Brock a sharp look.

“That may well be, Sir...” the clerk paused, and reached up to his ear to hold his earphone a little tighter. He typed his response and then looked to Garcia. “Madam Dahlia will approve your membership, and allow you and your companions to pass, provided you are willing to perform a service.”

“Wait a minute,” Brock said. “They’re my companions.”

“Madam Dahlia is aware that you registered Senior Garcia and your account will be appropriately credited for bringing in a potential, vital new member,” the clerk said. “However, Garcia’s initial visit is predicated on his performance of a task.”

“I bet she wants children,” Duana said.

“Kletsova is right. ‘Everywhere we go,’” Ilona said.

Garcia shot a grimace at his girls before turning a pleasant look to the clerk.

“What is it she wants me to do?”

“One of her performers has called out ill and she would like you to entertain her guests at the Regence Theatre, live, in thirty minutes,” the clerk said.

“Now, wait just a minute,” Brock said. “As Garcia’s agent, I must protest.”

“You will be appropriately compensated,” the clerk said.

“He would love to perform live,” Brock said.

“I’m not prepared to give a performance,” Garcia said.

“Are you kidding? A musician is always prepared to perform, and you sir, are the best at improvisational music,” Brock said, retrieving a PADD from a side pocket.

“Fine,” Garcia said.

The clerk escorted them to a private car and hustled them in. “Enjoy your stay at Madam Dahlia’s place,” he said, closing the door. Patting the side of the car got it moving, and it whisked the four of them away. Garcia reclined in the seat, sulking. Brock turned to the bar and poured himself a drink, praising the quality available to them. He offered one to Garcia, but he declined.

“Cheer up, Tam,” Duana said. “We had a talk with Miss Troi. It won’t happen again.”

“That was over the top brutal,” Ilona agreed.

“Yeah,” Garcia agreed. “But it doesn’t excuse my behavior.”

“Shoving her?” Ilona said. “She had it coming.”

“You shoved your mental companion?” Brock asked.

“No one deserves that treatment,” Garcia said.

“You really should stop fighting with yourself,” Brock said.

“So, I guess you won’t be shoving Kitara anymore?” Duana asked.

“That’s different,” Garcia said.

“Here’s the way I see it, Tam,” Duana said, taking a drink from Brock. “You’re not sleeping well, you got a lot on your plate, many of your playmates play fairly rough physically, and given the circumstances of being psychologically molested by the salt vampire, I think you can give yourself a break.”

“I wasn’t molested. I was a willing participant,” Garcia said.

Duana and Ilona both laughed.

“Yes it is true that when it comes to sex, you have extremely weak boundaries, and poor discretion,” Ilona said. “But Panays took advantage of you. And Troi monopolized on that.”

“I don’t want to be that guy!” Garcia said.

“What guy? The guy that gets taken advantage of by powerful women? Or the guy that shoves Rogue Troi?” Ilona asked.

“Tam,” Brock interrupted. “You do understand that science has proven that men’s IQ drops severely when in the presence of attractive women.”

Garcia turned to look out the window and the scenery passing by.

“Well, maybe a concert will cheer you up,” Duana said, refilling her glass. “We should perform something by Black Eye Peas.”

“Who said we?” Garcia asked.

“Well, you always call us your backup singers,” Ilona pointed out.

“They’re right,” Brock said, calling up data from his PADD while drinking his drink. “You need back up, and for now on, you should always perform with women on the stage with you. This will increase the number of males attending your performance. Dancing girls always increase revenues. Girls, I normally recommend nude, but for this audience, I recommend miniskirts and tight blouses.”

“Like this?” Duana asked, her outfit changing to something that could have been worn in the sixties on Earth. She lifted up and adjusted the skirt to mid-thigh.

“I really want a manifestation orb,” Brock said, momentarily distracted from his business.

“See how quickly IQ’s drop?” Duana asked.

“I think we should sing ‘You Know I Want You,’ by Bulldog,” Ilona said.

“Ooh! Nice song,” Duana agreed.

“I don’t know these songs,” Brock said, but he pointed to his PADD. “But I have access to the audience’s music interest inventories, which coupled with their purchasing pattern suggest they will most likely enjoy Earth musicians similar to Michael Bubbles.”

“Bubbles?” Duana and Ilona asked.

“It’s pronounced Buble,” Garcia said, saying ‘boo-blay.’

“It’s no wonder Earthlings can’t spell,” Brock complained. “No consistent grammatical rules. Tammias. Thomas. You really should come up with a universal script.”

Garcia ignored the complaint.

“Anyway, I recommend selections that have a strong beat, something up lifting, and fast. If you’re going to throw in a ballad, which I know you love to do, it needs to be late in the show, but don’t end on that, end with something upbeat.”

“Enough,” Garcia said. “You can’t break everything down to statistics...”

“What the hell kind of scientist are you?” Brock argued.

“How about a Bruno Mars’ song,” Duana offered, and started singing “Catch a grenade for ya.”

“Or an Eminem song,” Ilona said.

“Or a Bruno Mars’ Eminem song,” Duana offered.

“Ooh! Forget You, by Cee Lo Green,” Ilona offered.

“I don’t think that was the title,” Duana said.

“Yeah, but this is a family show,” Ilona said.

“No, it’s not,” Brock said. “You can pump and grind and use profanity all you want.”

“Oh, Eminem and Rhianna, I love the way you lie...” Duana and Ilona said together, hugging all excited.

“Nice hook, but a little more grinding,” Brock suggested.

“Would you give it a break,” Garcia said. “You’re not pimping us out.”

“Yes, I am,” Brock said.

The car arrived at the theatre and as it swung around to the back they got a good indication of the audience filing in. Brock noticed Garcia’s name above the door, and

imagined that the itinerary change must have been running across a local news feed, because there were people being turned away. He updated his PADD information to confirm that the hall was now sold out and began a new statistical analysis of the audience.

“Madam Dahlia works fast,” Ilona said.

“This is going to be great,” Brock said, counting the GPL’s.

The car pulled into a parking place, with the staff there to greet them. The staff, an assortment of aliens, and at least three different genders, immediately began to cater to Garcia, guiding him in and offering him a variety of clothing options. An attendant rushed him, wanting to touch up his face. Ilona and Duana immediately began inspecting the clothes.

“No, we go on like we are,” Garcia said.

Duana and Ilona looked heartbroken, but conceded. The attendants ushered them onto the stage. The staff pointed out the holographic display feeds and asked if he preferred hard instruments to holographics. Garcia accessed the stage computer via his neural implant, took a moment to familiarize himself with the interface, which was close enough to standard that he wasn’t worried about any issues, and then had everyone clear the stage but him and his two backup singers. He was forward center when the curtains went up, and the audience stood and cheered. He hadn’t performed live since before entering Starfleet, minus his stay on Iotia, but his apparent unease departed the moment the curtain went up and the lights came on.

“It sounds like ya’ll have heard me before?” Garcia said, all smiles and laughter. There was no hint of that he had ever been touched by depression or profound sadness.

There was laughter and an increase in applause, a few whistles, and one girl was audible when she yelled, “I love you!” More laughter.

“Awww,” Garcia said, motioning for everyone to take their seats. “Thank you, sit, sit. Be comfortable.”

The room grew quiet. Garcia waved his hands theatrically, and a mike appeared in front of him. Using holographic technology didn’t count as true magic, from a classical illusionist perspective, but the audience ate it up. There was already a rhythm in his head, as an idea for an opening number took shape, but he was unsure if he wanted to do the Cass Elliot & Sammy Davis J version or the Carol Burnett & Vicki Lawrence version. His backup singers were dressed like the latter, and since the sixties were obviously back in vogue, his selection made sense. The music began to play as he sang the first words, singing, “I Dig Rock and Roll Music,” by Peter Paul and Mary. His backup singer joined him at the mike as if they had done this their entire lives.

As the song rolled, Garcia was attentive to the audience, and though they were receptive to the music, probably because the beat and melody was good, and perhaps just because some of it was him, the energy wasn’t optimum. Consequently, his next selection was from his own work, which was a blend of old Earth from multiple periods, combining styles and rhythms that most people would not have dared. Garcia was most known for his blending of music styles, pairing up songs, or adding lyrics or poetry where none had been previously. But given a choice, he would almost always go Big Band in a setting like this. Using the stage’s holographic feature, he created a back drop of lights, blending a tapestry of changing images that resembled classic artist works, such as “Starry Night” by Van Gogh.

Garcia's "backup singers," Ilona and Duana were as good at dancing as they were at fighting. So between singing chorus, or occasionally taking their own verses, they danced and had fun just being under the lights, fully enjoying the freedom the manifestation orbs offered them. Their vibrant energy was contagious.

All in all, no one in the audience would have guessed that they had made up the entire performance on the fly. There had been a reporter in the audience reviewing the performance, and recordings were hitting the local network live. A moment later Losira was pinging his implant with a text message, teasing him for his low profile entrance. Not long afterwards, clips were going out across the Inter-Stellar Net. It took an additional forty minutes post performance to meet with people back stage, something he felt obligated to do, before he was able to return to his mission objective.

The same private car that brought them to the theatre escorted them all the way to the heart of Madam Dahlia's "Club." Brock raved about the performance the entire trip, but Garcia didn't want to talk about it. He rested his eyes and leaned against the glass, any hint of the energy he had on stage gone. Duana pulled him to her so that his head rested on her shoulder. Though he felt drained, his backup singers seemed to be even more alert than before the concert. Duana kissed him and patted his knee.

"The Club," had layers, and they were escorted through all of it to a section that catered to the upper echelons of society. The escort that met them quizzed them before bringing them all the way to the top, not only because she needed to ensure their needs were met, but also to affirm that they wouldn't be offended by activities they were likely to encounter. The escort explained that some humans simply weren't open to full nudity, or were easily offended by orgies, or other provocative activities. "The Club" catered to an extreme diversity, and though the sex act itself was often deemed "private" or "sacred" for many species, there was always a small percentage of any population that wanted to watch, or wanted to perform for an audience. Humanoids tended to have the most complex of rituals, though there were a few species that the act itself was fairly boring and quick. Almost all of the species involved had some level of mess, in terms of exchange of bodily fluids. And there was even a smaller percentage of any population that was only able to perform sexually when it involved a member of an alien species, which the majority of 'normal' folks found odd because, biologically speaking, that was often a dead end path, since most species were simply not compatible genetically. Then again, it usually wasn't about procreation. Garcia was the last person to be judgmental, as he was one of the latter. He was attracted to variety in general, but when it came to meeting new aliens, his curiosity went through the roof. Sure, there was a biological component with him, something his Kelvan species had programmed into his genes as they wanted to increase the numbers and viability of their species, but some of it was just scientific and medical curiosity, not just a simple hedonistic drive. In other words, he couldn't blame it all on his genes, or even his psychological drive, which was most likely rooted in abandonment issues that manifested in an increased libido to make up for the nurturing he lacked at early developmental phases. People were complex, and he knew this, but where he generally gave others a pass, he tended to punish himself.

On Earth, for most species, the onus of securing a mate falls upon the male of the species. They tend to be the larger, brightest, strongest, most colorful, where as the females tend to be smaller, and duller. It also generally falls upon the males to be the more creative, the best dancers, the best singer, the best at collecting shiny objects, lifting

stones, building nests, or just being able to physically cow the other males away from the female. Humans did things backwards. The women are more competitive, they wear the brightest colors and wear the most variety, often enhance with makeup and perfumes, and allure with sophisticated dances, as opposed to the men, who on average have the least variety, as if the tuxedo was a uniform. The one thing that successful human males shared with most other species, regardless of gender, was that the most successful gender tended to have greatest choice in selecting a mate, or mates. That's why Garcia wasn't surprised by the number of powerful females in attendance at the club surrounded by men vying for their attention. What did surprise Garcia was how readily Duana and Ilona were distracted by the dancers.

"You are going to have to take us out more often," Duana said. "I'm suddenly hungry."

"That's not hunger you're feeling," Ilona said.

"Isn't it?" Duana asked.

"I'm available," Brock said.

"Of course you are," Duana said, looking over him to the dancers beyond. "You know, pole dancing just never gets old."

"That's a female," Brock said. "You like females?"

"Don't you?" Duana asked.

Brock casually stroked his own ear lobe.

"Girls, we need to stay focused," Garcia said, purposely avoiding eye contact with the closest humanoid female dancing near him. Her arms beckoned him towards her as her hips gyrated, tilting her lower torso towards him.

"Can I go play while you're holding your meeting?" Brock asked, distracted by the same female Garcia was ignoring.

"Us, too?" Duana and Ilona begged.

"Would you both stop it," Garcia said. "You're embarrassing me."

"Just because we like guys doesn't make you gay," Ilona said.

"But if you were gay," Duana sang, from the musical Avenue Q.

Garcia was not amused by her musical reference.

"Oh, I want to go meet the tentacle guy," Duana said, stopping in her tracks.

Garcia took her by the arm and dragged her along. "I will deal with you later," he whispered.

"Promise?" Duana asked.

The "Club" was spacious. The center of the floor was a "theatre in the round" where the majority of the dancers performed. What made it unique was the fact that the entire floor of the main stage generated anti gravitons, so that the dancers were basically weightless, free to float up and down the entire column of air above the stage. The distance from stage-floor to the ceiling was about three stories, with both vertical and horizontal poles available for pole dancing. The poles themselves appeared to be free floating, but were locked in place architecturally, so that as the dancer spun about the poles the poles weren't relocated. The dancers knew their space so well that the routines were fairly elaborate, flying, facing any direction, even upside down, going from level to level and pole to pole, and sometimes using each other. It was basically three dimensional gymnastics at its best, with an erotic component. Around the stage, but lower, was a dance floor that the patrons could use if they felt inclined to dance, with no anti-gravity

plating. That was probably a good thing, since the average citizen was not trained in zero-g body mechanics and were likely to get hurt. There were swings; there were aquariums with mermaids; there were cages; there was no end to the types of enticements and distractions. The tables nearest the dance floor all had pedestals for dancers. There were private booths, private chambers, an upstairs area where couples or groups would go to participate in “rituals,” a bar, and hookah centers where patrons gathered around to inhale various substances. The hookahs themselves were illuminated from the inside.

“Maybe we could bring in some hookahs and add a zero-g dance floor to your club,” Brock remarked as he observed Garcia taking in one of the weightless dancers, spinning enticingly.

“Yeah, cause I need another vice,” Garcia said.

“I think that’s Byaus over there,” Brock said.

Garcia took a moment to observe Byaus. Though no one in the room was permitted a weapon, there was nothing said about bringing body guards. To the untrained eye, Byaus was alone except for the girls he was paying to entertain him. Closer inspection revealed there were four guys ready to move the moment Byaus indicated he was in trouble.

“You remember you can’t hurt him or take him against his will,” Brock said.

“I’m not going to hurt him. We’re just going to talk,” Garcia said.

“What movie is that line from?” Duana asked.

“Ilona, move towards table two there. Duana, table three. Brock, go get a drink, on me,” Garcia directed.

“Thank you!” Brock said.

As his companions moved off towards their goals, Garcia headed straight to Byaus. The man was laughing at something the girl in his lap was saying. One of the guards moved as if to intercept Garcia, but Ilona redirected him back to his chair and sat in his lap. She was not hurting him, but he couldn’t get up, either. Garcia took the empty chair across from Byaus and sat down.

“This table is occupied, friend,” Byaus said, looking to see where his body guards were.

“I would like to talk to you,” Garcia said.

“I said this table is occupied,” Byaus said, signing for his bodyguards.

Duana and Ilona blocked their assigned targets while the two remaining got to Garcia. They didn’t touch him, only tried to intimidate him. The only reason why Garcia could see having a body guard in this place was in case someone became too amorous. Garcia wondered how long it would take corporate security to arrive if he were to contemplate harming someone. But he kept his thoughts reasonably controlled. If the Telepath was there listening to him, she must know that most species have violent thoughts that they don’t usually act on.

“You do understand, contrary to popular belief, you can be physically harmed in this club,” Byaus said. “We’re not allowed to kill, but fighting for a mate is permitted, and you’re in my space.”

“You and I have business to discuss,” Garcia said, calculating the new set of rules. So if he wanted that lap girl, all he had to do was challenge Byaus? That might work. “And since I was not aware that I could fight you and your men to take those

women from you, I believe you just gave me the excuse I need to beat the crap out of you.”

Byaus nodded to Garcia and each of his available bodyguards reached for an arm. Garcia caught each bodyguard by a hand, twisted, and brought them to their knees, using a joint lock technique. The girl sitting in Byaus’ lap, and the two sitting beside him, smiled, reveling in the fact that someone was actually going to fight for them. Their pricing structure just went up, which was reflected on the meter on the table. Byaus looked for his other two guards and found them occupied with their own “lap” girls: Duana and Ilona.

“Yeah, my girls are interested in them, and they’ve not been entertained in a long time,” Garcia said. “Well, technically, they’re still virgins; they’re probably going to be occupied for a while. Now, can we talk?”

“Who are you?” Byaus said, pushing the girl off his lap. The girl landed undignified on the floor and began to pout. Her pricing jumped again. Garcia wanted to know how that worked. If they had tech on them, he didn’t see her activate it. It could be an implant, or even telepathically projected to the “boss” who updated the screen. Could Madam Dahlia be a telepath and hardwired into her own establishment?

“Really? You don’t know me?” Garcia asked, and sent a private thought to Madam Dahlia. ‘I would like to meet you later, if possible.’ Since there was no immediate response, he turned his attention to the bodyguards he was holding. “If I let you two go, will you go to the bar. That Ferengi there will buy you drinks, if you tell him I told him I sent you.” The bodyguards hesitated. “I could just break your arms.”

The two bodyguards looked to their boss who assured them it was ok before they agreed to Garcia’s terms and departed. The two girls sitting beside Byaus moved their chairs over next to Garcia, and the one on the floor crawled over and sat in front of him, her head in his lap looking up to him for permission to crawl up onto his lap. She brushed her cheek against his knees as if she were a cat, scent marking.

“Okay, so, who are you?” Byaus said.

A male waiter approached the table and paused. “Tammis Parkin Arblaster-Garcia?” the waiter asked.

Byaus paled.

“Yes?” Garcia asked.

The waiter pushed the nearest girl out of the way, grabbed Garcia by the shirt, and lifted. He lifted him to his feet and then off the floor in one easy move. All three girls gave the waiter and Garcia space to fight for them. Duana and Ilona rose to come to his aid. Garcia acted first, head butting the waiter. The waiter didn’t even flinch. Garcia would have fallen to the floor from head trauma had the waiter not been holding him up. Duana and Ilona both fell to the floor, reaching for their heads as if they had just run head first into a wall and were dazed.

The lights in the room came up to full day spectrum, hidden compartments in the ceilings and walls opened and what appeared to be gun turrets emerged, and swiveled to face the waiter. An automated voice warned the aggressor to cease activities.

The waiter ignored the warning and threw Garcia to the nearest wall. Garcia hit with his back and slid to the floor. The patrons in the booths to either side of him vacated the area. The waiter retrieved a knife from one of the tables. All the gun turrets opened fire on the aggressor, revealing that he had shield capabilities. He removed a remote

device from his pocket and activated it. The turrets ceased fire and retracted back up into the non-threat position.

“I am sorry,” came a voice in Garcia’s head. “I unable to stop this attack. Good luck.”

Garcia was just coming to his feet as the waiter came at Garcia with the steak knife. Garcia rolled, but not fast enough. He was cut across the shoulder. His uniform did its job, preventing him from getting severely cut, but it slashed the uniform to expose skin, leaving a red line and small beads of blood.

Garcia came up standing, launched himself at the nearest dancing pole, spun, and landed a perfect kick with both feet to the waiter’s face. This time the waiter did stagger, and part of his face fell away, revealing the fact that he was an android. It explained why Madam Dahlia hadn’t foreseen the attack and why he was getting his butt kicked.

Profanity slipped from Garcia’s mouth. “I could use some help,” he said out loud, but shouting it in his mind. He climbed the steps to the dance floor and dove, hitting the zero g stage with momentum. He flew across the floor, level until he pushed with his hands, adding a vertical component with the horizontal. The waiter android pursued, and fortunately for Garcia, he wasn’t adept in zero g. Garcia pivoted as he flew across the stage, landed on one of the dancing poles with his feet and shot himself upwards, going from one bar to another. He counted on the fact the waiter android was following him. He was also counting on there not being any safety features. When the waiter android hit mid way, Garcia grabbed a horizontal pole, spun back and kicked the android in the chest with sufficient force that the android was pushed outside of the influence of the anti-gravity stage’s floor. He fell like a rock towards the floor. But he also grabbed Garcia by the legs and took him to the floor with him. They landed on the secondary dance floor surrounding the antigravity stage. Garcia landed on his back and was winded, but nothing broken. The android wasn’t harmed either, though he had broken through the glass floor, breaking a series of floor lights beneath him. The android sat up, ripped out a power cord for the lights that had been concealed, pulled it free from the mechanism, and extended it towards Garcia. Duana and Ilona were unable to stop the android from electrocuting Garcia. Their bodies went limp, falling to the floor as if they had been equally shocked.

An Away Team arrived via transporter beams. The android was verifying that Garcia was dead when Tuer and four Klingons blasted him with phasers. The android’s shields came up automatically. He turned to face them. He slowly approached Tuer. Tuer smiled, dropped his phaser, retrieved his Gorn weapon, and fired two rounds at the android. The shields lit up again. The entire Away Team opened fire, some with phasers and some with Gorn projectile weapons. The shields ballooned as they became oversaturated and burst. The android staggered. Tuer fired the final shots. One went through the head, the second through the chest. The android paused, convulsed, and fell over backwards, landing directly on top of Garcia.

Jurak and his med team rolled the android out of the way and began resuscitating their Admiral.

