

STAR TREK:
This Side of Darkness

Part One
By
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EPH

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This story is the sixth in a series. Book One “A Touch of Greatness,” book two “Another Piece of the Action,” book three “Both Hands Full,” book four, “Necessary Evil,” and “The Seventh House” 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 nonessential emails) I expect there will be a seventh 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. (Then again, “Prelude to Axanar is probably one of the most successful fan fiction, which ended up in litigation and an attempt by Paramount to change the definition of ‘fanfiction,’ which is failure to recognize sometimes the fans know something executives don’t.) The author recognizes the issues and valid criticism from the previous books, knows there is room for improvement in his endeavors, and hopes to continue to grow as a writer and human being.

The delay in publishing this is in part due to me giving time to my bestest creation ever, the joy of my life, my son, Eston Gerik Ege; and due to being in human in general. All my love, J E E. There is more to this, see the authors notes.



This books is dedicated to all the fans who have enjoyed the Garcia stories. Thank you for your kind words, emails, and affection. Love, John.

Captain Zara Undine

CHAPTER 1

Zara Undine, Captain of the USS New Constitution, had been standing outside of the perimeter of the invisible Iconian Gateway that had opened up on the floor of Holodeck One when it swallowed a number of the crew. Iconian Gateways were two dimensional areas, usually attached to walls, and if you knew when and where they were you could literally push through the wall into another world. She kicked herself for having not considered that the floor could also be utilized, as the Gateways were not limited to the surface of a solid structure. They could be portals in midair, allowing people to come and go in a fashion much easier and faster than a transporter, in fact as easily as crossing from one room to the next. Floor placement of the portal had been unexpected, but the odd placement that was bothering her. The fact that she had trusted Paynays, the salt vampire that was reportedly in love with Garcia, enough to allow her access to their own Gateway's controls was more disturbing. She should have trusted her instincts on the matter. Had the salt vampire manipulated her mentally? Maybe not directly. Undine had watched Garcia's encounter with Paynays and had actually felt sympathetic to the creature's plight and believed her to be loyal to Garcia. More likely, it had been Garcia who had influenced her, just in his sheer eagerness to integrate Paynays into the crew, despite Paynay's admission she had been commissioned to assassinate him. She suspected Garcia was experiencing a version of Stockholm's Syndrome when it came to Paynays, which wasn't too farfetched considering Paynays knew just how to play him.

Undine forced herself to stop her internal dialogue, a negative self talk and question set that had her spinning in a non productive manner. It was a done deal. Providing an opportunity to someone to earn trust had value and that was the very thing Garcia had offered Paynays. The fact that she used that opportunity to escape was not unpredictable. It should have been a foregone conclusion. Paynays had been brought in to retrieve the code from Alexander's mind to remote activate what they believed to be a temporal Iconian Gateway. They believed this because they knew Alexander, Worf's son, was from the future and he had offered no other explanation for how he had traveled back through time. Were the two co-conspirators? If they were, they now had Garcia. Undine had gone full circle back to worrying and had to stop herself from going down a road that limited her functioning.

All in all, twelve people had fallen through the immediate opening of the gateway. Captain Weisberg and his team, guests on the New Constitution thanks to Admiral Pressman, a security officer, plus Jay and his team, guests of Garcia's visiting from Iotia, plus Garcia carrying the twins were all inside the perimeter when the 'floor' gave way. Dryac, the only Medusan in Star Fleet, was also within the perimeter, inside her floating mobility device, and though it initially dipped with the subtle change in weight displacement, it didn't pass through the floor until she actively fired the tiny directional thruster so as to follow Garcia on what would be her first Away mission. Paynays pushed Alexander into the circle, following him, as if diving into a pool of water. Kitara followed, without hesitation.

And Undine's present point of internal contention: she hesitated. She knew 'hesitation' wasn't completely accurate. She had considered diving into the unknown, but

decided someone needed to stay and update the crew on the situation, and she was the last one standing on deck. She had hit her communicator badge and had called for security team to join her at the holodeck simultaneous with Kitara leaping into the unknown. She still wanted to jump, to join Garcia in whatever adventure was underway, but she convinced herself that Garcia and the others were competent to handle any situation they were falling into, and if they weren't, her presence might not change anything. She had the presence of mind, though, to push one of the supply crates that Weisberg had prepared into the perimeter. Only it didn't fall through. The Gateway had already closed. A faint line describing the circumference of the circle remained on the floor. She touched her sleeve and a clock became visible. With a couple taps, she started a timer.

Security arrived. "Captain?"

"Don't cross into the circle. Scan the room, focus on the floor, look for any residue energy signature that might tell us where the Gateway opened up to," Undine instructed. "Lt. Bri, report to holodeck one. Bring a kit."