CHAPTER TWENTYONE

Though the white light was still a fairly new phenomena to Garcia, he had had enough experience with this strange space to start noticing subtle differences in the medium. There was a tactile sensation that resonated with his being, which was still difficult to describe because technically, he didn't have any physicality. He could see in all directions, but tended to relate to a perspective that maintained an orientation he was accustomed to, that of a three dimensional world. There was also an audio component. On a ship, there was the sound of the life support system. In the absence of life support, depending on which compartment you were in, you could have the high pitch hum of power oscillations. Underwater environments had a different pitch than being in an atmosphere, and different atmospheres of different pressures had different pitches. The present setting had an oscillating tone of 440 hertz, the perfect A for tuning. This was not the same sound he had experienced before meeting Amanda the last time, but he found himself anticipating her. Would she just appear, or fade into being as she approached? Did she even know he was here? And what was this place? An element of time was necessary for consciousness, but he was unable to discern any movement through time other than the flow of his thoughts. He was disappointed when an old man in a toga appeared. At first he imagined it to be an old wizard the way the toga moved and the way the staff ticked off the distance, but even for an old man, he was fairly muscular, so it was definitely not Gandoof the Grey. Garcia suddenly remembered him.

"You asked to see me?" Zeus said.

"Oh, god," Garcia said.

"Yes," Zeus said.

"Technically, I asked to see Apollo," Garcia said.

"Yeah, well, you don't always get what you want," Zeus said, knowing full well it was going to trigger a song in Garcia's mind. "Like the hero with a thousand faces, you tend to draw the personality you need most. When the student is ready, the master will come. You are never given more than you can handle. It's a hypothesis we have, based on observation, but empirically we're still working on the numbers."

"Please," Garcia said. "I just want a civil talk with Apollo. Can you make that happen?"

"I can't make anyone do anything. I can make recommendations, but I can't make people perform because at the end of the day, everyone has free will," Zeus said.

"Besides, why do you waste your time wanting to change Apollo when you should be focused on changing yourself."

Garcia sighed. "Change myself," Garcia repeated. "I want to resolve this conflict peacefully."

"You really need to grow up. Violence is the way of the Cosmos! The Universe came into being with violence. Stars come into existence because of violence. Planets become available only after billions of supernovas. Spectacular violence. Creatures eat other creatures, violence. The Universe, and life itself, is by definition, violent!" Zeus said. "You are created and defined by your struggles. It builds character. You discover truths about yourself and reality that can only be found through hardship. Obstacles are tests. That is why it is written, rejoice in your suffering, because suffering evolves perseverance, and perseverance strengthens character, and character radiates hope."

“Interesting translation,” Garcia said. “I don’t want to fight Apollo.”

“Then don’t,” Zeus said.

“I can’t keep doing this,” Garcia said. “Please, I need help.”

“If you will do something for me, I will attempt an intervention,” Zeus said.

“What do you need?” Garcia asked.

“Build an ark,” Zeus said.

“Excuse me?” Garcia said.

“A flood is coming. It will change everything,” Zeus said. “I want you to build an ark.”

“A flood,” Garcia said, shaking his head. “I have a space ship, why would I build an ark?”

“The river will over flow and you will not be able to row your boat,” Zeus said. “Unless you build an ark.”

“Can’t you just give it to me straight?” Garcia asked.

“Build an ark,” Zeus said. “How much more straight can I be?”

“Why?” Garcia asked.

“So you can survive the fall of destroying Romulous,” Zeus said.

“You seem sure I’m going to do that,” Garcia said.

“I am,” Zeus assured him. “You are going to usher in a new age, create new stories, and allow a place for new heroes and new villains to shape the things to come. There will be some reputation, variations on themes, but many of the players will change, and their faces will change. The Universe will renew itself.”

“And if I choose not to destroy Romulous,” Garcia insisted.

“You already have,” Zeus said. “It’s a done deal. It’s going to happen. It has happened. You can’t stop it. Now, build me an ark.”

“Please, no,” Garcia begged.

“Change is coming,” Zeus said. “I will preserve you and those who follow you, and most of your children. I will send you something to aid you in your efforts. I will intervene between you and Apollo, but only after I have my ark.”

“There has to be another way,” Garcia cried. There was a moment he was back in Dahlia’s club in severe pain, transporter lights were engulfing him, and then he was back in front of Zeus.

“Whether you live or not, I want this. Build me an ark,” Zeus said.

“No,” Garcia pleaded. “No, no, no, no!”

On the last “No,” he found himself in his body trying to sit up. Doctor Jurak pushed him back down to the medical table. Duana and Ilona both started breathing again, gasping for air on their respective medical tables.

“No!” Garcia yelled. He started crying, still struggling with the Doctor. The doctor extracted a piece of glass from Garcia and most of the pain subsided. The Doctor began healing the flesh. “You shouldn’t have revived me. God, why did you bring me back?”

“It is not your time yet,” Jurak said.

“How would you know?” Garcia snapped at him.

“Because you came back,” Jurak said, snapping right back at him. “You’re extremely lucky Madam Dahlia agreed to let us beam down to get you or you would definitely be permanently dead. Now get up, walk around.”

Garcia got up out of bed, aching, but alive. Duana and Ilona came to his side, reassuring themselves that he was well. Garcia approached the medical bed where the android lay. It was being examined by Sendak.

"Its memory banks were destroyed," Sendak said. "There's no way to recover them to determine its mission objectives."

"Its mission objective seemed quite clear," Tuer said. "Kill Garcia."

"It looks pretty sophisticated," Duana noted.

"It is," Sendak agreed. "And Star Fleet has encountered this technology before. This android comes from planet Mudd."

"The androids that Harry Mudd directed to hijack the Enterprise?" Ilona asked. "That wanted to enslave the human race and force peace upon the Galaxy?"

"Exactly," Sendak said.

"Why does everyone want to get at peace by force?" Ilona asked.

Garcia's eyes tracked to her and then back to the robot. "Better question, why would they want to kill Garcia?" Tuer asked.

"Because I am Kelvan," Garcia said. It all made sense now.

"What does that have to do with anything?" Tuer asked.

"They're mortal enemies," Losira said.

Garcia gave them a little history: "The Makers, the ones who created this line of androids, came from the Andromeda Galaxy. The Makers and Kelvan were arch enemies, mostly because the Kelvans enslaved them and made them pets. And since President Fos has been running a misinformation campaign to distract people from my real mission, it is now public knowledge that I'm descendant from Kelvan, and these guys suspect I am enemy number one."

"Admiral, I am confident that the extra component I found on the Britney bot is consistent with this technology. I believe they were responsible for modifying the Britney Bot to kill you," Sendak said.

"Wonderful," Garcia said.

"Actually, it's kind of poetic," Ilona said. "Androids utilizing a robot that you created specifically as a sex slave. Seems like justice, actually."

"Yeah, it affirms their position that you're the bad guy. That's exactly what Kelvans would do with robots," Duana agreed.

Kitara, Undine, and Simone entered sickbay, and their facial expressions ranged from concerned to indifferent.

"I'm alright," Garcia waved off their concern.

Kitara, hands akimbo, disagreed. "As of now, you are not allowed to leave the ship unless the four of us okay it. Is that clear?"

"Four of us?" Garcia asked.

Losira waved, meaning she was included in the decision making.

"Great. You're now a committee," Garcia asked. "And you've aligned with them Losira? I thought you were on my side."

"I am on your side. Your death warranted me calling them," Losira said.

"Please, it was a simple myocardial infarction induced by electric shock," Jurak said.

"Exactly, a flesh wound," Garcia said. Thinking about it made his chest hurt.

“Admiral,” Undine said, touching his arm with genuine affection. “It’s important that you stay on the ship. You need some serious rest.”

“Don’t make me pull rank on you,” Garcia said.

“It is our job to see to your wellbeing, and you will follow our instructions” Undine said, her tone still genuine, but genuinely angry.

“It is illogical to continue to put yourself in harm’s way,” Simone added.

Garcia looked to Losira.

“We all agree. Your place is on the ship and you have four from which you can choose, so don’t give me that look,” Losira said.

The alliance of Captains had taken their stand and seemed fairly well entrenched in their position. Garcia turned to Jurak. He nodded, conceding to the point that a week’s rest might actually benefit him, though that concession seemed coerced. Garcia looked to Nurse Cohen. It was clear she had sided with the Captains.

“I’m not going to hide up here like a coward. As a Star Fleet Admiral you would think I would have some say in how my life goes...” Garcia protested.

“It’s our job to run these ships and protect you! You delegated it to us. Now, let us do our job,” Undine said.

Garcia seemed resigned. “You can’t keep me pinned up forever.”

“We know that. There will be times when you will need to be involved,” Simone said. “But until that time comes, you are either on the Path Finder, or one of the sister ships.”

“So, go take a nap, or go play on the holodeck, because as of now, we got this,” Undine said.

“And I want you to be refreshed for the House party,” Kitara said.

“Pfff,” Garcia complained. “I’ll be in my quarters.”



Garcia’s quarters on the Path Finder was smaller than his quarters on either the New Constitution, or the Tempest, but they were just as Spartan. He conjured a bed, and it arrived with his mental entourage.

“Really, you’re just going to pout?” Rogue Troi asked.

“No, I’m going to sleep,” Garcia said, kicking off his boots. “A good, eight hours, uninterrupted sleep. Now, go find something to do or make room.”

“I would like to talk about the light,” Lal said.

“The light?” Duana asked. “So, you saw it, too?”

“I think we all did,” Ilona said. She looked to Troi. Troi nodded. “Tam, if we all had different near death experiences when you died, doesn’t that suggest there is something more to life and death?”

“I’m really not prepared to discuss this yet,” Garcia said.

“But it’s really interesting,” Lal said.

Garcia finished removing his clothes and was ready to climb into bed. The entourage made room for him on the bed, but somehow he was pushed to the middle, Duana and Lal on his left side, and Troi and Ilona on his other. The ladies took the pillows. He ordered a towel, rolled it, and substituted this as his pillow, placing it under his neck. He then pulled the other part over his face so that he was in darkness. It didn’t block his hearing. He heard a noise and lifted the towel long enough to identify the

sound, which he had guessed it right. Lal was unscrewing one of the bed knobs from the post.

“Really?” Garcia asked. He adjusted the towel under his neck, and covered his face again.

“I like the ‘bed knobs and broom sticks’ movie,” Lal said.

“Lal,” Garcia said. “I would like to sleep now.”

“I think it’s an important metaphor,” Lal continued. She rested her head on the pillow, holding up the bed knob. “It can’t be an accident that this is the bed that was replicated.”

“It’s random, and I’m trying to quiet my brain, not rev it up by entertaining abstract concepts,” Garcia said.

“Lal, I thought you enjoyed Darby O’Gil and the Little People more than Bed Knobs and Broomsticks,” Duana said.

“I do enjoy hearing the accents. And the song that Sean Connery sings,” Lal said. “Did you watch the Million Dollar Duck?”

“No. I was in another room in Garcia’s mind when he was viewing that with you. I watched the Computer Who Wore Tennis Shoes, though,” Duana said.

“Both of you, quiet,” Garcia pleaded.

“May I have a duck?” Lal asked.

Garcia whimpered. Ilona took pity on Garcia and began to sing “Hush-a-bye Mountain,” from Chitty Chitty Bang Bang. Lal closed her eyes and snuggled in closer to Garcia, still grasping the bed knob. Ilona also snuggled into Garcia. He was asleep before the end of the song. He woke himself with his own snoring, sighed, and turned over on his side. His head was hot, so he uncovered his face from the towel. Lal was laying on her side, facing him, eye closed. He sighed and closed his eyes. Ilona stirred, realized he was awake, and rubbed his back. He quickly fell back to sleep.

“You shouldn’t sing in the library,” Lal said.

Garcia was dreaming and his entourage was with him. They were in a museum, not a library, but Lal’s error wasn’t the focus of the dream. The focus was on a custom built, antique car in front of them, and a tall man who was a dead ringer for Dick Van Dyke. The man approached, shifting a bamboo pole to his left hand so he could offer his right hand to Garcia. Garcia looked at his hand skeptically; he didn’t shake it. Lal handed Dick the bed knob and he handed her the Bamboo pole.

“The old bamboo,” Dick said. “You really can’t go wrong with that.”

“Are you selling something?” Garcia asked.

“Why? Are you buying?” Dick asked.

“I’m looking for something,” Garcia said.

“Well, this is a good place to start,” Dick said. “Care to take it for a spin?”

“A convertible car that can be a boat or a plane is nice, but, no, I’m looking for something else,” Garcia said, and continued down the hall.

“Tam, I think we’re dreaming,” Duana said.

Garcia didn’t seem to notice. He paused at a display, shook his head, and pushed on. “I’m sure it’s around here somewhere.”

“What is?” Rogue Troi asked, playing along.

“Shouldn’t we wake him?” Ilona asked Rogue Troi. “He likes being lucid.”

“How can we be lucid but he remain asleep?” Lal asked, touching the glowing stones on a pedestal. She turned to discover that they were not waiting on her, and so she left the pedestal and followed. The pylon in front of the pedestal of glowing stones opened and a young woman stared out. Behind her was a humanoid covered with fur and behind him a reptilian humanoid.

“Maybe we need to remember something that his unconscious wants us to see,” Rogue Troi said.

“This could be dangerous,” Lal said.

“It could be sexy,” Duana said.

“Dream sex would be a nice change,” Rogue Troi agreed.

“You really need to control that impulse,” Ilona told her.

“Please, you’re just as hungry as I am,” Troi said. “And Garcia is our only access.”

“Maybe we aren’t really hungry,” Lal said. “Maybe Garcia’s hungry.”

“Then why do we always wake up before we get to the good part?” Duana asked.

“Is that all you girls think about?” Garcia asked.

“No, that’s all you think about,” Rogue Troi said.

“Oh! Here it is,” Garcia said, triumphantly.

Before them were four incarnations of H G Well’s time machine. There was the version from the first movie, made in 1950. The second came from a remake in the 1970s, and a third from the remake in 2000. The 4th was the version from a movie called “time after time,” 1984, and that held Garcia’s attention the longest. He approached the machine and removed a panel, drawing out a diamond that fluoresced in the light.

“We’re here to see time machines?” Rogue Troi asked.

H. G. Wells approached. “Care to take it for a spin?”

“How do you avoid paradox?” Garcia asked, replacing the diamond.

“Awww, finally someone who wants to engage in a philosophical conversation,” Herbert said.

“Well, not really, but thanks,” Garcia pushed on.

They passed a hot tub and John Cusack. A squirrel crossed the hall behind them. A Delorean appeared out of nowhere and skidded to a halt in the next display area. The door to the Delorean opened skyward and a tall, elderly man with outrageous hair climbed out.

“Great Scott, am I too late?” the man asked.

“Late for what?” Lal asked.

“For the sales pitch,” the man said, hastily shaking her hand. “Sorry, I’m Doctor Emmet Brown. Call me Doc.”

“Lal,” she said, tilting her head as if she were listening to something. “Great theme song. What are you selling?”

“A Delorean time machine, all made possible by the flux capacitor,” Garcia and the Doc said, simultaneously.

“You have heard of my work, Sir,” The Doc said. “I am impressed.”

“It’s nice and all, but I think I need something a little bigger,” Garcia said.

“I have a train, would you like a train?” Doc asked.

“In the rain?” Lal asked.

“Oh, please don’t start rhyming again,” Garcia chastised her.

“People all over the world, join hands, ride the peace train, peace train,” Duana sang. Garcia turned to her as if she had lost her mind. “Just singing.”

Garcia turned away from Duana, trying to avoid the song catching in his head. “Have you figured a way to avoid paradox?” Garcia said.

“Yes, simply don’t create them,” the Doc said. “Very dangerous things. You could destroy the entire universe...”

“Sorry, Doc, but I need to see the rest of what’s available before I can make a decision,” Garcia said.

“Of course,” Doc Brown said. “But you better hurry. There’s something wrong with the future. Your kids grow up to be jerks...”

The next display drew Garcia attention with its rotating lights at the base and top of the craft. It was the ‘literal’ flying saucer from another kid’s program. The ramp lowered and two comical robots approached Garcia.

“The lost saucer?” Lal asked.

“Yeah. I don’t think so,” Garcia said, pushing past the ‘Jim Neighbors’ and ‘Ruth Buzby’ robots. The robots waved a friendly farewell. Garcia quickened his pace.

“But they look friendly,” Lal said, looking back over her shoulder.

“But I don’t live in a comedy,” Garcia said.

“We could all use more comedy,” Rogue Troi said.

“I like androids,” Lal said.

“We’re going to need a bigger boat,” Garcia said.

“What’s this?” Ilona asked, examining a contraption on a pedestal that was similar to pocket watch.

A kid came around the corner. “That’s an Omni,” he said. “Phineas Bog and I use it to travel through time.”

“Yeah, I remember you,” Garcia said. “But I don’t want to be falling all over the place. Thanks.”

Garcia led his group to the next exhibit. A man and woman standing next to a British police box casually observed his approach. The man was leaning against the box, looking extremely bored. He took a pocket watch out, examined it, and returned it to his pocket. The woman tried to get the man’s attention, gave up, and went too Garcia herself.

“I thought you would never get here,” the girl said. “That was a pretty ingenious invitation.”

“Invitation?” the Doctor said. “More like a hijacking.”

“Hijacking? You know the TARDIS likes him,” the girls said.

“Let me guess,” Ilona said. “Another holographic girlfriend of yours?”

“I’m Rose,” she said, offering her hand to Ilona.

“Of course,” Ilona said.

“She’s cute,” Duana said.

“I like her accent,” Lal said. “Resume talking.”

“Are these your companions you’re always talking about?” Rose asked.

The man, known as the Doctor, finally joined them. “Four companions are a bit much to keep up with, don’t you think?”

“You don’t always get what you want,” Garcia said.

“True,” the Doctor said, pocketing his hands and rocking on his heels. “I don’t have all day. Are you interested?”

The entourage looked to Garcia. Rose clasped her hands excitedly. "Please say yes," she said.

"I'm not sure you're the solution set," Garcia said.

"Of course we are," Rose said. "How could we go wrong with two Doctors?"

"Everywhere he shows up there's trouble. Alien invasions, killer robots, misguided androids, people dying," Garcia argued.

"Not that I've been keeping score, but your track record isn't much better," the Doctor said.

"Touché. But as much as I would like to fly with you both again, and spend more time with you, Rose, I need something specific," Garcia said.

"Like the brunette? The Doctor's future companion?" Rose said, mischievously.

"Do we have to go over that again?" the Doctor asked.

"Every girl should have a Doctor. I have you, the brunette gets Garcia. So, what do you think?" Rose asked.

"I think I need a paradox inhibitor," Garcia said.

"A paradox inhibitor, of course," the Doctor said, snapping his fingers. "That would help tremendously, especially if you need to be aware of changes in order to track down anomalies and correct perceived errors."

"Perceived errors?" Ilona asked.

"Sure," the Doctor said, practically coming to life over a dialogue of technological babble. "It's always a matter of perspective and much more complicated than relativity suggests. Even Shrodinger's got the math wrong, unfortunately for his cat."

"That poor cat," Lal agreed. "In the hat."

"Why are you always rhyming in our dreams, Lal?" Garcia asked.

"I like cats," Lal said.

"Yes, well," the Doctor droned on. "Is the cat dead or alive? Do both realities exist? Does this reality cease to exist, or merely break off into branching realities, or is there one reality that is as fluid as a stream flowing downhill, spreading out in all directions, like the Universe spilling over the edge of an unseen table. Wave or particle? There is evidence for both. There is evidence of neither."

"You make no sense," Lal said.

"It's complicated," Rose agreed.

"Just the way Tam likes it," Duana said.

"So, what do you say? A trip around the Galaxy?" Rose asked.

"A threesome?" Duana said, feigning Rose's enthusiasm.

"There's more than three of us," Lal pointed out, not understanding Duana's suggestion. "Are you leaving some of us?"

"No, Lal, no one is getting left behind," Garcia said.

"Just left out," Ilona said.

The Doctor opened the door to the Tardis to reveal that the inside was larger than the outside. Rose took Garcia by the arm, smiling. "This is going to be so much fun."

Kitara shot Garcia in the back and he stumbled forwards. Rose started crying, as Garcia's dead weight dragged her to the ground. His entourage was falling, all mortally wounded. Rose called for the Doctor, but he closed the door to the Tardis and departed.

"No, please, you both can't leave me," Rose cried.

Garcia and his mental entourage all sat straight up in bed, gasping, fully awake. Duana touched Garcia's shoulder with compassion.

"Where did she come from?" Lal asked.

Garcia laid back down.

"And why does she keep shooting you in the back?" Duana asked.

"You and Rossi really should discuss your dreams," Rogue Troi said.

Garcia got up, moved to the end of the bed to avoid crawling over his companions, and began putting his clothes back on.

"We could help you get back to sleep," Troi said.

"You've helped enough, thanks," Garcia said.



After touring the Path Finder in an impromptu inspection, trying to look as if he weren't pacing, Garcia found himself in the game room. Losira and Tuer were watching over agents in the field in what appeared to be a jail break. Garcia leaned over the table and studied the terrain, admiring the placement of the agents. Losira acknowledged him with a quiet, "Admiral."

"Alexander?" Garcia asked.

"Yeah," Losira said. "Simone sent an extraction team to retrieve him. The telemetry is being sent via the crystal so we can participate."

"So, we're still at Wrigley's Pleasure planet?" Garcia asked.

"Yes," Losira said. "I have a Losira agent entertaining Byaus. I will follow that thread as long as possible. He's invited me to his ship. If he departs, we can follow him. But if he doesn't, I might have a chance to rummage through his computer files."

Garcia nodded. "Carry on," Garcia said, and departed.

Duana was suddenly by his side. "Are you moping?"

"Not exactly," Garcia said.

"You really hate having down time, don't you," Duana asked.

"I don't like being useless," Garcia said.

"You're not useless, Tam. Why don't you let me distract you? Let's go play," Duana said.

"Not interested," Garcia said.

Duana laughed. "I'm talking about a game. On the holodeck."

"What kind of game?" Garcia asked.

"I don't know," Duana said. She took his arm. "Come on. It will cheer you up."

Garcia allowed himself to be dragged to the holodeck. After all, Duana was essentially right. He needed to do something non work related. Was work his new addiction? The holodeck doors slid open, beckoning them into the empty, inner sanctum. The doors, and walls, were thicker than most of the ship, reinforced structurally to withstand the increased pressures that might play out upon them. Garcia and Duana stood in the center of the empty room. Garcia stared at the holographic generators, fashioned into the wall like small diamonds interspaced like tiles. This was the latest designed improvement, which increased the resolution down to the molecular level. The generators sparked like a million rainbows.

Duana was focusing on Garcia. She took his hand. "Want to go swimming?"

"No," Garcia said.

“Really? Seeing me in a swimsuit wouldn’t cheer you up?” Duana asked, teasingly.

“Yeah, but is it you, or is it my imagination?” Garcia asked.

“Does it matter if the net result is you enjoy yourself?” Duana asked. She shook her head. “Look, I don’t know if you subconsciously made me look this way, or I’m a collage of all the personalities that came together to create me in the first place, but as far as I know, I have always looked like this. Look, I know you are attracted to me, and you should be thankful because if you did imagine my looks, subconsciously it is better you chose this than an appearance you abhorred, because why would you want to live with that the rest of your life?”

“The rest of my life?” Garcia repeated back, not getting it.

“Tam, Ilona and I won’t age. Troi won’t either. Nor Lal. You will, but you will always be surrounded by four beauties,” Duana assured him.

“It kind of sucks for you then,” Garcia said.

Duana giggled and patted him on the face. “Awww, sometimes you almost have me believing you care.”

“Of course I care,” Garcia said.

“Then how about the great train robbery?” Duana asked.

He shuddered at the memory of the last episode of that. “Ummm, no,” Garcia said. But he was suddenly missing Nurse Tarkington.

“How about an episode of Sherlock Holmes?” Duana asked.

“No,” Garcia said.

“MASH?” Duana asked.

Garcia shook his head.

“A romantic comedy? Oh, the sci fi classic Barbarella” Duana asked.

“You consider that a romantic comedy?” Garcia asked.

“Opening sequence was pretty hot,” Duana offered.

Garcia frowned. “Don’t make me shove you.”

“Awww, you can shove me all you want, honey. Brilliant! I challenge you to a game of hockey,” Duana said, and before he could protest she generated the ice rink. For a flare, she spun and created an ice skating outfit more fitting for the Olympics, not ice hockey. Her skirt was a bit short, and the blouse a bit flashy. She leaned over flirtatiously, brushing against him, and picked up one of the two hockey sticks lying on the ice. She began pushing the puck around to try and entice him into chasing her. Garcia sat down and exchanged his boots for ice skates. Duana offered her hand to help Garcia back to his feet. She bent over to pick up his stick, purposely brushing him again.

“Are you teasing me?” Garcia asked.

Duana spun in closer and kissed him. “Of course. You and me alone, or computer generated teams?” Duana asked, handing him his hockey stick.

Garcia stared at the hockey stick.

“What’s wrong?” Duana asked.

Garcia started to smile.

“Tam?” Duana asked.

“Losira, connect me to Trini, please,” Garcia said. A moment later, Trini answered her hail. “Trini, are you busy?”

“No, what’s up?” Trini asked, her voice loud and clear as if she were not on another ship in another sector.

“Could you go to the Tempest, contact Trolos, and invite him to come visit me. If he’s free, bring him to the holodeck on the Path Finder,” Garcia said.

“Sure,” Trini said.

“Oh, also, page Micceal, Bri, Larys, Klathas, Omlar and Jurak to join me, here, ASAP, in full battle gear,” Garcia said.

“Okay. Anything else?” Trini asked.

“Umm, nope, that should about cover it, thanks,” Garcia said.

Duana looked confused. “What, you don’t want to play with me?”

“Oh, yeah, but we’re going to change the rules a little,” Garcia said, smiling deviously. “Losira, I would like to modify the hockey stick. Add a Klingon Pain device to the end of the grip.”

Duana smiled. “Oh, this might be fun,” she said. “A Klingon Pain Hockey stick. Sweet.”

“Shhhh, keep it a secret for a bit,” Garcia said.

“Oh, yeah, this is going to be fun,” Duana agreed.

It wasn’t long before Garcia’s requested crew members arrived in full battle gear, ready for a fight. They seemed a bit disappointed by the ice and seeing Garcia and Duana on skates. Duana circled closer to Garcia and pivoted to a stop. She winked at Garcia and smiled at the Klingon Warriors.

“Hello, boys,” Duana said. “And Larys.”

“Warriors, remove your boots and put on the ice skates,” Garcia directed.

“Ice skates are for tesh,” Klathas said, using a derogatory term for females.

“Then you should be the first to comply,” Garcia said. “Because I hear only tesh can’t play this game. That, and I am giving you a direct order. Jurak, you’re the goalie, over there. You stand by the net and if you can, you keep this puck from going into the net.”

Duana hit the puck with her stick and shot it into the net to demonstrate.

“Two of you will be defenders, your starting position between the goalie and the three forwards,” Garcia continued to explain. “The goal is to get as many goals as possible in a three period tournament. We toss the puck between team members to set up shots towards the goal and to avoid losing control to the other team. It’s you guys against me and Duana. Let’s go, warriors. On the ice. Losira, we need some referees’, please. ”

Though the Klingons were not exactly comfortable at the ice, they weren’t children. Their balance was better than sufficient for their first time on the ice, and would likely improve as the game went on. One of the ‘Losira’ referees started the puck, with Micceal and Garcia battling for control. Garcia elbowed Micceal and stole the puck shooting it over to Duana. Duana shot it and scored.

“Was that legal?” Micceal asked the referee.

The referee nodded and brought the puck back to center. Garcia allowed Duana to fight for control of the puck. She shot it to him. Klathas tried to take it from him, and Garcia jabbed him with the business end of his pain stick. The stick illuminated, radiating pain into Klathas’ upper chest, knocking him off his feet. He slid into the wall. Garcia skated around him, shot, and scored.

Klathas, angry, clumsily got to his feet.

“That was legal?” Klathas demanded.

“I guess you were right, this is too tesh for you,” Garcia said.

“Let’s do this,” Klathas growled.

Trini and Trolos arrived as a battle ensued on the ice. Garcia caught the puck, shot and bounced it off Jurak’s chest armor, and when it bounced back, he shot it directly into the net as if it were hitting a baseball with a bat. The back end of the swing ‘accidentally’ knocked Larys in his helmet, dropping her to the floor, while the forward part of his swing hit the puck. Garcia shot his arms up triumphantly, making himself available to be stuck with a pain stick. Larys was the offending player.

“Hey, ref! That’s a penalty!” Duana yelled.

“How is that a penalty?” Larys demanded.

“The play was finished,” Duana said.

“So?” Larys said. “He hit me with his stick.”

Garcia jabbed Larys with his pain stick, dropping her back to the ice. “So, when the play is over, it’s over.”

“Hey!” Micceal said, and jabbed Garcia with his pain stick.

Duana jabbed Micceal. Another fight was on. Losira generated additional referees to separate the fighters, sending them back to their starting positions.

“Hey, can I play?” Trolos asked.

“Those are your skates,” Garcia said. “You’re our goalie.”

“Am I limited to the net?” Trolos asked.

“Not necessarily,” Garcia said.

“You didn’t tell me that,” Jurak said, who sat out the last fight because he didn’t want to leave his position.

“Considering how many goals you’ve allowed, whether you’re there or in the bleachers doesn’t seem to matter much,” Duana said.

“Awww, it’s on sister,” Jurak said.

“Want in, Trini?” Garcia asked.

“Umm, no, I think I will sit this one out,” Trini said, patting her belly as an excuse.

The game proceeded, and the next fight included both goalies. When the fight was over, everyone on the ice was laughing and getting ready for another round. Garcia observed a growing audience between plays, and when Klathas finally scored a point, he noticed that the four Captains were there. Yeomanette Tomako was also present. When she had his attention, she motioned Garcia to come to them. Garcia skated over to the bleachers.

“Hey!” Micceal said. “Are we still playing?”

“Go ahead without me,” Garcia shouted back. To the group that had come to speak with him. “What’s going on?”

“You had an appointment with Rossi,” Tomako said. “You missed it.”

“Oh, yeah, but I recently died and I thought that canceled out all my previous appointments,” Garcia said. “And now that I’m Admiral, I’m counting on more flexibility.”

“Well, you thought wrong twice,” Tomako said. “According to you, the chain of command and staff structure is still the same as it was prior to all the promotions.”

Additionally, but more importantly, you've not been answering my pages again. I'm beginning to think you're avoiding me."

"I'm not avoiding you," Garcia began.

"Do you want another Yomanette?" Tomako asked.

"No," Garcia said.

"Then you will answer my pages, you will keep your appointments, and you will improve your coordination through me, is that clear?" Tomako said more than asked.

Garcia looked to the four Captains. They seemed to be backing her.

"Yes, Ma'am," Garcia said.

"Great," Tomako said. "The quarters on the Path Finder next to yours just became my office. You and I will be seeing a lot more of each other. In fact, I will see you tomorrow, oh seven hundred. He's all yours, Captains."

Tomako walked away, leaving Garcia to the firing squad. It wasn't lost on him that she had an extra swing in her hips as she departed. He leaned on his hockey stick and accidentally zapped himself with pain generator and fell on his butt. Undine actually laughed. Garcia got back on his feet, clumsily. He noticed Kitara scowling. "What?"

"What is my brother doing here?" Kitara demanded.

Because Garcia was looking at the Captain's he didn't see the play behind him. Consequently, Micceal and Duana crashed into him. As he was getting back up, Jurak yelled, "Play or get off the ice!"

Garcia got off the ice and came and sat down in front of the Captains. He began to removed his skates. Another Klingon Officer joined the game, taking Garcia's place and his hockey pain stick.

"Your brother is having fun," Garcia said. "I was having fun, and I think I was doing what ya'll requested. I was staying out of trouble by engaging in a little recreation."

"I don't see how fighting constitutes recreation," Simone say.

"That's because you're not a Klingon," Kitara said.

"No matter how hard he pretends to be, our husband is not a Klingon," Simone said. "Garcia has been killed three times in the last week. His body needs a rest, we agreed on that."

"We did," Kitara agreed. "Tam, you and Rossi are going to have a conversation. Afterwards, I want you to report to me on the Tempest."

"I feel like I've been busted back to Ensign," Garcia complained.

"Are you saying you don't wish to be the first to interview Alexander?" Kitara asked.

"Oh, yeah," Garcia said. He almost wanted to run do it now, but the longer Alexander waited, the longer he had to worry about why he was brought here, and potentially be more cooperative. "The mission was successful then."

"Of course," Simone said.

"No one got hurt?" Garcia asked.

"No one of consequence," Simone said.

"What does that mean?" Garcia asked.

"A few Cardassians were injured, one rendered unconscious," Simone said. "We did ask for him to be handed over, per your instructions. Goris turned us down."

Predictably, he took renewed interest in Alexander, and we grabbed him when they were transferring him to a more secure location.”

“Has Goris tried to contact me?” Garcia asked. Before she could answer, Garcia stood up and yelled at the Losira agent on the ice. “Come on Ref!”

The Losira that was sitting behind Garcia defended the avatar that was on the ice. “Butt-ending is now legal, due to the addition of the pain generator to the stick, but hooking is still illegal,” Losira said. “Unless you want me to rewrite the whole game.”

“Please, you’ve been letting stuff slide the whole game,” Garcia said.

“That’s because they’re learning the rules as we go. I told Klathis he can’t do that and if he does it again, he’s going to spend time in the penalty box, but Duana knows better, so she’s going to the box,” Losira said.

Garcia sulked. “Fine. Simone, you were saying?”

“If you’re sure you’re through” Simone said.

Garcia looked back at her crossly. “I’m relaxing.”

“You and I have different ideas of relaxing,” Simone says.

“You’re right. Losira, would you get me a beer, and a hotdog, with cheese and jalapenos on it,” Garcia said. His ordered arrived via the replicator. He motioned Simone to keep talking as he stuffed his mouth with food.

Simone shook her head. “Yes, Goris left you a message,” Simone said. “You’re welcome to respond to it how you wish. No evidence points to us having taken him. I did warn him that Alexander was likely to be a person of interest and that someone might try to help him escape.”

“Good work,” Garcia said, speaking with his mouth full. He took another bite and then offered a bite of his dog to the Captains. Undine took him up on the offer. Garcia swallowed, and asked: “Now, may I make some requests?”

“Of course,” Losira said. “We are here to serve.”

“That’s just disgusting,” Simone said, watching Undine take a bite of Garcia’s dog with horror.

“What’s disgusting?” Losira asked for clarification. “The food or the fact that Undine ate after Garcia?”

“I know the food isn’t really a dog, it’s from the replicator, but to eat after Garcia...” Simone said, making a face.

Undine swallowed what was in her mouth. “I’m carrying his child,” Undine said. “What else could he give me?”

Before Simone could start a list, Undine pushed the dog at her.

“Try it,” Undine insisted.

Simone resisted, but found herself suddenly overwhelmed by the smell and tried it. She chewed it and swallowed without making a face.

“Yeah, you liked it, didn’t you,” Undine said.

Simone made a face. “My biology has been seriously compromised by his genes,” Simone explained.

Undine went to take the food back, but Simone took another bite first. Garcia shook his head sadly. Kitara slapped him in the back of his head.

“Don’t shake your head like you’re tired of us. You wanted more than one wife, this is part of it,” Kitara said.

“Thank you,” Simone said.

“You’re welcome, sister,” Kitara said.

“Ya’ll are going to make me regret all of this, aren’t you,” Garcia surmised. They all four gave him the serious look for his answer. “Okay, then. Let’s focus on work. Simone, I want you to take the T’Pal to planet Mudd. I want to contact the androids there and see if we can negotiate a cease fire.”

Simone frowned. “Is that wise?” she asked, while indicating to Losira that she wanted her own hotdog with hand signals.

Kitara held up two fingers. Losira smiled and provided them with service.

Garcia’s attention went back to the game and the fight that was playing out. Duana looked out of place in her skimpy ice skating uniform, compared to the Klingons in full battle gear, but she was holding her own. “Aww, please Ref...”

“What,” Undine asked, her mouth full of the last bite of hotdog. “Pain sticks are okay, but elbows are not? Besides, Duana tripped Larys, she had it coming.”

Garcia seemed impressed that Undine knew something about hockey.

“We need to establish some new ground rules, for sure,” Losira agreed.

Garcia drank some of his beer. “Anyway, Simone. The makers created the androids to defend against the Kelvan. They actually have technology that nullifies Kelvan tech, to some degree. Even so, they lost the war and that’s why they escaped to the Milky Way. If these androids maintain their original programming, then they will be committed to the single purpose of killing me. We need to convince them I am on their side. Further, an army of androids could supplement our personnel and help us establish a defensive platform at the wormhole. There are more benefits to this alliance than there are risks.”

“I disagree,” Simone said. “The last time they had access to a Starship they wanted to take over the Galaxy. That doesn’t sound like they were philosophically different than the Kelvan.”

“I know. But they are programmed to be useful, and so when Mudd unwittingly let them escape their planet, they sought purpose by trying to provide a peace for the inhabitants of this Galaxy. Kirk showed them another way, and until now, they have kept to themselves, which means they are still looking for a purpose. I would like to give them one. Kitara, Undine, you both know that the best way to end conflict is straight on,” Garcia said. “I’m not going to spend my time hiding from them. There’s no telling how many agents they have in the field waiting for a chance encounter. Losira, another hotdog please.”

“You really think that was a chance encounter?” Kitara asked.

“If it wasn’t...” Garcia began.

“Barona Shi is a double agent,” Losira interrupted, offering her conclusion.

Losira suddenly had all their attention. She handed the new dog to Garcia, smiling as if she were a genie whose only purpose was to make his wishes come true.

“You have no proof of that,” Simone said. She allowed Undine to wipe mustard from her chin with a finger.

Undine was about to wipe her finger on her skirt, but then decided to just lick her finger. Simone made a face. Undine shrugged and took Garcia’s hot dog from him.

“You could get your own,” Garcia complained.

“Yours taste better,” Undine argued.

“It’s the only logical explanation,” Losira insisted.

The Captain's took a moment to weigh Losira's hypothesis, while Garcia sulked at losing his food. "We need more proof before we can act on it," Undine said, covering her mouth with her free hand and still chewing her food.

"As long as she's on the Path Finder, I can monitor her behavior. If she's a double agent, I will eventually have the evidence you need," Losira said. "I do think her affection for Garcia is genuine, so, if you were willing, Admiral, you could probably court her and see how it falls out."

"Yes, I suppose I could take one for the team. Not," Garcia said.

"I'm just saying be yourself, flirt with her a little," Losira said.

"We'll see. Kitara," Garcia said, changing the track. "Would you send a team to my property on Kronos and construct an ice rink. I want it ready for tomorrow's party."

"You're joking, right?" Kitara said.

"What, you're opposed?" Garcia asked.

"Skating is tesh!" Kitara said.

Garcia pointed to the Klingons on the ice. "Do you really think they're masculinity is threatened? I seriously doubt anyone will turn down a challenge when pain is involved. And, I think this is a nice contribution to Klingon society. A little like mRock, only no one dies. Improves eye and hand coordination, and, did I mention pain is involved."

"Very well," Kitara agreed. "I will have a temporary structure erected and an ice floor put down. If it takes, we will build a permanent structure. But my brother doesn't play tomorrow, is that clear?"

"I'm not your brother's keeper," Garcia said.

"You want your ice rink? He stays off the ice," Kitara said.

"Fine," Garcia surrendered.

"By the way, I think it important to inform you all now that I'm certain," Losira said, preparing them for something big. "I'm pregnant."

Garcia lost all interest in the game. He turned around on the bench and gave his full attention to Losira. Kitara choked on her food, forcing Undine to hit her on the back. Simone raised a skeptical eye.

"That is not possible," Simone said.

"Apparently it isn't impossible," Losira said. She reminded them that unlike the Federation holodecks, she was created in the image of her maker, all the way down to the microcellular level, and animated with real matter, not holodeck matter.

"How?" Garcia asked.

"You mean 'when.' The last time we were intimate, it was with the present avatar that you're looking at," Losira said. "As an experiment, this body has been animated for exactly 22 days, 5 hours, and thirty six seconds, mark. Based on present data, if I don't disintegrate this avatar, I can carry the child to term. At birth, it should be a completely normal, healthy child, but a hybrid of our two species. Further, if my calculations are correct, I am going to have to reduce the number of avatars being simultaneously generated. The amount of attention required to maintain this body is taxing. I will be making this child's wellbeing my priority."

Garcia stood up to leave.

"Where are you going?" Undine asked.

"I'm going to go see the counselor, now," Garcia said.

“She drops this bomb and you’re going to run away?” Kitara asked.

“What am I supposed to do? Rant and rave? I thought I was safe using holodeck technology, but apparently that’s now off the list, too,” Garcia snapped. The immediate evidence of his frustration was that he was gripping his left wrist fiercely. “But leaving that lament off the table for now, I’m wondering if I should be angry at you for not telling me you were going to do an experiment.”

“You want me to disintegrate this body?” Losira asked.

“Wow,” Garcia said. The way he was gripping his wrist revealed his index finger was pressing into his skin where the button for the Kelvan device would be. “How can you be so incredibly intelligent and hold the emotional intelligence of a teenager?! No, I’m not going to order you to shut down. But yes, you have now added a new moral argument to the advancement of technology where you don’t have to even have a biological partner to recreate a new life. There is so much to deal with here, philosophically, morally...”

“Actually, Tam, you skipped over those points when you chose to make love to a computer,” Kitara said.

“You’re mad at me?” Garcia asked.

“The operative word here is love,” Losira said, interrupting the argument.

The Captain’s shifted their attention back to Losira. She seemed almost radiant as she continued. “I represent the last of my kind. And, I’m in love. And I see this as a new beginning. I wasn’t sure this was going to work and I take responsibility for not telling you my desire to see this through, but I thought if I told you, you would have avoided intimacy.”

“You think?!” Garcia said.

“You could have chosen anyone for the experiment,” Undine said.

“No, it had to be Garcia and not just because I love him,” Losira said. She stood up to wipe a tear from his face. “Please, don’t be sad.”

“I’m just overwhelmed,” Garcia said. He put his hands up to say he surrenders. “I’m overwhelmed. And I’m taking a time out.”

CHAPTER TWENTYTWO

Lt. Giada Rossi's, the psychiatrist originally assigned to the Path Finder at the same time Garcia was given command, established her office on the New Constitution in order to have more room to spread out. On entering, the eye was almost instantly drawn to the Parisian Semi-Circular sectional Sofa. The sofa was in four sections, with a space between each, alternating black and white. Two small coffee tables, one white, and one black, opposed each other, spaced between couches. There was a larger, circular coffee table center the couches as well. Centered on it was a crystal bowl once full of butterscotch candies but now was filled with fire red cinnamon candies. There was also a pitcher of water and two crystal blue glasses with ridges. There was a school of thought that said there should be no objects between the Counselor and the Client, but she thought candy and water was an exception. Beneath the couch, and extending past, was an area rug describing the Yin Yang symbol. Everything was Feng Shui perfect, almost to the point of being cliché, which went straight to antagonizing Garcia's sensibilities. Garcia sat directly across from Rossi, arms crossed, frowning at the poster of a peace symbol behind her.

"So, you're going to pull a Good Will Hunting?" Rossi asked, referring to his silence.

Garcia rubbed his forehead. "Ummm, do you watch old movies, or are you familiar with it because it's on my must see list?"

"The great thing about counseling is I get to listen to things about you, without divulging things about myself," Rossi said, a tempered smile that could be interpreted a multitude of ways.

"Without an exchange, rapport diminishes, and so does trust," Garcia offered.

"I'm an Ellis-site," Rossi said, meaning a follower of the intervention therapies created and promoted by Doctor Albert Ellis. "Trust is nice, but it isn't necessary to have therapeutic change."

"I think trust is crucial," Garcia said.

"Probably why you're only a counselor and not a psychiatrist," Rossi chided.

"What is that? A Jibe?" Garcia asked.

"What do you think it is?" Rossi asked.

"For someone who hangs a peace sign in her office, you sure are adversarial," Garcia observed.

"So, you're searching for peace and not finding it?" Rossi asked.

"Answering a question with a question is a technique that will most likely irritate me," Garcia said.

"Umm, you say you might become irritated with questions, but you seem to already be irritated," Rossi said.

Garcia sighed. "Yeah, I wonder if you can imagine why," he said.

"Again, you're back to me," Rossi said. "Do you find it difficult to talk about you?"

"Not with people I trust," Garcia said.

"So, you're telling me that you believe it's necessary to trust someone to be psychologically intimate with them?" Rossi asked. "That seems to go against the evidence."

“You really hate the fact that I’m not monogamous,” Garcia said. “Your bias might make you unsuitable as my counselor.”

“You assume I as was referring to your promiscuity. Further, you presume bias,” Rossi said.

“Presume? The first time we were together you proposed I become celibate or monogamous,” Garcia said.

“Really? Is that how you remember it?” Rossi asked.

“You’re denying you said that?” Garcia asked.

“I thought you had a perfect memory, but maybe you, too, hear what you want to hear. I will make the transcripts available to you so you can see the context,” Rossi said.

“Do you find it difficult to do therapy without recording and making transcripts?” Garcia asked.

“Again, back on me. Get off me and stay off me,” Rossi said.

“Umm, you’re using sexually suggestive words, and you’re a bit defensive,” Garcia pointed out. “A connection perhaps? Feeling a bit frustrated? No suitable companions available to you?”

“Unlike your previous counselor, I’m capable of maintaining boundaries,” Rossi said. “Something I notice you have a real problem with.”

“What does that mean?” Garcia asked.

“You knew that there were ethical issues sleeping with Troi, and yet, you did so anyway,” Rossi said.

“She told you?” Garcia said.

“I have her file on you,” Rossi said.

“What did she say?” Garcia asked.

“What do you imagine she says about you?” Rossi asked.

Garcia stood up and paced around the sofa. “You really suck as a therapist. There is no rapport, no trust...”

“You’re angry and resistant to the therapy process,” Rossi observed.

“Really? You think?!” Garcia said, stopping and leaning into one of the couches. “You are one of Pressman’s spies, sent to make sure I play ball or kill me, and you wonder why I don’t want you in my head? For that matter, he asked me to kill you or other crew members who got in the way of his plans, so how can you even trust me?”

Rossi closed her eyes, took in some slow breaths before opening them again.

“Again, trust isn’t necessary. And, I find you fairly predictable. That’s sufficient.”

“Predictable? Predictable?!” Garcia asked.

“You disagree with that assessment?” Rossi asked.

A visible “tell” that Garcia was processing information was that his eyes shifted left and right as if he were in REM sleep. When he focused on Rossi again his eyes narrowed. “I find predictable a poor choice in words. Answer me this: Why did you choose to keep the baby, seeing how adversarial you are to me?”

“As long as we are in this room, or the context of our dialogue is about your therapy, we will not be discussing me, is that clear?” Rossi said more than asked. “Now, you can waste your hour pacing around and drag this process out, and thereby increase the number of sessions we will have, or you can sit down and talk to me.”

Garcia sat down, arms crossed, his starting position, only this time he was clearly pouting as well. He imagined poking her with a hockey pain stick, closed his eyes and tried to erase the image, which only reinforced it. He went to his mantra.

“What are you thinking?” Rossi asked.

“Nothing,” Garcia said.

“Fine, let’s start with something easy,” Rossi began. “You’ve seemed more agitated than usual of late.”

“Do you really want me to list the reasons why I might feel agitated?” Garcia asked.

“Any noticeable changes in your health?” Rossi asked.

Garcia sighed. “I’ve not been sleeping well lately.”

“Did you tell Jurak?” Rossi asked. “Because I don’t remember seeing that in your medical file.”

“I did not,” Garcia said, his eyes narrowed. “Why interview me if you’re going to read my file?”

“Because you clearly don’t report all of your issues,” Rossi said, making a note in his file. “Are you having difficulty sleeping because of disturbing dreams?”

“No,” Garcia said.

“Really? Cause I seem to remember Lal mentioning something about dreams. Something about angry babies?” Rossi said.

Garcia slumped. “Hungry, angry babies.”

“And they sing,” Rossi said.

“Singing, hungry, angry babies. I’m trying to direct the chorus, but there is a synchronicity issue, and when I stop to address the issue...”

“Go on,” Rossi said.

“They sprout teeth and start eating me like ravenous piranhas and I wake up,” Garcia said.

Rossi tapped her thigh with her fingers as she processed it. “The interpretation in that seems a bit straight forward. Can’t you just go lucid and change it? I thought you were like this huge dream master, wooooo,” she said, doing something sarcastic with her hands which might have been an impersonation of a funny ghost.

Rossi was very aware that Garcia was biting down on his anger response. It took him a moment to recover. She wondered if he noticed the slight disappointment play across her face when he failed to rise to the purposeful bait.

“I’ve not been able to initiate lucidity of late,” Garcia said, secretly analyzing the taunt.

Rossi leaned forward. “When did that change?” she asked.

Garcia frowned. “Since I started the allergy regimen,” he said.

“That seems like a significant side effect, which is most likely physiological in nature and you didn’t report that to Jurak?” Rossi asked. “Any other unmentioned side effects?”

“My photographic memory retention has decreased,” Garcia said.

“Your memory has been affected. How about your judgment?” Rossi said, not hiding her anger. “Even if you had nothing else going on, this alone could explain your agitation.”

“I know! That’s why I have not said anything. I’m tracking the neurological and psychological changes. You are welcome to review the inventories and assessments I have taken. Long term memory has not been affected, but getting stuff into long term is taking more effort.”

Rossi sat back and sighed. “Tell me more about the dreams.”

“They’re just hungry, angry babies,” Garcia said.

“I got the impression that there are more dreams than the hungry babies, the way you tried to squash the talk on dreams,” Rossi said.

Garcia nodded, almost resigned. “I’ve had a number of variations on a theme in which Kitara kills me. Sometimes she shoots me in the back. Sometimes she sneaks up on me and stabs me in the back, while holding me in choke hold until I bleed out. In the latter, she whispers something in my ear, but I can’t make it out due to pronounced Tinnitus.”

“You have Tinnitus?” Rossi asked.

“No. Well, in the dream I do. And when I focus on the Tinnitus I start hearing that song from Jesus Christ Superstar, where the disciples are singing, ‘what’s that buzz, tell me what’s happening,’ which is also repetitious, and annoying. And I wake up and I have that song stuck in my head for hours.”

Rossi unconsciously began drumming her fingers as she was processing the dream symbols.

“Do you have to do that?” Garcia asked her.

“Kitara kills you from behind,” Rossi said, not only ignoring him, but drumming her fingers louder.

“That’s what I said,” Garcia said. If the table wasn’t between them he would have reached out and put his hand on her hand to stop the drumming.

“Does that strike you as particularly odd?” Rossi asked.

Garcia thought about it and nodded. “Not Klingon.”

“Well, not Kitara. If you have conflict with her, she’s coming at you straight on. Are you sure it’s Kitara?” Rossi asked.

“Of course I’m sure. I asked her to...” Garcia paused. His shoulders dropped and he slumped back into the sofa.

Rossi watched as he processed the information, allowing the silence to be instructive. For a second she thought she might be close to a ‘breakthrough moment’ as he was telegraphing more information than she had ever seen him share before, which suggested he was letting his guard down with her.

“Do you know why people with high ESPer ratings are not allowed to cross the Galactic barrier,” Garcia asked, his voice quiet.

“Tam, we’re getting close to something. Please stay focused on you,” Rossi said, the kindest her voice had been during this session.

“I’m not focusing on you!” Garcia snapped, grumpily. “I merely trying to avoid explaining something you may already know. People with high ESP quotients are banned from leaving the Galaxy because the Galactic Barrier alters them physically and mentally. Not many people know about this, but if a person with a high ESPer rating passes through the Galactic barrier they become godlike, with their powers growing exponentially as time passes. This happened to two people on Kirk’s ship, and Kirk had to kill them.”

“And there’s a connection here with you and Kitara?” Rossi asked.

“I can’t cross the barrier. I have a higher than average ESP rating,” Garcia said. “Sometimes when I have a challenge, I prime my dreams before sleeping by telling myself that I need a solution set, and most the time, I dream a response that’s practical. When I prime my dream on the Charlie Evans problem, the only dream solution set I’m getting so far is to fly through the Galactic Barrier and become a god of equivalent strength to Charlie. After I fight and kill Charlie, and assuming that the fight sufficiently drains my god like abilities so that I am vulnerable to attack, I asked Kitara to kill me so I don’t take over the Galaxy.”

“So, you think Charlie is going to come after you,” Rossi said.

“I stole his Yeoman Rand doll, so yeah, I think he is going to come after me,” Garcia said.

“How about you become a god and not take over the Galaxy,” Rossi offered.

“Yeah,” Garcia said. “How’s your morning sickness been?”

“You think it’s impossible for you to have self-restraint and discipline when you have so much power,” Rossi said.

Garcia’s hands fell to his lap.

“There’s no other way for you to be. Absolute power has to corrupt absolutely?” Rossi asked.

“That is the maxim,” Garcia said.

“The flaw with that, and most maxims, is that it is an absolute, and absolutes tend not to be one hundred percent true in complex realities,” Rossi said. “For example, if you assume for a moment that there really is a God, then there is at least one example of someone who has absolute power who isn’t corrupt or corrupting.”

“You believe in God?” Garcia asked.

“Why can’t you stay off me?” Rossi asked. “And again, out of context. No wonder you took my prescription to be celibate or monogamous literally.”

“It wasn’t literal?” Garcia asked.

“I framed it in terms of an experiment, or did you skip the class on paradoxical intent? I figured you wouldn’t be able to go a week before you were so frustrated that you gave into your urges, forcing you to re-examine your beliefs on sex and your beliefs about relationships with others and realize who you are is okay and you’d be actually kinder and more accepting of yourself, but you went this whole other direction, which, just in case you’re interpreting this observational rant as ‘bad’ and start to think that you failed, you didn’t fail, and neither did I, it just gives us more information on how your brain and philosophical programming are colliding to produce a particular emotional and behavioral response most probably resulting in some specific self-defeating tape like ‘I’m a complete monster’...”

Garcia looked away.

“You do think you’re a monster! How long has that tape been playing in your head?” Rossi asked, and gave him a little time to process or respond. He didn’t respond verbally, but there were definite ‘tells’ that he was thinking. “Alright, educational moment. Epictetus wrote, paraphrasing here, that men are not affected by things, or events, they are affected by their thoughts on things and events. For whatever reason, Tam, you were programmed with a particular philosophy. 20th century, Earth, American philosophy. At its time, it played an important part in shaping world philosophy and we

humans evolved to where we are today because of that influence. But that philosophy is hurting you. You believe in falling in love and living happily ever after, an idealistic, dangerous philosophy that comes from watching too much Hollywood and Disney films. What the hell is happily ever after? Think about it. All movies are about meeting a mate, or ending a relationship, No films models what happily ever after looks like. It doesn't exist. Even we in the 24th century, with all our basic needs met, we still have struggles. We all have issues. Happiness can't exist in a vacuum. You need good and bad to distinguish between the two..."

"I know all of this!" Garcia said.

"Intellectually, you got this," Rossi agreed. "Emotionally, you don't have a clue."

Rossi paused only to discern if he was listening or ignoring her. It was difficult to know for certain, so, she continued on. "Add the fact that we have doubled the life of human beings. Human beings are not likely to be married for 120 years to one person, which is bared out by the naivety of youth who continue to try to prove the statistic wrong. Living a hundred plus years with the same spouse is such a statistical rarity that you can measure it on one hand. The average person today has three significant relationships, the first in their teens that may last till their twenties. The second is usually in the thirties and last till their sixties. And the third relationship, and that one starts in the late seventies is usually the one that last the rest of life. And then there are people like you. You are an outlier, an exception. Most people still expect fidelity in their serial monogamy, but that's not even you, and so your thoughts about how you think you should be increasingly conflicts with the reality of who you choose to be. And I say choose, because if you wanted to be monogamous, you would have already chosen that route. The one thing about fidelity that is most important isn't trust, its honesty. And you, Sir, are the most starkly honest person I've ever met, so anyone who chooses to be with you, you can be assured it's because they want to be with you. Still, your philosophy will be getting in the way because the more you seek that one special relationship, the more relationships you will have, which moves you further and further away from your goal, because you can't undo relationships. And the other truth you're ignoring is that this one ideal relation you're looking for doesn't exist."

Garcia held up his hands, signaling her to stop as her rant had sped up as she went along and he wanted to make sure he was catching it all, but instead, the moment she stopped speaking he just blurted out his first thought. "And you think all of these marriages I'm committing to is simply a farce, a meaningless gesture which offers no value," Garcia said, his voice quiet.

"Again with me. Stay off of me. It doesn't matter what I think. It matters what you think," Rossi said. "Are you doing it to meet some social or philosophical goal, to make things perfect? Is perfect even possible? Your agitation, your frustration, stems from a belief that you need to accomplish something specific and are being blocked. Let's try to discover what that is. We discover that and you can free yourself."

Garcia looked at his sleeve and the chronometer came to life with direct view of his eyes. "I think our time's up."

"We can extend," Rossi offered.

"No," Garcia said, taking a candy from the bowl. He unwrapped one end and pulled the candy free with his teeth. He was unprepared for the spicy flavor, but it was

nice. He pointed the paper at her. "I would hate to violate the boundaries of our relationship. See you."



The Captain's Quarters on the *Tempest* were spacious and divided into two sections. The back section contained the bath, toilet, and lavatory, all of which could be folded into hidden recesses, and a bed, which was nothing more than a hard bench that also recessed into the wall when not in use. The front room had several hard, but functional chairs for entertaining, but most prominent was the private exercise equipment. One of the walls was adorned with weapons. The wall adjacent to the weapon display was adorned with medals and badges, proudly displayed. Garcia's eyes lingered on the various weapons, not interested in the badges or awards because that wasn't how he defined himself and so not how he defined others. Whenever he received an award or medal, he simply recycled it into the replicator; if he wanted, he could reproduce any number of medals on a whim. He noted their importance to Kitara and then returned to examining the weapons.

Kitara was working out when she gave permission for Garcia to enter. She continued pushing herself through the exercise, lifting weights via pulleys using her legs and thigh muscles. She noted the box Garcia was carrying but didn't ask. She merely watched him studying the weapons while she finished her reps. She rose, wiping her face with a towel hanging around her neck. Only then did he take the time to really observe her. She was a beautiful woman with armor on, and without it, she was heart stopping. She was a tall thick woman, with muscle to rival the Perserver god's he had met. She was perhaps the ideal image of what the Amazon women of Earth's legend. Her long, dark hair hung to the small of her back. The ridges gave her character.

"You're earlier than I anticipated," Kitara said. "How was your session?"

"I want to kill her," Garcia said, going for black humor.

"Losira or Rossi?" Kitara asked.

"Rossi," Garcia said.

"Umm, then therapy is obviously working," Kitara said, proceeding to her bedroom.

Garcia followed. "What does that mean?"

"If she is eliciting that much anger out of you, then she is obviously touching nerves that need to be examined," Kitara said. She opened a recess to retrieve undergarments. She extended the bed and laid the garments out. A uniform hung next to the bed on a half mannequin slash personal valet that held the various sets of armor available to her.

"Do you realize, this is the first time I've been to your quarters," Garcia said, not diverting his eyes from her as she removed her exercise attire.

"Do you like what you see?" Kitara asked, meaning her.

"It's functional," Garcia said, meaning the room, but knowing full well that she had been fishing for a compliment. She grunted and proceeded to the shower. As she stood in the corner, the semi-transparent walls to the sonic shower extended to encapsulate her. She could have used water, but that was a luxury, and Klingons considered it a point of honor to routinely deny themselves creature comfort. If he ever decided to share quarters with her, they would need two beds. The hard table would be for her and the mattress for him, as he could only do the hard table a couple nights before

his back hurt. It only took a moment for her to become perfectly clean with nothing more than air and sound whipping around her body. She stepped out of the shower as the doors receded back into their recess.

“What is that?” Kitara asked, pointing to the box he was carrying.

“Oh, yeah,” Garcia said, handing it to her. “It’s for you.”

“You brought me a present?” Kitara asked, a little anger in her voice. “I am not one to be bought.”

“I’m not buying you,” Garcia said. “I think I’ve worked hard to earn my right to stand next to you, if you still want that.”

“Are you backing out on our agreement?” Kitara asked.

“I have no intentions of backing out,” Garcia said. “Do you want me to back out?”

Kitara studied him, looking for some kind of duplicity. She opened the box, dropped it to the floor, knelt down to study the contents before standing. She pulled the dress out of the box as she rose, holding it before her. It was a traditional Klingon dress, appropriate for a wedding ceremony. Her eyes flashed with fire.

“Are you trying to make me kill you before we get married?” Kitara demanded.

“I’m not making you do anything,” Garcia said. “Except to wear that dress for the ceremony tomorrow.”

She approached, so angry that she was forcing herself to hold back. “I will make you wear this.”

“You will wear that tomorrow, or you will not get married and I will name Grilka my number one,” Garcia said.

“How dare you threaten me!” Kitara said.

“Why should I risk my life to change Klingon traditions, when you are so closed minded to what your brother is or wants to be,” Garcia asked. “If I fight for liberty, I need to know equality applies to everyone.”

“You don’t understand crap!” Kitara said, tears in her eyes. She tossed the dress at him and then shoved at him. “They will kill him! That behavior is not tolerated in our society. He is a great fighter, but he can’t fight everyone, and if people even suspected he is gay, everyone would be gunning for him, and he simply can’t fight off the entire Empire!”

“Did it ever occur to you that perhaps your brother is the great fighter he is because people did suspect and he had to fight or die?!” Garcia asked. “He is who he is because society has shaped him. But if he doesn’t want to be a fighter, then he should have the right to be whatever. And there is no reason why he can’t be a gay warrior. His orientation has nothing to do with his ability to perform his duties.”

“Don’t do this,” Kitara said. “Please.”

Garcia led her over to the bed and sat her down. He sat next to her, put an arm around her and drew her in, guiding her head on his shoulder. He had really never seen her so vulnerable, so not ready to go to war due to her strong emotions.

“Are you happy?” Garcia asked her.

“I don’t understand the question,” Kitara said.

“Are you happy? Do you really want to marry me, knowing who I am and how complicated my life is,” Garcia asked.

“Why are you asking me this now?” Kitara asked.

“Because I want to know,” Garcia said.

“I have made my choice,” Kitara said.

“Again, you’re not answering my question. I know you made a choice. You made a choice within the confines of a particular context. I can also imagine you had a childhood fantasy of what life was going to be when you grew up and got married, and this probably wasn’t that dream,” Garcia said.

“I never dreamed of getting married,” Kitara admitted. “I didn’t think anyone would willingly have me. Sure, my father would have married me off, and someone would have accepted just to be part of the House, but they would not have married me for who I am. But, as Kahless said, you go into a marriage with your eyes wide open, and live married with your eyes half shut.”

“Actually, I think Benjamin Franklyn said that,” Garcia corrected.

“This Benjamin was he a great spiritual leader on Earth?” Kitara asked.

“Well, no, not exactly. A leader. Yes. A scientist. A philosopher. Fairly hedonistic and, well, let’s just say he had a reputation of being somewhat of a ladies man,” Garcia said.

“All great leaders are,” Kitara said. “It is that drive that spurs you to be successful. Kahless was also known for having many women. There are stories of Kahless as told by these lovers and wives, and they were no less strong and decisive as Kahless. He chose them for their strength, their resolve, their ability to endure. In some ways, I see you as Kahless, and I am one of the many who will stand beside you as the god’s rain down hell around you. We are taught to take pride in our suffering and not run from it. We run to it! For through suffering we learn perseverance, and perseverance we learn patience, and patience we learn love.”

“Kahless again?” Garcia asked. Kitara nodded confirmation. “There is a Bible verse very similar to that. It’s kind of funny to hear you have something so similar. It seems like I just heard it...”

“Funny?”

“Coincidental, irony, weird,” Garcia offered.

“Tam, you’re smarter than that. It is not coincidence,” Kitara assured him.

“Whether it is algebra, physics, or a religious text from your world or mine, truth is truth.”

“Wow, now that’s profound,” Garcia said. “Which makes my question even more important than before. Yes, I hear you made your choice, but are you happy?”

“Happiness again?! Happiness is irrelevant. It is what it is,” Kitara said. “There will be good times and bad times and in between times. That is life.”

“That really isn’t an answer,” Garcia asked.

“It is an answer! This obsession with happiness is a human thing. Focus on honor. If you have honor you don’t need happiness,” Kitara said.

“So, if you have honor, you have happiness?” Garcia asked.

“Are you testing me?” Kitara asked. “Honor is a choice to act regardless of what you feel.”

“I want to understand why you are choosing me,” Garcia said.

“Do you want me?” Kitara asked, matter a factly.

Garcia locked eyes with her. “I want you. I cannot imagine being without you.”

“And the fact that I have chosen to be with you, time after time, doesn’t answer your question? The fact that no matter who you do, or what, I still stand beside you!” Kitara said. She took his head in her hands so to be sure he couldn’t turn away. “Fine, let me spell it out for you. I want to be with you. I love you. I’ve loved you from the moment we met. I know there will be issues. You will never be able to be with me fully. There is your career, your women, your children. And Goddess help your children. I go into this eyes wide open, knowing who you are. Some people see your vice as a great detriment. But I don’t see this flaw. I see the good things you do, and that you fight with honor, and you don’t hide.”

“How is it you can see past my flaws, but the quality you see in your brother is a detriment and catastrophic?” Garcia asked.

“You just will never understand,” Kitara said. “I love him. I don’t want him dead because of some senseless bounty gets placed on his head. Dying with honor is one thing, but dying alone, exiled... I can’t allow this.”

“This is why you became a warrior,” Garcia said, perhaps glimpsing part of what makes her Kitara. “So that you can have his back. That is why you tolerate my promiscuity, because you see this as a quality of being male, and you wish your brother was more like me.”

Kitara wiped her eyes. “Maybe. I’ve never thought of it like that. Yes, that makes sense.”

“About the dress,” Garcia said. “I was just making a point. I would not give you an ultimatum. As always, you’re free to do as you wish.”

Kitara kissed him and then leaned her head on his shoulder. “Don’t be angry with Losira.”

“I’m surprised to hear you say that,” Garcia said.

“How can I say this,” Kitara said, thinking hard on her words. “This is the second truly human act she has done, and there is an element of honor accompanying it. She is not just a computer program. She is definitely sentient. And she’s alone.”

Garcia nodded. “Yeah,” he agreed. “Problem is, after the baby is born, she might still be alone.”

“How so?” Kitara asked.

“The child will inherit her genes, but it won’t be a sentient machine, like her, it will be completely biological,” Garcia said.

“Then you must make sure she is not alone,” Kitara said.

Garcia stared at the floor and leaned into Kitara. “What was the first?” Garcia asked.

“First?”

“You said ‘second truly human act’ if I’m not mistaken,” Garcia said.

“The first is confidential between she and I,” Kitara said.

They sat together, in quiet, just leaning on each other, both thinking their own thoughts. After a while, Kitara kissed him and finished getting dressed.

“Shall we go interview your assassin?” Kitara asked.

“Why not,” Garcia agreed.

CHAPTER TWENTYTHREE

Alexander was being held on the Path Finder. Though there was a bench in the cell, he sat on the floor with his back to the corner. When Garcia arrived, he didn't bother to get up. He merely scowled. "So, you have finally come to kill me? I am surprised you have the balls to do it yourself."

Garcia looked to Kitara. "Did he just disparage me?"

"He is trying to bait you into killing him quickly," Kitara explained.

Alexander stood up. "I am not a coward!"

Kitara nonverbally expressed to Garcia that she was right, with a hint of satisfaction at how easy it was to prove her point.

"No, just a really lousy warrior," Garcia said. "How did you traveled back in time?"

"Screw you," Alexander said.

"What is up with this animosity? What have I done to you?" Garcia asked.

Alexander sat down, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

"I don't know what the Federation is doing with criminals that travel back in time to alter the future, but I dare say you are probably better off cooperating with me than being locked away in some dark cellar the rest of your life," Garcia said.

"I am not a criminal!" Alexander said.

"You are trying to change the future and that means the Temporal Consortium would label you a criminal. Will label you a criminal? I'm not sure what tense to use for a time traveler. Altering time is a crime, as well as attempted homicide," Garcia said.

"If I had succeeded, I would have been a hero!" Alexander said.

It wasn't exactly a direct admission to being guilty of time traveling, but it was sufficient for Garcia to return to his main concern.

"Why do you want to kill me?" Garcia asked. Alexander looked away. "You're right. You shouldn't tell me. That would probably change the timeline."

Garcia turned his attention to Kitara as if he was going to ignore Alexander for a moment, but as soon as he turned his head, Alexander began to ramble.

"If you only knew what a menace you are, you would throw yourself on your own sword," Alexander said. "I curse the day you were born."

Garcia heard his sister's voice, "you're a monster," in his head. "Okay, so it is something personal," Garcia said, speaking over the voice.

"Lots of people want you dead," Alexander said. "And the number grows daily."

"I have no doubt that's true," Garcia agreed, his right hand grabbing his left wrist. "But you have taken it to a whole new level! You're the only one I know of using a time machine to kill me. What did I do to you personally? Kill your dog? Steal your girlfriend?"

"Maybe you're his real father," Kitara jested.

Alexander raged enough to hit the force field. "He is not my father! His son kills my father," Alexander said, spittle coming out of his mouth. "I thought if I killed you, then you don't have a son and my father won't die."

Kitara gave Garcia a look that he interpreted as, "I told you so," as he recollected his earlier dialogue about what would drive a man to travel back in time.

“Could you be more specific?” Garcia asked. “I have a lot of children. Or will have. Soon. Which son?”

“Yours and B’Etor,” Alexander said.

Garcia looked to Kitara but this time she didn’t meet his eyes. He looked back to Alexander. He decided to change the subject. “Where did you discover an Iconian Gateway?”

“How do you know about the...” Alexander stopped himself.

“Where is it?” Garcia asked.

Alexander pursed his lips. He returned to the corner at the back of the cell.

“On the video footage that we have of you on Kronos, it looked like you were wearing a bracelet. You touched it right before you stepped away,” Garcia said, touching his wrist as an example. He longed for his Kelvan device. “I presume it’s a call back device. Where is it?”

Garcia’s com badge chimed and he answered it. “Garcia here.”

“Admiral, this is Trini. Lt. Larys is requesting your presence at your estate on Kronos,” was the response.

Garcia observed Alexander’s mouth move in a surprise, clearly repeating the word “admiral.” His eyes narrowed and shifted in perplexity, as if he were trying to figure out what he had changed.

“I’ll be right there,” Garcia said, indicating to Kitara that he was through for now and that he wanted her to follow.

As soon as they were in the corridor, Kitara smacked Garcia across the face. “I thought you said you used protection?!” she growled.

“I did!” Garcia said.

“I believe you,” Kitara said, staring down the corridor. “They would both be pregnant if you hadn’t.” She took another moment of contemplation and then slapped him again, just for good measure. “How did you dispose of it?”

“I tossed it in the bin,” Garcia said, and then rolled his eyes and rubbed his forehead.

“How old are you? Twelve? Do you realize just how dangerous your stuff is? You can’t just leave that around, especially with your enemies in the same room,” Kitara said.

“I’m sorry,” Garcia said. “I wasn’t thinking...”

“Clearly,” Kitara said, her eyes narrowing as she peered down the corridor. “I will kill her the next time I see her.”

“You will not. We can’t change the timeline,” Garcia said. If she killed B’Etor now, the son wouldn’t be born, and he wouldn’t kill Worf, and Alexander wouldn’t come back in time and be in his cell, and he wouldn’t have his first lead to an Iconian Temporal Gateway.

“Fine, I will kill her after the baby is born,” Kitara said.

Garcia shrugged. “I can’t find fault with that,” he agreed. He motioned her to walk with him. “Did you notice his reaction at hearing that I’ve been promoted?”

“I did. From his perspective, the timeline has changed,” Kitara said.

“Not likely from something he did,” Garcia said.

“I concur, but someone or something has changed something significant, and he is aware of that change,” Kitara said. “A change that seems to have increased your

significance. It is like you are being driven by forces determined to have their way with you.”

“I think the correct word is railroaded,” Garcia said.

“What is it about you that is so important?” Kitara asked.

Garcia didn’t have an answer. Regardless of the number of accomplishments he had achieved, he still failed to see himself as important. Sure, his fantasies had the Universe hinging on his clever responses and actions, but that was the nature of dreaming. The pressure of being a Starship Captain, the weight of four to five hundred souls was manageable. But the weight of several star systems, of the Galaxy, of possibly the whole Universe as they know it, that was becoming intolerable.

“He wasn’t wearing the bracelet when he attacked me at Club Bliss,” Garcia said. “I’m certain of that. See if we can discover where he was staying. It’s either at his hotel, or in a storage facility. I doubt he would travel too far from that bracelet if it’s really a recall device to a temporal gateway.”

“I will ask Brock to look into it,” Kitara said.

“No,” Garcia said. He considered calling Simone and having her return her ship to Sherman’s planet, but her new mission of getting to planet Mudd was more important. He activated his communicator badge. “Losira, patch me through to Jay,” he said. A moment later Jay responded. “Would you and your team be willing to go retrieve an artifact for me?”

“Absolutely,” Jay said, without the slightest hesitation.

“Thank you. Gear up and meet Losira at the Gateway. She’ll give you the specs for the device and further instructions. Make sure you deliver it to me, personally.”

“You got it,” Jay said.

Garcia terminated the call.

“Is that wise?” Kitara asked.

“You want me to send Weisberg?”

“Not particularly, no,” Kitara said. “But we don’t know where he hid the device. It might not even be on Sherman’s planet.”

“I’m betting it is. He wouldn’t have traveled too far without it. Ask Kors over to interview him,” Garcia said.

“As if she will invade his privacy for our gain,” Kitara said.

“Good point. Alright, get Panays over here and get the location of that device,” Garcia said.

“You are not about to start trusting that salt vampire!” Kitara said.

“I want that device,” Garcia said.

“The moment you start using her, the more likely you are to integrate her into the crew, and I’m against that,” Kitara said.

“The potential of gaining access to a temporal gateway is too important to pass up,” Garcia said. “Take whatever security measures you feel is necessary, but get Panays over here and find that device. Please.”

Kitara grunted. “Jay says his tech can locate preserver tech, but if he can’t find it, I will have Panays interview Alexander. I will brief Jay and his team.”

They proceeded down the corridor together and diverged at the corner.



Lt. Kletsova met Garcia as he arrived on the Tempest via the gateway. She handed his manifestation orbs and Duana and Ilona were activated almost immediately. They also had an assortment of gear prepared for him and they were ready to help him into his armor.

“I have assembled an Away Team to beam down with you,” Kletsova said.

“A bit much, don’t you think?” Garcia asked. “There is a team on the planet, plus the estate’s staff.”

“Yes, but I am following orders. We’re not letting you out of our site,” Kletsova said.

“Umm, so I promoted you into babysitting,” Garcia mused.

“Babysitting is yet to come,” Ilona said.

“I can’t wait to hold the babies,” Duana said.

After suiting up, the party proceeded to the transporter room where they met four additional security officers that had been assigned to the escort detail. Trini was present, standing at the transporter alcove.

“Is this really necessary?” Garcia asked.

“It is if you’re beaming down,” Kletsova said.

“Did Larys say what she wanted me for?” Garcia asked, addressing Trini.

“No. Perhaps if you had promoted me, she would have more confidence in sharing information,” Trini said.

“Ouch,” Duana said. “One of your girlfriends is unhappy.”

“Baby’s mama, not a girlfriend,” Ilona said.

“Don’t be angry, Tam. She’s pregnant and emotional,” Duana said.

“That would make sense if the rest of the impregnated crew were being crazy then,” Ilona said.

Garcia shut his “backup singers” down with a look. He turned back to Trini, knowing full well that Ilona was mouthing the words, ‘just saying.’ He pointed at her without looking at her.

“Clear the transporter room,” Garcia said.

The Away Team hesitated.

“Now!” Garcia barked. “Even you two.”

“But we can still hear...” Ilona began.

“Out!” Garcia snapped.

Duana dragged Ilona out of the room. They doors closed.

Trini turned to leave, but Garcia took her arm, forcing her to stand her ground. She met his eyes.

“That was a bit passive aggressive,” Garcia said.

“I’m sorry,” Trini said.

“Don’t do that,” Garcia said.

“Don’t do what?” Trini asked.

“Apologize. Just say what you’re thinking,” Garcia said.

“I’ve worked just as hard as everyone else in your crew and I got nothing? Not even a good report?” Trini snapped.

“And you didn’t stab me in the back like Tatyana,” Garcia added.

“Exactly!” Trini said. She faltered. “No. I mean...”

“Don’t do that. You’re squashing that and it’s a legit feeling and you need to deal with it,” Garcia said.

“So, you didn’t promote me because I suppress feelings?” Trini asked.

“I didn’t promote you because I don’t think you’re ready,” Garcia said. “Yes, you held your own and we have been through some horrendous stuff, but you lack the direct aggressiveness necessary to excel in this particular environment.”

“I’m not a Klingon!” Trini said.

“I know that,” Garcia said. “And I’m not grading you on that. But that passive aggressive thing you just started with, in front of the crew, is an example of what happens when suppressed anger comes out.”

“And you don’t do that?!”

“How dare you,” Garcia said.

“Tell me you don’t!” Trini said.

“Of course I do! I excel at passive aggressive. I get angry. But I endeavor to come at every one as straight as I can, just like I am doing now with you. You are a great officer. I wouldn’t trade you for anyone. That’s the reason I requested you stay on the Path Finder’s full time crew, since I intend to spend most of my time on that ship. But you still need more experience and instead of trying to manipulate me emotionally with off handed comments in front of the crew, you should come straight and ask what do I need to do to meet your expectation? Or what can I do to improve my rating?”

Trini’s face revealed a gambit of emotions before she contained herself. “You’re right. I’m sorry...”

“No. Don’t do that.”

“Don’t say sorry? People say sorry when they mess up.”

“It isn’t necessary here because you’ve not done anything wrong,” Garcia said. “You didn’t step on my toes. And passive aggressive is a legitimate tactic, it’s just not effective in this setting.”

“I don’t know what you want from me!” Trini said, the random tears turning into steady streams.

“Stop crying for starters,” Garcia said.

Trini started bawling. Garcia pulled gently to bring her closer, but she resisted and raised her free hand to communicate, ‘no, she wanted her space.’ Garcia let her hand go and crossed his arms.

“This is definitely not effective,” Garcia said.

“Oh, just give me a damn moment,” Trini snapped.

“Better at direct aggressive,” Garcia said.

Trini turned her back to Garcia while she tried to get herself together and sank to the floor. Garcia knelt beside her and touched her shoulder

“I know you don’t love me, but hell, you don’t even like me enough to tell me to my face,” Trini sobbed into your hand.

“Trini, what are you talking about. You know I love you,” Garcia said.

“You don’t love anyone. You’re just a monster. Get out!” Trini yelled, pulling her shoulder away from his touch.

Garcia’s hands were trembling with anger. “I don’t know what’s going on here but...”

“I said get out!” Trini yelled. She stood up, turned at him and slapped him in the face. “The only ones that got promoted slept with you, right? Is that what it takes? Hell, I threw myself at you and you turned me down. Why do you hate me?” She backed up to the wall, covering her eyes and slid down to the floor. “I work so hard to prove to you and I’m so much nicer to you than Tatiana...”

“Trini,” Garcia said, kneeling.

“Get out! I hate you...” Trini said. “Oh, but I can’t be without you... Just leave already. It’s what you’re going to do anyway...” She struck at him again, hitting in the eye.

Garcia stood, angry, and confused. Troi was suddenly in his ear: “There is something wrong here. You need to call Jurak.” But the memory of their last fight just angered him more, and he tuned out her voice. He checked the coordinates on the transporter console. They were set for his estate. He set it for a solo transport and set the timer. His face was flushed with anger, and the more Troi tried to talk sense in him, the more he raged and more he was determined to just get off the ship. A part of his brain knew something was seriously wrong, actually agreed with Troi’s assessment, but another part wanted to just leave and be done with it all. The artifact blocking his normal crisis resolution was palpable.

He looked at Trini and there was a sudden compassion. “Trini?” he asked gently.

Trini didn’t respond with words. She simply sobbed. Another wave of repulsion rippled across Garcia’s mind. He set the timer in motion. Console lights indicated various checks in progress. There was a visible countdown on the display. One of the transporter pad’s luminosity increased in intensity.

“Fine, we will continue this when you get yourself under control,” Garcia snapped. “Shut up, Troi!”

Garcia stepped up into the transporter alcove and onto the illuminated pad, turning forward to confirm Trini was still facing away from him. The transporter wave enveloped him, tore him apart and reconstructed him so quickly that he hadn’t noticed any time elapsing. Theoretically he shouldn’t feel any pain, but he always felt a tingling sensation that went from skin to bone. Imaginary or real, it was real enough for him. He shuddered, and added another count to his transporter tally.

The transporter had set him down at the estate’s established receiving platform, outside the main structure. The platform was like a rock on a sand garden, only instead of nice white or yellow beach sand, the dirt was black denoting its volcanic origins. He could see into the valley and a variety of rugged plant life that had managed to thrive in this environment. The plant life was just as hardy and tough as any of the animal life, so tough it was a wonder that a tribble population nearly decimated the plant life on Chronos. A tribble would have to eat through a bark that was just as tough as an oyster shell.

There was visible steam rising from the top of the volcano in the background which might have held Garcia’s attention a moment longer if it hadn’t been necessary to attend to the Klingon posse taking up position around him. The one he identified as the leader was dragging Larys by the hair. Two of the henchmen were dragging Moshe, clearly wounded. Garcia took a step towards Moshe. Weapons came to ready. Garcia had a double realization: now that he was on the planet, outside of Trini’s sphere of influence, his inability to think clearly was due to being telepathically overwhelmed by Trini’s state

of mind, a thing that shouldn't have happened; the other, and more prominent, was that he was in serious trouble. Even though he was certain he was about to die, he moved towards Moshe again. He was blocked.

"I'm a Doctor. Let me help him," Garcia said.

Unar laughed. "That would defeat the purpose of mortally wounding him," Unar said. "I will put him out of his misery soon enough, but first, I must kill you, thereby terminating the contract between the two of you, eliminating any threat of your offspring having any legal rights to his fortune."

"Oh, really? Please tell me this isn't about petty jealousy and materialistic gain," Garcia cringed.

"You are just showing how much an outsider you are. This isn't about jealousy. This is how we do things. The old and weak are eliminated by the young and powerful who hold the courage and vision to take charge," Unar said. "The fact that you are a non Klingon doesn't even register on my radar. What does register is the amount of power you have accumulated. So, I will kill you, and your unborn offspring here and on the ship, take charge of your ship and make your female carry my offspring. And I will add Moshe's power base and wealth to that, and before it's all done, I will be in control of the Empire."

Unar handed Larys off to a henchmen and took up a bat'leth.

"I'm truly impressed you came alone," Unar said, twirling the weapon strikingly.

Garcia calculated the odds. Fourteen Klingons with disruptor pistols, armed and ready. One held a knife to Larys throat. The other two, unarmed, held Moshe, forcing him to watch what was about to unfold.

"Yeah, well, I would have brought more folks had I known you were so lacking in honor," Garcia said.

Unar laughed. "I will not be so easily goaded," he said.

"Just like that?" Garcia asked. "Too afraid to kill me directly?"

"Oh, I'm going to kill you directly, right after I capture your ship," Unar said, activating his communicator. "Kols, send the boarding parties."

"Unable to get a lock... Their shields are up!" Kols reply came as a shock to him as well as Unar.

"What is this treachery?! Open fire, destroy them!" Unar ordered. The signal went dead. "Kols?!" He stepped forward. "Kill Garcia now," he ordered his men.

Moshe whispered something. The men brandishing energy weapons did an about face, stepped away, and holstered their weapons, except for one. The one holstered his weapon, retrieved a bat'leth and stepped up to Garcia.

"This will be a fair fight, Brother," the one said, bowing to relinquish the bat'leth to Garcia.

"Betrayer!" Unar yelled, attacking the one. Garcia took the bat'leth and blocked, saving his brother's life. The battle began.



The moment Garcia beamed down, the telepathic connection to the manifestations orbs was severed. Duana and Ilona collapsed to the floor. Kletsova reacted instantly.

"Quick, to the transporter pads!" she ordered, leading the charge into the transporter room.

Kletsova found Trini on the floor, crying, but she didn't have time to deal with that. The Away team had assembled on the pads as she was finalizing the transporter for another departure when she noticed an anti-transporter field had been erected planet side. She hit the com panel on the transporter console, opening a channel to the bridge.

"This is Commander Kletsova. Shields up, battle stations! This is not a drill," Kletsova said. She pointed at the closest Away Team guard: "You, take her to sickbay. The rest of you, to your posts, now..."

They hesitated. The ship lurched as the shields took a direct hit from an enemy vessel. The hesitation was replaced with sudden resolve. Kletsova steadied herself against the console as the ship shuddered again.

"Helm, evasive action! I'm on my way," Kletsova said. Using the transporter, she risked beaming herself to the Bridge during a fire fight.

The security officer on the Bridge, Tedra, was prepared to attack Kletsova, but fortunately waited till the transport finished. Relieved it was their own, she went back to her station, reporting as she went.

"We're surrounded by six ships," Tedra announced. "Shields are holding."

"Let's do a Garcia maneuver," Kletsova said, taking the command chair. "Helm, full aft thrusters, ramming speed. Tactical, fire at will. I want an assault team in transporter room one ASAP!"

S'Had was at the helm. As she took the Tempest forward, the ship in front of them realized someone crazy or fearless of death was flying straight at them and took evasive. "Do you want me to hit them, or just push through?"

"Get as close as you can, keep thrusters on full," Kletsova ordered. "Badich, hit them with the starboard grappling hooks, fire all of them."

"Shields still holding," Tedra announced, as another blast rocked the ship. Indeed, had it not been for their modified shielding, they wouldn't have survived the first volley from six ships. "Assault team is in place."

Grappling hooks fired, four of six making contact with the main fuselage of the closest enemy ship. The flight dynamics of both ships were suddenly altered, as their center of gravity changed, their countering thrusts setting them in a spin. The enemy ship took several torpedoes meant for the Tempest.

"S'Had, tap them now," Kletsova said. "Transporter, beam the assault to the auxiliary command center as soon as we hit."

The Tempest bumped the other ship. Energies flared where the shields conflicted, arcs of energy pushed out, creating an opening between the ships. As soon as the team reported they had arrived safely, Kletsova had Badich sever the grappling lines. The enemy ship spun away, their spin partly due to momentum, but also partly because the Bridge crew was trying to compensate for the joint center of gravity to stabilize their situation, even as S'Had had been purposely keeping them both unstable. As soon as the tethers were cut, S'Had rolled the Tempest out of her spin, pushing for another enemy. One of the ships was trying to avoid collision with the ship they had spun. The others were changing their flight paths due to the Tempest sudden change in direction: coming straight at them, a spread of torpedoes preceding her. As Kletsova singled out the next closest ship to focus her attack on, the others saw this as an opportunity to set up their own attacks. There had been sufficient energy release when the shields had clashed that no one had detected the transporter signature, so they were not prepared when one of

their own opened fire on them. Kletsova's next target didn't have a chance as it barreled down on it, all because she was heedless of the others targeting her. She managed to take out its weapons and propulsion in her attack. She pushed past it, spinning for her next target, just as the captured ship took aim at the closest of its prey. Both targeted ships sustained damaged. Before the remaining two could regroup, both the Tempest and the capture ship fired on the fifth enemy, taking out's propulsion and weapons. The final, but undamaged ship, fled at warp, leaving the others at Kletsova's mercy.

"Hail them," Kletsova said. "If you stand down and surrender your vessels, then we'll let everyone know Garcia beat you fairly in a war game exercise. Force my hand, we will destroy your ships and let everyone know you were bested by a crew of women. What will it be?"

"Captain on the Bridge," Badich announced.

Indeed, Kitara and other officers were arriving to assist or relieve where needed. Over the comm. Everyone heard the voice of the commander agreeing to Kletsova's terms of surrender, their systems powering down.

"What the hell?" Kitara demanded.

Kletsova stood up, saluting Klingon style. "Captain. We boarded one. We managed to damage five and they are just now signaling their surrender. One ship escaped."

There was a long pause as Kitara considered the hails coming in and the crews responses to the situation.

"You are going to have to do better, number one," Kitara said. "You can't be letting people escape like that. Where's Garcia..."

"Captain, seven more ships are approaching," Tedra announced. "Gowron's flag ship! They're hailing."

"On screen," Kitara said.

Gowron appeared. "We heard there was coup in play."

Kitara looked to her first officer. "My understanding is this was just a little war game exercise."

"Really? Then where's Garcia?" Gowron asked.

Kitara looked to Kletsova. "He had just transported planet side before the attack," Kletsova said, not bothering to mention Garcia had beamed down alone and that a transporter block had gone up as soon as he was on the ground, which had alerted her to the ambush.

"The transporter block at the Moshe estate is down," Tedra said. "Still unable to raise anyone."

"Join me on the ground, Gowron?" Kitara said. "Kletsova, clean this mess up, and make sure we have teams on these ships we just confiscated. Don't let any of the new comers to this venue bully you into giving up your trophies."

"Aye," Kletsova said.

"Tedra, have Jurak standing by in sickbay," Kitara said. "God help Garcia if he got himself killed again. The bastard will do anything to block my House."

CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Unar rushed Garcia, bringing his bat'leth to bear. This seemed in slow motion and surreal, as he was still accepting his bat'leth from a brother, but he had no time to understand the game of loyalties and what was what. The first thing was the attack. He brought his bat'leth up to ward off the blow that would injure him or his brother. His brother remained kneeling, as if he had expected or wanted Garcia to kill him. The attack had been pretty straight forward, showing that Unar had anticipated Garcia retreating, as opposed to advancing into him. It revealed Unar had done his home work. Garcia advanced, their blades locked. Simultaneously on locking blades, he tangled a leg with Unar's and they both went down. The far end of his bat'leth end hit the transporter platform and sparked like steel on a grinding stone, breaking. Garcia put an elbow in the back of Unar's neck. The blow might have killed a human, but didn't even slow Unar down. They disengaged, rolled to their feet and came up. Garcia threw down his broken sword and picked up a hockey stick. Unar laughed and advanced. Garcia pushed through the attack and lit Unar up with the pain side of the hockey stick. Unar was not prepared for the intensity of a pain stick, partly from surprise, but partly having not prepared for this ritual. Unar went to his knees. Garcia twirled the stick and hit Unar in the back of the head, breaking the hockey stick. He took the remaining piece and lodged it into Unar's neck, driving it down into his back. Unar died, gasping.

Garcia looked at the men holding Larys. They let her go.

"Get my medical bag," Garcia told her. "Quick."

Garcia went directly to Moshe.

"There's nothing you can do," Moshe said.

"Shut up and let me save you," Garcia directed.

His medical tricorder was suddenly in his hands, Larys hovering by in case he needed something else. Garcia took the scans and slowly lowered his tricorder. Moshe laughed, coughing blood.

"I told you," Moshe said. "There is only one thing you can do for me."

"No," Garcia said.

"Don't let my enemy slay me. You finish it. Speed me on my way," Moshe said. "My friend. My son. This is our way."

Garcia allowed tears to flow. He didn't care if anyone was looking. He didn't know Moshe as well as he knew Gowr, but he hated this. He hated it even as he retrieved a blade from a leg pocket. He hated it even as he held his friend and put the knife into his remaining heart. He held the head, keeping the eyes open. And when the life passed, he howled. Garcia was unprepared for the chorus that howled with him. And when he was breathless, staring up at the night sky, he lowered his head into his friend's hair and sobbed.

It was Kitara helping him up. He stood, wiping his eyes, and turned to face the crowd that had gathered. There were seven coins at his feet.

"You have earned your House, brother," Gowron declared.

Gowron and the High Counsel moved to enter the house to go partake of the food Larys had prepared. As they flowed into the house, most of them nodded to him. The seven who had thrown coins personally stopped and took him by the arms, with the exception of last one, who wasn't entitled to the brotherly grip as she was female.

“We should talk,” B’Etor said. She ignored the glare Kitara was giving her.

“Soon,” Garcia said. “I promise.”

B’Etor went inside, her sister smiled pleasantly, touching his hand, and followed her sister.

“This alliance will be our undoing,” Kitara whispered.

“Probably, mother,” Garcia agreed. “But, what else could go wrong?”

“That first officer you gave me scratched my ship,” Kitara said.

“Well, there is always that,” Garcia said.

“I love you,” Kitara said.

“I love you,” Garcia said.

His communicator badge rang before as they moved in to kiss.

“Ignore it,” Kitara said.

“Can’t. That’s the urgent signature,” Garcai said, leaning his forehead against her forehead. He activated his badge. “Go.”

“Admiral, you’re needed in Sickbay, ASAP,” came the voice of Tedra.

“Tempest?”

“Be right there,” Garcia said. “May I?”

“Your work here is done. I will clean up. As usual,” Kitara said.

“Right. Beam me up, Tedra,” Garcia said.



Garcia entered sickbay and almost immediately felt the same psychic impulse to flee as he had earlier in the transporter. It was so strong that he didn’t notice Simone until after she injected the contents of the hypo spray into his arm. The cloud of panic dissipated. Trini was on medical bed, strapped down, and screaming, “Please, don’t kill my baby,” and other nonsensical phrases. Cohen was on site, as well as Rossi, and Undine. Jurak, Undine, Rossi, and Simone gathered around Garcia.

“Lt. Sookanan is having a telepathically induced psychotic break,” Rossi said.

“But she’s not telepathic,” Garcia argued.

“No, but her baby is,” Rossi said.

“This is my fault, Admiral,” Undine said. “Rossi tried to warn me something was off about Trini, and I didn’t accept her theory.”

“And the baby can project all the way to me? Is that what I was feeling before you shot me?” Garcia asked.

“The baby is in a hyper panic mode and responding to Sookanan’s emotions, but using her brain and spinal cord as a psychic transmitter, but no one else has picked it up because it specifically tuned in to you. It’s basically calling ‘daddy’ for help,” Simone explained. “The drug has suppressed your telepathic receptiveness, but it won’t last long. We suspect you are being affected because the baby is focused on pushing you away, and has been doing so since your injured Sookanan.”

Garcia sighed. Though he couldn’t recall the specific incident because he had been acting out from a dream state, he did acknowledge that he had hurt her before she and Jurak had been able to rouse him from the dream. Then he remembered that the dream had been influenced by the fact he had taken drugs to sleep. A bit of self loathing rose to the back of his throat, with a hint of bile. He heard his sisters voice.

“Okay, so what do we do to help Trini?” Garcia asked.

“It’s killing her,” Jurak said. “We have two options. We can abort it, or put it in an artificial womb.”

“So, what’s the delay?” Garcia asked.

“The baby is telepathic. It requires a telepathic host to maintain normal development. You are the only one that has shown any telepathic receptivity to it, which means you are the only one that can carry it to term.”

“You want to put it in me?” Garcia asked.

“In a word,” Rossi said.

“I’m a doctor, not an incubator,” Garcia snapped. He was about to start off on a rant, pointing out the flaw in their theory of him becoming the recipient, for instance, the baby was pushing him away telepathically, so how were they going to change its little tiny brain’s fight or flight response...

“As a Doctor, you should know you don’t have the anatomy to carry it. It has to be an artificial womb. You will have to be in physical contact with the womb at all times, or at the very least, within one meter of the womb, or the baby will die,” Jurak said.

Garcia didn’t hold back on the flaw in this part of the developing impromptu plan. “You mean, I have to be locked in a room with the artificial womb for six months?” Garcia asked. “Not on a box, not on a train. I have ships to run and...”

“Don’t do Doctor Seuss. It’s not becoming of a Starship Admiral,” Rossi interrupted him.

“Tam, you have nothing to fear. Vulcans have seen this before and we have developed a portable artificial womb that you can carry like a back pack. The material allows for direct telepathic energy exchange, as well as sound conduction from your body into the womb,” Simone said.

“Sound?” Garcia asked. Focusing on the “sound” part of her speech blocked his protest. ‘I’m not afraid,’ part of his brain yelled. “The baby is afraid, maybe, but not me.’ Duana’s voice rang clear in his head. “Tam, you’re sound infantile for a reason. Focus. We got you. You’re safe.”

“Babies, even fetuses, are learning about their environment, both their immediate environment in the womb, and the exterior environment vicariously through their mothers. Babies learn taste by what their mothers eat. They are learning the sounds of mom and dad, those who speak most frequently around them. They respond to their mother’s emotions. It has been demonstrated that babies respond to music that they have heard in the womb,” Simone said. “For this to work, Tam, we will put a neuro-monitoring device on your temple which will broadcast your emotional make up to the portable womb, which will give the baby real time information about your external and internal environments. Your physical contact with the portable womb will allow your own telepathic defenses and control to exert itself naturally on the baby, so it won’t be broadcasting or overriding anyone else’s nervous system, as it is presently doing to Sookanan.”

“And stop talking about me like I’m not here! My name is Trini!” Trini yelled.

Garcia was quiet as he contemplated what they were asking him, all the while, trying to see Trini, only unable to meet her eyes. The baby’s push was palpable.

“You’re hesitancy is not logical,” Simone said.

“I’m not feeling particularly logical at the moment. You know what you’re asking me to do?” Garcia asked.

“Save your baby,” Simone said.

Garcia rocked his head in affirmation. “You’re right. Let’s do it,” Garcia said.

“Are you sure?” Undine asked.

“What? You’re going to talk me out of it now?” Garcia asked.

“No, but there is risk to you,” Undine said.

“Risk is our business,” Garcia snapped. “Besides. Do you really think I would say no when so many of the crew are carrying children they didn’t ask for?”

“Do you understand that that in itself suggest an ethical conflict which suggests you’re being manipulated or coerced into doing something you might not otherwise do, which requires us to take a moment and think this through?” Undine asked.

“Does the baby have a minute?” Garcia asked.

“The baby does, but every moment, Sookanan is at greater risk for permanent brain damage,” Simone said.

“Undine, I love your ethical qualities. Keep doing what you’re doing. But for now, the assessments over,” Garcia said. “Impregnate me.”

Undine nodded, no longer objecting. Simone had already replicated an artificial womb and had it ready for fitting. They had Garcia sit down, and ‘dressed’ him with the forward fitting ‘backpack.’ The straps went across the back, and up over the shoulder, with padding, and the pouch rested in front of his stomach.

“I thought you said a back pack. This is a stomach pack,” Garcia said.

“I said like a back pack,” Simone said. “The baby needs to hear normal stomach, heart, and breathing sounds, so naturally the best conduction of sound would be from your stomach to the pack. Has your IQ dropped?”

Garcia looked at Rossi. She said nothing. Simone demonstrated how he could take it off, one shoulder at a time. He could wear it like a pack if he needed to, or sling it over one shoulder, but it was best to carry it just like every other female, on the front. They walked him through all the emergency medical features of the pack. The womb’s internal environment controls would match Garcia’s body temperature. It had a molecular replicator for dispensing appropriate chemicals and nutrients into the bath, as well as putting nutrients into the baby’s blood streams. Most of the nutrients, chemical messengers, proteins, antibodies, etc, which needed to be as naturalistic due the baby’s hyper sensitivity to psychic spins that a host can put on their own molecules, were actually robbed from Garcia directly by mechanical means. Various points on the bag itself would literally latch on to Garcia and suck blood and nutrients into the device where the collections would pool into a reservoir and were then filtered through to the baby. It was like a hypospray in reverse. The same procedure returned baby blood and waste products back to Garcia. The Vulcans referred to it as a grab and give session, but the humans called it a pump and dump. The periodic pulse of the grab and give sessions were audible and might take some time acclimatizing too, not to mention the associating pain, especially if the bag shifted during a grab and give session. The artificial womb and Garcia were now a combined, synergistic life support for the baby. Not perfect, but the best shot.

Then they measured Garcia to harmonize body energy to baby and womb. This procedure started with the heart’s electromagnetic pulse, because it was the loudest electromagnetic signature of the human body, a frequency that was as much as forty thousand times greater than the brain’s neural electrical signature. Once measured, the

womb was tuned into it, so that it pulsed with Garcia heart beat. The stray thought as Garcia's eyes saw the electric signatures mapped out on Jurak's PADD was, "I wonder if this is how a shark 'sees.'" But then he noticed the other signatures, which looked like a pattern similar to the Chinese energy systems.

"Oh bloody hell, next you're going to be telling me about chakras," Garcia complained as they fussed over him.

"Already taken them into account," Jurak said. He glued the neuro-meter to his left temple.

"Ouch," Garcia grumbled.

"You're an awful patient," Rossi observed. "You should feel lucky you can take the pack off at night and sleep on your stomach if you wanted."

"Yeah, and what does your Ellis guru say about the word 'should'?" Garcia asked, referring her back to her own primary counseling modality.

"Nice, grumpy," Rossi said.

"If you do take it off at night, it's best to be in physical contact at all times," Simone reminded. "The less it uses the backup nutrient pack and waste filters the better. Also, you'll have to eat better. No Klingon blood wine. No vigorous exercise activities... and do I have to say it? No rough Klingon sex for a while."

"I think I can go six months without being beat up," Garcia said.

Rossi and Undine laughed disbelief. Cohen was smiling, but looked away. Garcia felt compelled to try to change the way he believed they judged him, but realized his perception was fairly biased, and it was probably best to remain silent. "Monster," his sister's voice echoed. "God, sometimes I hate you sis," he followed her voice.

"This will allow you to read the baby's stats," Simone said, activating the womb monitor on one of the straps.

"I know what that is," Garcia said, his anger displaced. "I studied on Vulcan, too."

Simone nodded, almost apologetically. "The womb is ready for its passenger," Simone announced, pushing on over Garcia's sarcasm.

Jurak looked Garcia in the eyes. "You sure about this?"

"Yes," Garcia snapped. "For crying out loud, let's get this over with."

All the while Trini continued to bemoan her fate, begging and pleading. Jurak executed the transport. The baby, placenta and all, along with cells from Trini herself to help maintain some of its original environment, was relocated from Trini to the artificial womb Garcia was now wearing. He was unprepared for the weight and nearly fell forwards. As soon as the transport was complete, Cohen gave Trini a sedative.

"When she wakes up she will feel a lot better," Simone assured him. "How are you feeling?"

"No difference," Garcia said, reading the stats. "Heavier. My balance is off."

Rossi chuckled. "Well, you're center of gravity has changed."

"I know that. Even if I wasn't a doctor, I know enough that I'm not an airplane that had weight and balance shifted. Sorry, I don't know why I'm so grumpy. Everything seems fine. Except, this isn't right. I must be reading this wrong. I see two heart beats. Do you see two heartbeats? This is my signature, this is baby, and this is an echo?"

"Oh," Jurak sighed. Double checking his read outs.

"What?" Garcia asked.

“Standby,” Jurak said, scratching his chin.

“You just can’t say ‘oh’ during a major medical procedure. What’s wrong?” Garcia demanded.

“Nothing, technically, with the baby... However, apparently the transporter had a duplication error. There are now two babies,” Jurak said.

“Oh, bloody hell, tell me you’re joking?” Garcia said.

Simone, Jurak, Cohen, and Rossi were all into their scans. Their dialogue was intertwined: “Perfectly healthy? Yes, both viable. Identical twins. Can the womb handle double occupancy? It should. It will increase the pump and dump sessions...”

Garcia jerked, a shiver going from head to toe, the hair on his arms standing up. Out of reflex, he grabbed Simone’s hand. “What the heck?”

“Relax. You’re just getting internal telemetry. Partly due to being low grade telepathic, and partly because the medical devices send info two ways,” Jurak said.

“You didn’t prep me for that part?” Garcia said.

“Think of it as a bio-feedback session,” Rossi said.

Garcia made a face as if he swallowed a castor oil. “What is that I taste?”

“Is it metallic?” Jurak asked.

“No, more just blah, like eating beach sand,” Garcia complained.

“Well, that’s good. You didn’t notice the system doing its first session dump into your bloodstream,” Simone said. “That taste is baby waste.”

Garcia made another face. “Oh god. That’s horrible? I can taste it?”

“That might fade. It’s a side effect of the technology, and is similar to synesthesia. Experiences vary per individual,” Jurak said. “Basically, your body is processing the new information and trying to make sense of it all.”

Garcia stood up, slowly, not because he had to, but because he was sensitive to sloshing the babies around. Simone said he didn’t have to exaggerate his slowness, assuring him that he could move about normal. Then the emotions hit him. He was overwhelmed and started pulling on the packs straps.

“This is not happening,” Garcia said. “Get it off. Now, take it off me...”

“Tam, sit back down,” Simone said, taking his arm. Undine took the other arm as they both blocked him from tearing the device off.

Rossi got in his face, “Tam, focus!”

Jurak was taking readings as they tried to calm Garcia. “The babies are just acclimating,” he assured him. “They’re missing some old information and adjusting to new information. You’re a different host than Trini. You are going to have to relax, Tam.”

“I’m dying!” Garcia cried.

“No, you’re not,” Rossi said. “Think peaceful thoughts.”

Lal appeared in his line of vision, petted the bag and began to sing: “Hushabye Mountain.” Garcia began to calm. He took control of his breathing back.

“There you go, keep breathing,” Rossi said. “What did you think to calm the babies? You may need to this lot for the first couple of weeks.”

“I didn’t,” Garcia admitted. “Lal did it.”

“Lal?” Rossi asked, curious.

Garcia looked at Rossi, seemingly with anger. “Hungry, angry, babies,” Garcia said.

Rossi couldn't help but laugh.

CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Garcia predicted his acclimation to pregnancy was going to take a while. The worst immediate part was everyone trying to cheer him up. “Keep a good face on it, babies can feel it.” Or “got to control those stress levels.” Those sorts of things came from the humans, and was well intended, and accurate, as fetuses were much more aware of and responsive to their in-utero environment than most people even suspected. He was sure some of the Klingons were snickering behind his back, which was a funny, inhuman sort of sound, but not as evil sounding as Gorn laughing. He would almost prefer the direct laughter, but only some of the Klingons were brave enough to tease him about it openly. He suspected that most of the male Klingons didn’t know what to make of this situation. Tuer and Jurak both assured him his reputation as a warrior was uninjured by this act of caring. They commended him for being a real father, protecting his offspring. Sure, the twin was a calibration error on Jurak’s part, but hey, they were still genetically his children. He was just sitting down to a bowl of peanut butter curry ice cream, another side affect of carrying the twins, cravings, when he was paged to the NC. He traveled over from the Path Finder via the Gateway, and paused on arriving, his hands going to the small of his back. Apparently the babies didn’t like Gateway traveling, and they were letting him know. When they weren’t happy, his lower back hurt. Funny, Trini never complained that babies protested.

Garcia pushed past his own discomfort and walked down into the midst of an argument. Kitara, Undine, Weisberg and his team, Jay and his team, Dryac in her new mobility device, and Alexander under security, were all present.

“Hand over the device,” Weisberg said.

“I was told to deliver it to Garcia in person, and that’s how I will deliver it,” Jay said. The fact that his P90 was slung where he could access it fast if there was a shoot out wasn’t lost on anyone.

“Really, Weisberg, are we going through this again?” Garcia asked.

“That bracelet is access to a Iconanian temporal gateway,” Weisberg said. “You have an obligation to give us access.”

“I have an obligation to keep you and my people safe,” Garcia said. “We’ve not investigated this site.” He paused. “Have we?”

“We were about to, but we were interrupted,” Undine said. “We have been unsuccessful operating the device so we thought we give Alexander a chance to assist us.”

“And how do you know he isn’t part of an elaborate trap?” Weisberg asked.

“Because he is being held by a salt vampire,” Undine said.

“Really?” Garcia asked, taking a second glance. He saw Panays as Leeta. “Good for you. Out and about.”

“Nice twins,” Panays said.

“Anyway, we were about to open the gateway and send a probe through, and Dryac is here in case she can sense where the other side is in space time,” Undine said. “Weisberg and his team just got here, Tam. I’m sorry.”

“No worries, let them participate,” Garcia said. “Whatcha got for me, Jay?”

Jay handed Garcia the bracelet.

“You have to wear it to be functional,” Panays said.

“I have to wear it?” Garcia asked.

“Someone has to wear it,” Panays said. “Not you specifically.”

Garcia tossed it to Weisberg, who wasn't prepared for it and nearly fumbled.

“Your turn,” Garcia said.

“Really?” Weisberg asked.

“It might be wise to note that my bracelet tech has indirectly resulted in me carrying twins,” Garcia said. “Consider this spreading the wealth.”

Weisberg swallowed but put it on. Panays, reading Alexander's mind, describe the initiating sequence. Weisberg dialed it in as she spoke it. When he finished, they turned to see the Gateway swirling, but as they focused on the gateway, no one saw the spark of a light tracing out a circle on the floor. The moment the circle was complete, everyone inside the perimeter of the circle fell through. Panays pushed Alexander through and then jumped after him. Dryac, floating above the floor in her mobility device fired a small thruster and went through the opening. Undine called for backup. Kitara jumped in, going after her husband, who fell through in the first moment. The support team got there just as the circle disappeared, leaving only the circumference marked by a faint line.

Panays broke Alexander's leg as soon as she hit the sand and disappeared into a nearby cave. Kitara sent Alexander's other guard after her. Marijic and Gates on their own initiative assessed Alexander, but there was little they could do for him at this juncture. Weisberg joined Kitara in assessing Garcia's condition. They had all landed in sand, which helped. That, and the fall hadn't been that great.

Garcia accepted Weisberg's help up and brushed the sand off his butt.

“Well, didn't see that coming, did you?” Garcia asked.

“Yeah, actually, I did. What did I tell you about trusting a salt vampire?!” Kitara said.

“Okay, I'll give you that one,” Garcia said.

“Where are we?” Weisberg asked.

Dryac, who was hovering nearby, rotated her orientation to be a part of the conversation. “We are on Lambda Paz, a desert moon of Pentarus 3,” Dryac answered.

“Why does that place sound familiar?” Garcia asked.

“Interestingly, we have also traveled backwards in time from where we were,” Dryac continued. “The star date is 44306.5”

“Alright, well the first business is survival. We need shelter and water,” Garcia said.

“I say we ask Alexander. Maybe the gateway is around here,” Kitara said.

“Or, we can use the device to return?” Weisberg asked.

“You guys don't get it. I've killed you already,” Alexander shouted at Garcia. “If I couldn't kill you directly, I was supposed to bring you here.”

“Here? Why?” Kitara said.

Garcia looked up, at nothing particular. He suddenly heard Panays in his head. “This was a trap set by your grandmother. I was able to change the temporal drop point, giving you ten minutes. The gateway is yours if you can access it. Good luck. And thank you for sparing my life.”

“Tam?” Kitara asked, aware that he was tuning into something as he scanned the horizon for signs of Kelvan.

“We need to go,” Garcia said, leading the way. “Into the cave, now. Bring Alex.”
 “Really?”

“Now. Please, trust me,” Garcia said.

“You can’t run from Kelinda forever,” Alex yelled.

Jay and Carter pulled up alongside Garcia. “Anything we should be looking for?”

“I don’t know yet. Tech. Anything. The Gateway is here somewhere,” Garcia said.

“Quiet,” Carter said. “You hear that?”

“Running water,” Garcia agreed. “Come on folks, let’s keep everyone together.”

They came to a fountain head and a dead end. Jay pointed out the salt vampires footprints. They ended at the fountain.

“So now what?” Weisberg asked.

“We figure out how to use this before my grandmother arrives,” Garcia said.

“Somehow she knew we were going to be here. She used Alexander as a pawn to draw us here. Panays gave us a head start.”

“So, how did McCoy access the Guardian?” Kitara asked.

“They simply talked to it,” Garcia said. “Guardian of Forever, can you hear me?”

No response. Garcia felt stupid. A moment later there was a sound of thunder.

“Here she comes,” Alexander said.

“Come on, think folks. Athena said that some portals were disguised as every day objects. Maybe there is another door, or a loose rock, something.”

“Maybe it’s the fountain,” Gates said. “What do you do with a fountain?”

“You drink,” Garcia said, going for the water.

Kitara stopped him. “Don’t you dare. Has anyone ran the specs on this?”

Mosleh nodded. “Tricorder said it’s just water. I’m detecting a massive energy buildup outside the cave,” he went on.

Garcia touched the water, drank from it.

Everyone looked at him. He frowned. “Sorry, nothing.”

Lal tapped Garcia on the shoulder. “Get in the fountain,” she said.

On instinct, Garcia trusted her. He took off his boots and sock and got in the water. His world changed. He was standing in front of a goddess, shimmering in light. At the same time he was still in the cave and the struggle was deciding on what to focus. The fact that the goddess was incredibly attractive and growing closer was making the decision easier the longer he stayed in the water.

“Everyone in the fountain,” Garcia said.

“We can’t all fit in here,” Kitara said.

“Make room, do it now,” Garcia said. “I’m accessing information...”

“You were wise to remove your shoes and socks,” the goddess said. “My name is Clio. And I’ve been waiting for this moment, all my life.”

Clio spoke this as she stepped into Garcia, embracing him. Garcia didn’t resist. She kissed him. Mentally, Garcia was transported, but his body was still in the pool. He saw Kelinda approaching the group, trying to use her tech, but Garcia had activated some sort of Guardian that was protecting the fountain and those in it. Kelinda paced around the fountain, perturbed by the problem, but not able to breach the protective barrier. He noticed her pacing destroyed the one artifact of the salt vampire, the foot print left at the fountain. He wondered why he focused on that specific details, as opposed to say,

Alexander's compound fracture. That tangent took him to the fracture, he mended the wound, making the leg whole and removing the pain. In some ways, accessing the fountain was similar to accessing a Kelvan computer. After the leg healing though, the goddess interface took over the controls.

Garcia found himself lying in a meadow, the gentle flowing sound of a brook nearby was subtle harmony to nightlife. Fireflies broke the even continuity of the darkness near the ground, giving rise to a slightly less dark sky, with a cascade of stars as if looking directly up into the spiral of a galaxy. The center of the galaxy seemed comparable to luminosity of the sun from as seen from Earth. Even though the ground was dark, he could discern the green of grass and leaves. Where no star poked through canopy over head, there was the tint of blue sky, tapering to black on the horizon. It was as if he were seeing real blue for the first time. Clio leaned on one side, her head propped up, observing Garcia. Her observing was like he was being consumed, like a thirsty man downing a glass of water. Her other hand lighted on his chest, and he felt warmth and love pouring into him.

"The babies?" he asked.

"They're fine, just not here," Clio said. "And your entourage is having their own experience, so do not be concerned. I'm so glad you helped Panays so that she was able to offset this trap. The other way wasn't so pleasant for you," Clio said.

"The other way?" Garcia asked.

Clio smiled. "Let's not talk about that path," she said, moving closer to him, kissing his neck. "Athena shouldn't get all the fun, you know. We can have some time together before I show you."

"Show me?" Garcia asked.

"Father asked me to show you," Clio said. "I can give you all of history in a kiss, our hearts combined can create whole universes. We could dance from beginning to end if you like. Dive in me and we shall grow old and young together... You will go through hell to get some of your answers. Janeway, stardate 51268.4. There's an answer there. A piece of the puzzle. But don't tarry. Your line is not with her. Except in that in other Universe. Oh, that was a lovely time we spent, you and I and her. Want to see it again?"

Clio was on top of him, straddling him, her arms up stretched to the heaven, shouting. With the fireflies sparking, the arms of the galaxy over head seemed to be raining down over them. The center of the galaxy was directly overhead; the center of a black hole spun dead center, almost imperceptible, and maybe missed if it weren't for the shooting beams of light lancing out to hit them dead on, illuminating them both, almost like they were a hologram being projected from the black hole itself. The intensity of the joy was so overwhelming that he didn't think anything could be much better, but as his lungs filled with air he, himself, his psyche, expanded to take it all in, and for a moment, he felt connected to the cosmos. It was the connection he had always been looking for, and yet, the connection he had always had. The atoms in his body, created in stars... The philosophy he often gravitated towards was now no longer a belief, but a solid fact! There was no separateness in nature. If only people truly understood the this, he thought. Only oneness. One electron that ran through all of us, one atom. Multiplicity was the illusion!

Clio leaned into him, as if exhausted. She whispered, "I love you so. Our time together is always so wondrous." She sighed, drifting to sleep, taking him into sleep with her, where they played in dreams, and then returned.

“Do you remember the Voyager probe. The one that becomes Vger?” Clio asked.

Garcia nodded. His voice was there, but he was so entranced with her voice, the feeling of her warmth on top of him, the texture of the ground below him, that every cell in his body was sending positive telemetry to his soul. Fireflies and stars merged, the spinning of the galaxy flowing around the center, as if they were in vortex, rising.

“Tell me,” Clio said.

Her voice was in his head and in his ears. He answered her and disliked his voice, as if he was just now for the first time hearing a recording of his voice and it wasn't the voice he knew. “The Voyager probe entered a black hole and emerged on the far side of the galaxy...”

“Tell me how that was possible?” Clio challenged.

“I can't,” Garcia said.

“But you believe it to be true,” Clio said.

“That is what we were taught. I don't know why I never thought about it,” Garcia said, musing. “The voyager probes had no propulsion systems and left the galaxy at sub-light speeds. It was accelerated by gravity boost alone, sling shot from planet to planet. Assuming Voyager left the solar system on a direct vector towards the nearest black hole, and no other gravity influences, it would take well over 50 million years for it to arrive. Warp drive and Star Fleet would have beat Voyager to the center of the Galaxy way before that.”

“And yet, it is accepted fact,” Clio said. “It's an anomaly.”

“How so?” Garcia asked.

“Your destruction of Romulous makes it happen,” Clio said. She kissed him. He saw localized area of space, a growing supernova. A speck of dust moving in proved to be a ship. Spock! Red matter, and artificial black whole, intending to stop the supernova, or at least slow it down. Spock was fired on by Nero. Evasive action went awry. Both ships fell through the same temporal wormhole, an artifact of the artificial black hole. Nero ship had a heavier mass, and its momentum carried it back further in time than Spock. They did converge again. Vulcan was decimated. The same fate approached Earth, but young Spock stole old Spock's ship. Nero pursued. Relentless, was Garcia's impression. Outside of the Sol system, the battle ended, all the red matter being released in one spot, and the black hole consumed Nero and his ship. The Enterprise went home. Had they lingered, they would have seen the Voyager probe disappearing into a temporal wormhole.

“That sounds plausible,” Garcia said.

“You saw it with your own eyes? Why the doubt?” Clio asked.

“The original timeline didn't have that, occurrence,” Garcia said.

“The factures extend even into your original timeline, though the wormhole existed only for a fraction of a moment, long enough to capture Voyager,” Clio said.

“This event must occur. It is necessary.”

“Why?” Garcia asked.

“Vger must exist. It must meet Kirk. It must be allowed to evolve,” Clio said.

“But it can't. If we change the timeline, what happened won't happen,” Garcia said.

“Both timelines will exist, and must exist, as if they are interdependent. You will destroy Romulous, and you will be in the other timeline, and you will reverse it back, and

these two timelines will revolve about themselves, not for eternity, but long enough, twisting like DNA strand” Clio said. “You must do this.”

“Why?”

“So the people of Edo can exist,” Clio said. “They are to inherit the Universe.”

“I don’t understand,” Garcia said.

“Captain Decker, Lt. Ilea, Vger, this specific trinity, this entity is what the Edo know as the Guardian,” Clio said. “You are a part of this.”

“Holy shit,” Garcia said. “No way. No. I don’t like this religious overtones. What does that make me? Judas. I don’t want to be the direct cause of millions of lives destroyed.”

“I know,” Clio said. “But this must be. It won’t help your feelings knowing that from one perspective, no one will die, more diversity is created, more complexity. I would do anything to help make this easier for you. People make sacrifices all the time. Remember Sita Jaxa?” Clio kissed him, and he saw Sita on her last moments, and she died crying his name, telling him good bye, and thanking him for what he had given her in terms of love. Clio gave a gentle kiss to the forehead, and Garcia lived her life and death as if he were her. The torment of knowing her and feeling her passion for him and the sharp turns her life made over her last year.

“She would want you to know that,” Clio said. “And you need to know about Data. What a brave act.” She kissed him, and he was with Data, both beside him, and as him, as if he had lived the life or dreamed the dream of being him. And before he died, as he reached out with his decision to save Picard, and watched Picard’s face as he sacrificed himself, he thanked Picard for his life and he thanked Garcia for allowing Lal to live on in him so she was not completely lost at his death. Garcia cried.

“Don’t cry, Tam,” Clio said. “They are not lost. It’s okay.”

“I feel this... I can’t describe it...”

“I know. The timeline is changing. This is what’s going to be.” She kissed him. It was all revealed. “But you, you don’t just consider these bit parts. You dream of gods and men. Did you know Charlie changed the Universe for his own design, and then changed it back? Once you accumulate a certain amount of power or material, you always discover you don’t want it or need it. He grows from that. He improves. And in the end it reverts back. The things you will learn in your struggles, Garcia. You are going to do some awful things. But know, you are being prepared, groomed, for something even greater. What you have tasted here with me, nothing compares. I can only tell you that there is more coming.”

“I’m scared,” Garcia said. Tears flowed. Stars and fireflies blurred, patterns emerged out of the star points, constellations.

Clio laughed and hugged him. “Don’t be. I’ve got you.”

“You’ve got me but who’s got you?” Garcia asked, serious, but also quoting a Superman movie.

Clio laughed. “I have held you from the beginning, will hold you till the end, it never ends. If you like, you can stay with me, here, in this bubble universe for a while.”

“Forever?”

“As long as you want,” Clio said. “Aren’t your children beautiful. You want to see them?”

Clio stood up and drew Garcia's up by both hands, laughing. She sprinted away, came back, took his hand, and led him down to the river.

"Oh, this isn't the right perspective," Clio said, drawing him up into the clouds. The river became rivers, spreading out like veins and arteries. The air moved around the planet as if it were breathing, the sound of the ocean on thousands of beaches emphasized that point.

"Don't look down," Clio said. "That's all illusion. It's inside you, silly. More connections in your brain than stars in the sky, than sands of grains on the beach. The analogy is, all of your life experiences are simply soul reading a book, and you have great empathy for the actors and actresses. All of life's a stage..."

"Are you the Guardian of Time?" Garcia asked her.

"Pff. Like Guardian four point oh," Clio laughed and hugged. "Much more interactive. Did I not rock your world back there or what?! Oh, you just want to do it again! I promise, you will remember that always. It will reverberate through you. You will see flashes of me when you close your eyes. The light will shine from you."

They traveled in open space, faster than warp, but not warp. The Galaxy zipped by like a canvas on the floor and they passed through the energy field surrounding the Galaxy. They paused outside of it. "This field, an energy field that pervades the entire Universe. It's everywhere, but only seems to be more intense at the edges of some galaxies. Everyone has access to it. The universe, the multi-verse, is just information. You've got to try and not think of things in terms of matter and light. Nothing is lost. Information can't be lost." They moved further out, tearing across the depths of blackness that he knew as space time, but it felt like a medium, like liquid. Then they broke free of space, it tore apart like wet tissue paper and they burst into light. It was the whiteness he had seen dozens of times now. It was fluid, as if he were swimming in it.

"But don't discount the darkness. They are both intertwined. Think of your twins. They are wondrously made, in darkness. You are not becoming, you already are. You just wanted a dream. And it's beautiful."

"That's all this is?"

"Nonsequitar. There is no all there is. There is nothing there is everything," Clio said. "You should really return. You are not done, and you were going to do something for my Dad. What's going to happen is ok. You are a sand mandala. Yes, that is the metaphor for you, for every individual. All the patterns, all the colors, just waves, interference patterns, but in the end, it's a beautiful masterpiece."

"How can you say that? If I destroy Romulous, if I make all the lives go away by altering the past, doesn't that make me the worse butcher of all the worlds?" Garcia asked.

"When the masters have finished with a sand mandala, they sweep up the sand and spill it into the wind," Clio said. "From dust to dust... I see you are stuck on this point. It will make sense, in time. What you do will pave the way for others. And those others will wear your mandala as a badge of honor."

"And you would still love me and hold me."

Clio embraced him, laughing. "Aww, dear. Always and forever," she sang. She showed him how the change will take shape. How the past will unravel. She showed him how both still exist, simultaneously, and how they are interwoven like DNA and neither can exist without the other, and indeed, not only do they both transcend, there is more yet

to be revealed. "You can choose two people out of all of time to assist you, but you must take a third, of my choosing. And they must not interact outside of your crew until after the change comes."

"Anyone?"

"You've already chosen." Clio said. Smiling, knowingly. "And you can't take your sister."

"But I wanted to save her," Garcia said.

"I know. And that is about you," Clio said. "She has chosen a different path and already has a new role."

"Can I see her?" Garcia asked.

"Not at this juncture, but I assure you, she loves you," Clio said. "No more monster in your head. It's healed."

"Ok," Garcia said.

"You understand, you cannot have this experience and not be changed," Clio said.

Garcia nodded. The love they shared was ineffable. She held him tightly before letting him go, whispering into his ears. "You must spend time with the other eight, my sisters, before your path is finished. Go with love."

The next thing Garcia knew was he was awake in sickbay. He knew he was in sickbay by the sounds, but he didn't open his eyes. He was lying on his back. He felt the twins moving on his belly. He assessed their condition using his neural link. He still didn't want to open his eyes.

Jurak noticed the change in vitals. Undine, Kitara, Losira, and Simone were there at his side.

"Tam?" Losira asked.

"I hear you," he said.

"Are you ok?"

"The Pa Nun was destroyed, all hands lost," Garcia announced.

The Captains exchanged glances.

"We just lost contact," Losira said. "I'm not able to access the crystal. How do you know this?"

Garcia opened his eyes. They were glowing. "I've seen it," Garcia said.

"Doctor," Simone said.

"This is interesting," Jurak said.

"McCoy will know about it," Garcia said. "Ask him. I've projected a timeline for us to finish some goals before Kitara has to kill me. The clock is ticking."

"What are you talking about?" Kitara asked.

Garcia's eyes returned to normal. He smiled. "Hey. How did we get back?"

"You teleported us from the fountain. You don't remember?" Kitara asked. "You don't remember what you were just saying?"

"I was saying something?" Garcia asked.

"What do you remember?" Undine asked.

"I had just accessed the portal. I saw Kelinda approaching and I activated a shield... Oh, you know what. I think I left the self defense system on. No one will be able to use that fountain for time travel again," Garcia said. He mused. "I hope people can access the water. It was really good water."

"Tam, are you ok?"

“I feel great, why?”

“We lost contact with the Pa Nun, and you just said it was destroyed,” Undine said.

“I don’t remember that. Kitara, take the Tempest and assess the situation,” Garcia said, mulling it over after speaking and deciding that was the right thing to do.

“I will. But do you want us to do with the guest you put in the Brig?” Kitara asked.

“Guest?”

“Maybe it would be better just to show him,” Undine said. “Do you feel like walking?”

“Sure. I feel great,” Garcia said.

Garcia stood and was surprised he was so unsteady on his feet, but he made it, paused as he recovered balanced, and then proceeded to follow the Captains. He paused to talk to crew as he passed; asking them how they were, and even hugged them. Rivan was pleasantly surprised by the attention, and he allowed her to accompany them.

“This isn’t classified, is it?” Garcia asked the Captains.

“We haven’t decided yet,” Simone answered.

Garcia was not only jovial, he seemed extremely pleased to see the guest presently incarcerated. “Jito!” Garcia yelled. Jito stood up, surprised but happy to see Garcia. “And Data. Lal will be so happy to see you.”

“I should have known you were behind this,” said the third inmate. An older Riker was not happy to be in a cell.

“Why are they locked up?” Garcia asked.

“We assumed that’s the way you wanted it, since they were placed there. We believed you or maybe Q brought them back,” Undine said.

“Brought them back from where?” Garcia asked.

“The future,” Simone said.

Data clarified. “You appear to have pulled each of us out of the timeline at the exact moment of our demise,” Data said.

“Really?” Garcia asked.

“Why do you look sad?” Jito asked.

“I don’t know. I’m suddenly thinking about my sister and I’m missing her,” Garcia said, his lines on his forehead becoming complex as he struggled to recall. Tears dropped from his eyes. His face smoothed over as if he had an understanding, and his eyes shimmered with a glow. “Each of you will be instrumental in preserving, restoring, the timeline which I’m going to destroy. Without your help, both time lines will be lost. If you interact with anyone outside of my crew, you will risk the most important missions of your lives. That’s all I can tell you, for now.”

Garcia staggered, but Rivan held him up. His eyes returned to normal. “Please, let them out of their cells. And get Will a uniform, he looks uncomfortable.”

“I prefer Thomas,” Riker said.

“Uh? Oh, you’re the transporter twin,” Garcia said. “You’re going to love sitting for my babies. I’m feeling really tired. If you’ll excuse me. Rivan?”

Rivan accompanied Garcia out of the room.

“What just happened,” Jito asked.

“We are in serious trouble,” Undine said, staring at the door Garcia had just passed through.

“Yeah,” Losira said. “I will catch these guys up to speed.”

“No, really, what’s happening?” Jito asked.

“Change is coming, dear,” Losira said. “Answers, maybe, but change, definitely. Come. Let’s get yall some food and a change a clothes, and I will tell you what’s transpired and what it seems like you have been unwittingly woven into.”



Additional notes, added 10/02/2013

Obviously the notes following this reveal this has been in the works since before the star trek 2009 was at the box office. I'm not prepared to discuss the ST: Into Darkness, but the discerning may find an obscure reference to it. I so wanted to finish this sooner, but between life, school, internship, work, migraines, being lazy, minecraft... and the simple fact that I'm simply not a writer... I know where I want this to go and how it might end, but getting it there is proving difficult. Book three is still the strongest, this one seems like just another bridge...

Still, I continue to receive encouragement from fans of the Path Finder series, from all over the world, literally, and requests for the next. Very generous folks. There are few that have, legitimately, lamented the grammatical issues has being the strongest detractor from being able to enjoy this, even though they see potential in the story and story arcs. I'm happy to hear from them, too.

If you are holding this, you're either a good friend assisting the editing phase, or a friend of one those. Thank you. This would be much worse without you.

Your fan,
John erik

Author's notes/diatrife:

Okay, this is a long time coming. Basic rough draft has been here for a while, but I was just not sufficiently happy to release it. It holds several story lines, and I decided it was best to divide the stories into two books, so there is actually a companion book to this, which hopefully won't take a year to flesh out the rough draft. The amount of fan mail that the previous four books generated has been extremely generous, and it has helped me to continue to work on this, keeping this story alive in my head. The biggest part of my struggle has been to integrate the demand for more and faster with producing something of quality. The single, most consistent complaint has been about the grammatical errors. I agree. I hate them, and my editing needs to improve. To that end, I've solicited help from several fans to assist in this endeavor. "We" still miss things, but ultimately, I take full responsibility for any and all errors. There was a blaring continuity error in book four, "Necessary Evil" regarding the characters Grilka and Quark. I failed to do my homework, and to those DS9 fans, I apologize.

I've also sat down and re-examined "Enterprise" in its entirety. I've made some fairly harsh critiques in the past, and part of me still stands by those statements, like, "Enterprise would still be on the air had the scripts been stronger." But there were some really good things, and some of it kind of parallels my own efforts with this series. I didn't like the temporal cold war, for example, and yet you can clearly see that tangent in my Preserver arc that I went with, something that this book has emphasized, connecting it

not only to “Enterprise,” but to the new movie. There is something about the temporal cold war that is interesting, and lots of ways to connect it to TOS. One thing I hated was how frequently Enterprise in “Enterprise” took on serious damage and yet, they kept on going. It just seemed like too much, and then the next episode they would get slammed again, and then again. I enjoyed the episode where the station wanted to fix them, for a price, but my favorite episode of “Enterprise” by far is the two part episode, where they explained what happened to the Constellation from TOS episode. I partly like the last episode, for the tie in to TNG, and at the same time, felt it was kind of a weak ending. There really were more stories to tell. That was not the way for that series to go out.

But my bent to save the time line was reinforced by watching Enterprise and their Temporal Cold War. The movie didn’t cure me of that. So, let’s talk about the movie for a moment. And not just because there was a parallel with my online books. (You know, Garcia blows up the Romulan star with the modified genesis weapon. Fits the supernova theme of the Trek movie. (What is it, ST:TNM?) And in book one, I wrote the first free fall transporter rescue. (Whoo hoo! It looked awesome.))

Star Trek, the new movie.

From the opening of the movie to where the Kirk trial is interrupted to go save Vulcan, I was glued. I loved it. From warping to Vulcan, I started to be irritated. Now, all my grievances may seem petty, however, every critique I offer comes with a simple fix, a change in dialogue, that could preserve the actual final print, while simultaneously making the movie more consistent with what we actually know about science and Trek. For example, the number one complaint was the Supernova explanation. Old Spock explains, “A supernova was threatening the entire galaxy...” Supernovas happen all the time. They wouldn’t threaten the entire galaxy. Supernovas could threaten stars in their immediate path of destruction, but not the whole galaxy. So, a binary star system would probably be affected the most if one of the companion stars went, but the further a star is away, the less the impact. Either way, if Romulus was in the sphere of influence, it would not be as Old Spock explained... “Then, the *unthinkable* happened, Romulus was destroyed.” It would not be “unthinkable!” It would be a forgone conclusion! How fast “the end” would come is dependant on how far the killer star is from Romulus. Several light years away means they have at least several years to evacuate. So, let’s say it is Romulus’ main star that goes nova. It wasn’t. Lets’ say it was, or even the companion star. I think there is literary evidence that Romulus is a binary star system, but let’s say it’s their star. Further, let’s assume it is the same relative distance between their star and their planet, as Earth is from Sol. That gives them 8 minutes to evacuate, as it takes light 8 minutes to go from Sol to Earth, assuming there is no warning.

Okay, here’s the fix. Romulan scientist discover their star is about to go nova. (Grr, again, it wouldn’t. It’s a g-type star, like Sol.) But, we’re going to say it is. There should be a contraction phase before it explodes, probably some changes in luminosity, even fake some tech talk about neutrino emissions... Whatever! They know, and they call Starfleet for help. “We need to evacuate our planet. Please send help!” To which Star Fleet responds, “Sorry, but we’re a little short on starships due to the last Borg attack.

And, thank you so much for helping us with that.” (Sarcasm included.) “Please, send all the help you can.” Romulus pleads. They probably have what, a population of several billion? (We presently have over 6 billion, so wouldn’t a high-tech, civilized worlds have at least a billion plus?)

This is where Old Spock steps up and says, “You know, we have an experimental substance that should allow us to create a stable, artificial black hole. We could introduce this to their star, and slow down the expansion phase, or maybe even stop it from going nova. This would give us time to evacuate their planet.” Romulans still have to vacate because whether it’s the nova or a black hole, their star is toast. It doesn’t work out, Nero still chases Spock into the black hole, and everything in the movie is intact. Simple dialogue change could make this sound more technically plausible.

Before I go to my next point of contention, I want to point out one other thing in regards to the supernova. If the supernova that takes out Romulus is a natural event, it will happen again. This could allow for a movie plot where the new Spock, when he is older deliberating whether he should attempt to prevent it or not. The time line is probably sufficiently altered that even Nero may not be born again. There are two possibilities: Nero has inadvertently changed the time line, causing himself to not be born, which means when the supernova occurs, there won’t be anyone to chase Spock back in time and kill Kirk’s father, and so the time line reverts back to the original timeline. If Nero’s personal timeline hasn’t changed, something must compel him to chase Spock back through time, recreating the events in this movie so that the new timeline remains established. Nero and Spock would need to be the temporal patch that keeps the new time line solid. Of course, New Spock could eliminate Nero, or his great grandfather, so no Nero, and the timeline reverts back. Or, let’s say, temporal mechanics are such that once Nero went back and changed the time line, the change is permanent, regardless of whether Nero’s personal timeline is erased, then Spock could use the future Supernova/black-hole to travel back to the point in space time to prevent the first Nero from killing Kirk’s father, which then causes the timeline to return to the way it was as we know it with TOS AND TNG. Complicated? Yes, that’s why Janeway and I have a headache. More likely, this supernova is not a natural event. More specifically, I suspect this is the time line which I referred to in book three and four, and literally spelled out in the short story accompanying book four, where Tammus destroys Romulus to end the Federation Romulan war. In that time line there is so much death and destruction that Guinan convince Tammus to go back in time, (episode time “The Neutral Zone”) so that the time line is maintained as we remember it with TNG.

Second issue was with the lightening storm which gives Kirk his epiphany. It couldn’t happen. (Ok, it shouldn’t have happened.) The lightening storm appeared to be a function of a ship traveling through an artificially created wormhole through time, or a result of the black hole tearing space. It is not a result of traveling at warp drive. I can back this up using the movie itself as evidence. There are only two times we see the lightening storm: at the opening scene when Nero emerges out of the worm hole, and when Spock’s ship emerges from the worm hole. We never see the lightening storm again. We do see Young Spock stealing Old Spock’s ship at the end of the movie. He

goes to warp. No lightening. Nero chases. No lightening. Therefore, there would be no lightening storm when Nero attacks the Klingons, and there would not be lightening when Nero attacks Vulcan.

And that brings me to the next point. Vulcans are supposed to be the most scientifically advanced race in the entire Federation. How is it they don't see the giant spaceship attacking their planet? Am I suppose to believe that Vulcan has no Starships in orbit, spaceships on the ground that can be launched, no orbital platforms, defense satellites, ground based defense systems, or any other means to determine the source of the attack and respond accordingly? Not buying that. Again, here is an opportunity for some simple dialogue change. Nero comes in with his 24th century technology and severs Vulcan's ability to communicate with Earth. We could easily suggest that Nero could still have the ability to communicate with Earth, and he calls Earth, pretending to be Vulcan, and asks for help against a threat, send all ships, knowing Earth will respond with at least most of their ships, and he could pick those off one by one as they arrive, leaving less ships for him to face when he goes to Earth. That's such a simple fix, and the Vulcans don't have to look like complete Pakleds.

Those are the two biggest things. I didn't like that it took only fifteen minutes for ships to go from Earth to Vulcan. I think there are several episodes that put the distance at two weeks. (Someone back me up on that. Please.) The planet that Old Spock and Kirk were marooned on was too close to where Vulcan was for Kirk to have been dropped off on it. They had already been traveling for some time at warp. I base this on the fact that when Old Spock watched his home world get destroyed, he saw it in the sky as big as the moon, which suggests that planet was a moon of Vulcan, which would also mean it should be spiraling to its doom, into the same black hole that consumed the planet. There is no indication that the black hole goes away after its done eating said planet. Technically, they don't even have to drill a hole in the planet to introduce the black hole. (And this is why I really wish I had published this right after the movie came out, because Neil DeGrass Tyson said the same thing in one of his youtube videos! I would really love appearing to be as smart as Tyson. I would love to sit and talk movies with him. I love Neil!) You just have to drop it from orbit, and it would end up making the planet look like Swiss cheese as it fell through the planet and out the other side, stalled, and fell back, oscillating through the planet until its energy dissipated and it stays centered. (I think Carl Sagan did that in his imagination on Cosmos.) And when you think about it, they released all the red matter not too far from Earth, which means there should be this huge black hole really messing with the Sol system! considering a single drop was big enough to wipe out a planet in less than ten minutes. Even if it didn't alter the orbits of the planets in the Sol system, or sling and shift the comets in the ort belt, this would create a navigational nightmare for people going to and from Earth. They were only at warp speed for what, five minutes at best before Nero caught up to Spock? I simply can't imagine a black hole that close being a good thing.

There were transporter issues. As I mentioned, I loved the free fall transporter rescue, but it was unnecessary and unbelievable drama to have Chekov running to the transporter room. Now, there are several significant episodes which talks about the

importance of matching velocity when you transport. Instead of having Chekov running, he could have taken over the helm and put the Enterprise into a dive to match Kirk/Sulu's free fall velocity, which allow the tech to get a lock, and then beam them up. This would also prevent them from going "splat" against the floor, which if the velocity is not attended to, would have been just as deadly as crashing into the ground. The other transporter issue was at the end of the movie. Nero's ship is in earth's orbit. We know this because we can see him lowering the drilling platform. The Enterprise arrives at Io, Saturn's moon. Kirk and Young Spock transport from there to Nero's ship. What the hell? That's way more than 40,000 kilometers! Even TNG's transporter range couldn't go further than 40,000 km, so did someone just forget? Yes, movies and episodes both fudge on this and warp speed from time to time. Even Voyager did a transport while their shields were up. But you know, if you hire someone tech savvy, that wants to help produce a good Trek movie, well, hello, pick me! Or any of the hardcore Trek fans who knows tech and history! You can't find one? Could you have at least consulted Neil DeGrass Tyson? He loves movies and he would love to help. Just ask James Cameron about the star placement in the last release of Titanic!

Ok, I'm back from the pulpit. Yes, there are others more qualified. Some really devoted fans. I'm just an egg. A couple of fans took time out of their day to correct me. I think that's awesome. I hope people keep doing it. I want this book series to be fun, and accurate, and consistent, just the same as I want the movies and televisions scripts to be. There were other minor things in the movie, not deal breakers, but my awareness shot up. Like Uhura orders a Cardassian drink. We don't meet the Cardassians until TNG. The assumption is that that is a function of warp speed, and TOS ships weren't as fast as TNG ships, and so naturally Picard would meet more aliens. That was one of my pet peeves on Enterprise, we kept meeting species that we hadn't met in TOS or TNG. Or, in the case of the Ferengi, which is a fun episode, I liked it, but goes against the episode where they make a big issue that humans have never seen a Ferengi's face before TNG.

Now, it's not real anger. I love Trek, and will continue to watch it, and I think the movie was extremely fun to watch. I'm glad they cut out the Klingon tangent, but wish they had left all of the Orion girl scenes in. The extra footage with Kirk mistaking one Orion girl for another was hilarious! And, to show that I can take it as well as dish it out, here are a couple of mistakes with book four "Necessary Evil." The conversation at the beginning, where Garcia says he's changing his name to "Jacob" that part is correct, but a dialogue ensues over whether it was right for Jacob to kill his son because God ordered it. That should have been Abraham. The conversation was to include both prominent Biblical characters, but I failed to catch it, failed to correct it, and failed to self destruct afterwards. ☺

It's hard to go back and fix all the copies that are out there, but there is a new edition because of that. The other mistake centers on Quark. It was pointed out to me that Quark had already been working on Terok Nor when he met his wife to be, reporting that he killed her husband, when really her husband had fallen on his own knife. So, my dialogue is off. Now, a simple dialogue change could correct that, and still leave them in as contributing characters. Or, I could do it the way I did here, and suggest that we're in

an alternate timeline already. We would have to be in either an alternate, or a simultaneously existing timeline that would enable both realities to exist. The destruction of Vulcan is interesting, as it guarantees some suspense. But if they had asked, I would have been better with them blowing up Earth than Vulcan. That would have left Earth colonies, and few rag tag ships in a fleet looking for the missing 13th tribe... (Oh, am I mixing genres again.) What's good about the destruction of Vulcan? We no longer have certainty that the characters we know will survive the next movie. (Another inconsistency, all Vulcans are tied together telepathically, and in episode of TOS Spock nearly has a heart attack when a Vulcan Starship is destroyed. You would think when planet Vulcan gets decimated he would at least fall to the floor in sheer agony.) Anyway, the destruction is of such magnitude, there can be no TNG as we know it. The paradox is that we need TNG to happen in order for the timeline to change. After all, we can assume that Spock didn't create the red matter alone, that it was a team of Vulcan Scientist at the Vulcan Science Academy. That's right. No academy, no red matter. The supernova will happen again, if it was a natural event, outside of the affairs of biological life. Romulus will be destroyed again. But, presumably, there won't be anyone there to stop it or create a time loop... Grrr! Should we just assume that both realities exist, or multiple time lines, as evidence by TNG and DS9 episodes?

There is a problem with my solution set in this the previous Path Finder stories. The powers that be do not want anyone writing Trek novels from alternate time lines. Especially unknown writers such as myself. (Apparently, the popularity of these stories is irrelevant, but please, keep writing Paramount and Simon and Schuster and telling them your opinions. I'll even close with their addresses, as I'm such a nice guy and want to help.) Alternate timelines do exist in the Star Trek Universe. That's a given. And now that the timeline is technically shot to hell due to Abrams movie, I would think that it is possible to have prominent stories from any of the possible timelines and still have them make sense. (Doesn't anyone want to visit that timeline where the Borg are winning and Riker's crying like a little baby? I do.) I'm wondering if alternate timelines are the only way to incorporate all the stories that have been created that are accidentally inconsistent or flat out dismissive of cannon as established by episodes. I genuinely don't have an answer. I simply know, I want more Trek. And to that end, I am continuing this particular story line for myself, and for the fans that have taken time out of their lives to read them. And for all of you that have written to thank me, to ask for more stories, and to send corrections, I humbly thank you.

Sincerely
John Erik Ege

Star Trek Movies:

Star Trek: Of Gods and Men (available online) 2007

Star Trek: TOS
I, Mudd.
Catspaw

Enterprise

Future tense, episode 42

Voyager
Flashback

“Black hole sun” Nirvana

TAS

“The Slaver Weapon” a short story by Larry Niven that was turned into a Star Trek episode.

ST: TNG

“Final Mission”

Unusable stuff, rework?

“So that plan sucked. No traps and no lures,” Garcia made notes out loud.

“In another reality, you passed through the Galactic Barrier and became a god,” Guinan said. “In the epic battle that ensued, you eventually won the war against Charlie, which devastated three star systems. After the battle, during the moment that you are temporarily drained of your god like abilities, Kitara kills you, per a prearranged directive you gave her. She will chose the Starburst weapon. The resulting explosion causes a star to go supernova, and a chain of events leads to a temporal anomaly which alters your time line.”

“Okay, so that plan pretty much sucks, too,” Garcia said. “Have you seen any realities in which I confront Charlie Evans, not lose, and not destroy the timeline?”

Guinan nodded and explained, “There is a reason why Star Fleet has made a rule against people with your ‘ESPer’ rating from crossing the Galactic Barrier. It changes people. There is a reality where Kitara doesn’t kill you, but because of your subconscious programming by the Kelvan to take over the Galaxy, you will become the worst dictator the galaxy has ever seen. Worst in terms of power corrupting absolutely, not in terms of successfully conquering the Galaxy. Of course, if you don’t win, Charlie takes over the Galaxy.”

“Why are you telling me this?” Garcia asked

“If Charlie Evans wins, both Q and the Metrones cease to exist,” Guinan explained. “If you win, one of them will continue to exist.”

“Which?” Garcia asked.

“That is yet to be determined,” Mandora said.

“And if Charlie and I both die?” Garcia said.

“The Universe changes,” Q said. “The playing field changes. The Great Dispute is suspended.”

“Either way, you will face Charlie. If either Q or the Metrones interfere with that eventuality, they will both cease to exist. Their hands are tied,” Guinan said.

“I don’t want to play,” Garcia said.

“Tough,” Q said.

“Why can’t you both just behave like normal people, and agree to disagree? Why must it be one way or the other?” Garcia asked.

“We’re not people,” Q said. “When a Q or a Metrone cease to exist, they cease to exist in all realities, in all time lines. Parallel universes once entwined come unraveled. The impact will be tremendous, bigger than you can ever realize. You are the Solution Set we agreed upon.”

“Pick someone else!” Garcia told him.

“There is a way to soften this, Tam. If Kitara agrees to kill you after you beat Charlie, you won’t take over the Galaxy,” Mandora said. “Things will go on, pretty much as normal, only, this timeline will change.”

“Right, of course, I have to die for the Universe as I don’t know it to continue to exist,” Garcia said.

“We could show you the new Universe that will emerge,” Q said,

“No. I’m going to find a way to prevent this,” Garcia said. “There has to be another option.”

Garcia went to the couch and sat down. He stared at the tree. Having never celebrated Christmas growing up, he wondered if he could truly understand the joy and wonder and anticipation that came with the holiday. Sure, some people still held the occasion, but none in his circles growing up did. There were other holidays, of course, but none that held the stronghold in literature and pop culture from Earth. He ached for a present. “I don’t want to do this.”

“You are the Solution Set that ends the Great Dispute,” Q and Mandora said together.

“What is this Great Dispute?” Garcia asked.

“Basically, the Chicken or the Egg,” Guinan said.

“You’re joking, right?” Garcia asked.

“Sort of. It’s kind of an analogy,” Guinan said.

“Bloody hell! You guys are like god’s, changing the time line for your benefit left and right, and you come down to a Solution Set that requires me to become an evil tyrant or dead?”

“There’s one other option,” Amanda Q said.

“We agreed we weren’t going to discuss this,” Q and Mandora said.

Garcia leaned forwards. “Amanda?” Garcia ignored the fact that Guinan was shaking her head.

“You must destroy Romulous with a supernova,” Amanda Q said.

“Damn you!” Q and Mandora yelled.

“He deserves to know,” Amanda Q said. “If you destroy Romulous, it will create a temporal anomaly which changes the Universe, and Charlie ceases to exist. You no longer have to confront Charlie. I’ve seen that play out.”

“That path is unacceptable,” Q and Mandora said. “It leads to a larger confrontation with Q and the Metrones, which could result in both of our species ceasing to exist.”

Q looked crossly at Mandora and then back to Garcia. "If Q ceases to exist, the human race ceases to exist, don't forget that!" he said.

"That's absurd!" Garcia said. "None of this makes sense. Charlie is human, so if humanity ceases to exist, then the problem ceases to exist..."

"Chicken or the egg," Guinan, Q, and Mandora all said.

"You guys are nuts!" Garcia yelled.

"It's in your best interest that Q continues to exist," Q said.

"And what do you think happens if we cease to exist?" Mandora demanded.

"Pfff! A few fluff races disappear. Nothing significant," Q argued.

"Really? Nothing significant? You're omnipotence has blinded you," Mandora said. "And there are many realities where humans exist just fine without you."

"I wouldn't call those Universes 'just fine,' by any stretch of the imagination," Q argued.

"Ok, that's enough. You both agreed on the Solution Set," Guinan said. "And you allowed for the third option."

"I've yet to hear any viable options," Garcia complained. "I'm not going to destroy another planet with a supernova, much less destroy Romulous."

"Why, you've done it before?" Amanda Q said.

"What? When?!" Garcia asked.

"That's why we agreed not to tell him," Q told Amanda Q. "The multiverse is weaved together with a complexity only races like we can grasp. There are unintended consequences to mere mortals knowing things."

"He already knows that he's a temporal patch," Amanda Q argued.

"That's not the point," Q said.

"Destroying Romulous is the only way to avoid the Charlie X equation," Amanda Q said. "This allows him a window of opportunity to live a peaceful, uninterrupted life. Tam, you can grow old and see your kids. Even ours."

"We will not tolerate the Escape Clause," Mandora and Q said.

"He has the right to choose," Guinan said.

"Choose? Really? Every option you've offered me people die!" Garcia said.

"I told you he couldn't handle this. Now he may not choose anything," Q screamed at Amanda Q.

"Not choosing is accounted for in the Solution Set," Guinan reminded them.

"He will choose. Charlie is coming for him. It's his nature to fight, to win. That is why we chose him," Mandora said.

"Guinan," Garcia said. "You're complicit with this scheming?"

Guinan crossed over to him, sat down on the couch next to him, took his hand in hers. "No matter what happens, no matter what you decide, remember, I love you."

"This is unacceptable. We will take the Solution Set back to the Blind point," Q said.

"Agreed," Mandora said.

"No!" Amanda Q said, stomping her foot.

Q snapped his fingers and Garcia was gone.

“Why would anyone want sex slaves in this day and age?” McKnight asked. “There are sufficient number of planets that are completely Hedonistic, and any pleasure a person might seek to gratify can almost instantaneously be obtained through various technological or pharmaceutical means, not to mention any number of willing volunteers.”

“It’s often not about the pleasure, but about power,” Garcia said.

Speed dating

So, whats your name?

Call me Ishmael.

You’re nameIshamel?

No, my name is thamas, but I thought I’d demonstrate im literate and funny at the same time.

Or an ass.

That too

So, thamas, what do you do?

Im a rocket man.

Rocket man?

Yeah, burning out my fuse up here alone.

Episode

“firstborn” TNG

Rozhenko, Alexander is K’tmar

Come on. You can sleep when youre dead

Being dead is the only sleep ive been getting lately.

Doctor Soran. Tolian Soran

Muds planet