Undine instructed the computer to generate a walking stick. One appeared, hovering. She took it up and walked the perimeter probing the floor with the stick. It felt solid enough, but even so, she suspected she would be walking more gently for a while. Bri, the ship's engineer arrived with his kit, followed by his brother, Lt. Brel, her first officer. Brel had actually resisted the promotion, claiming others were more qualified to run a Star Fleet ship. Undine suspected he had resisted because he didn't want to serve under a female Captain, or perhaps he had hoped to follow Garcia, but she had insisted because she couldn't very well select the next qualified out of the crew, because that would put two pregnant females department heads. With all of those who were pregnant due to give birth around the same time, they couldn't afford to inconvenience of major interruption in ship's operation, as they were already running on a skeleton crew.

"Check the deck plating for any integrity issues, then run a diagnostic on the hologrid systems in the floor to ensure there is no damage to the circuitry," Undine instructed.

"Aye," Bri said, and got to work.

Undine checked the elapsed time. Two minutes. She hated not knowing, but applauded the response time of her teams. She acknowledged Brel with a nod as he assessed the situation and intuited what had happened.

Brel pulled up alongside of her. "You made the right decision, Captain," Brel said. "Your place is here on the ship."

Undine held her response.

"There was nothing you could have done," he continued.

"Stop treating me as if I am human," Undine snapped. "Aren't you supposed to be on the Bridge? I got this."

"Aye," Brel said, and departed quickly.

Losira arrived in her fashion, passing through several dimensions before solidifying into a three dimensional creature. She had a compelling look about her, that was not quite Egyptian, but reminiscent of something ancient, a present beauty that transcended time. Some of the humans compared her to the original Siri, but she was much more than just a holographic computer interface. She could make herself tangible. She could finely tune her frequency to harmonize with a person's DNA, resonating at

such a rate that would shatter a DNA lattice like an opera singer shattering a glass; a single touch would kill her target. There were rumors that she could tune her frequency to enrapture, not kill. It was further rumored only Garcia knew for sure, having given into this Siren. She would draw you in with her look, not a song; she was wearing the Pathfinder's uniform, mostly silver with holographic gold overlays, miniskirt option with matching boots. She was not human, but she was so close and so stunning that human females had to suppress the innate insecurity that she provoked.

Losira quickly orientated herself, and then approached Undine and Brel. Undine was hopeful that Losira had something useful for her.

"I am aware of a temporal anomaly having occurred and though I believe I know how to proceed, I would like your advice," Losira said.

"What sort of anomaly?" Undine asked.

"Three people have arrived on the Path Finder unannounced," Losira said.

"Specifically, they each arrived in their own cells in my Brig, security fields snapping on simultaneously with their arrivals, as if whoever placed them their didn't want them wandering about on their own cognizance. I recognize each of them individually, but out of habit I accessed their continuity logs on their communicator badges and have evidence that each have been extracted from a future date."

"Com badges. So, they're Star Fleet?" Undine asked.

"Yes," Undine said. "Sito Jaxa, Thomas Riker, and Data."

"And you're sure they are from the future?" Undine asked.

"Yes. I have been attempting to understand their personal stories to complete my understanding. Thomas is resisting, giving very little information, but I have sufficient data to know that he is a transporter clone of William T Riker. He reports being on the Bridge of the USS Ghandhi when he suddenly found himself in the Brig, in a fashion not consistent with a transporter. He is not happy and has been yelling at Q to stop playing games. Q has not appeared, or taken credit for the situation. Jaxa arrived with severe physical injuries. Doctor Jurak has treated her and she was able to convey that she was being tortured by Cardassians, on the verge of death when she found herself, gratefully, relocated. She is sleeping now. Data's tale, is even more interesting. Apparently, he had just saved Captain Picard's life, by giving away his personal emergency transporter transponder, and reports he would most certainly be dead had he not been brought back at the instant he was retrieved."

"From the future?" Undine said.

"The evidence is overwhelmingly 'yes.' Also, Data has been modified," Losira said.

"How so?" Undine asked.

"Though he is reporting all diagnostics are coming back within operating parameters, his external appearance has definitely been modified. He has realistic skin, his hair has streaks of gray, and he appears older than the Data we know. His appearance is so radically different, I thought at first that he was Dr Sung, Data's creator, and that he was human, but he is still an android, he is still Data."

"Why would anyone change his appearance?" Undine asked, rhetorically.

"Also, you should be aware that I have lost contact with the Pa Nun," Losira informed her. "I am unable to access their Preserver Communication Crystal."

At that moment, the doors to the holodeck slid open and retired Admiral McCoy stormed in, almost manic in his determination. His anger wasn't the only obvious feature. What was most startling was that he no longer appeared to be a man well over a hundred, but a very young, and vibrant, forty-ish year old man.

"Where is Tammias!" McCoy demanded.

"Umm, Bones," Undine said, trying to soften him a little.

"Don't 'umm bones' me," McCoy snapped. "Where is he? On the Path Finder? Fire up that confounded portal contraption of yours and let me at him."

"Tam is indisposed," Undine said.

"He did this to me! I know it," McCoy said. "I told him I didn't want this. By God, a man shouldn't be rejuvenated against his will and forced to live another hundred years or so! What was he thinking?"

"Admiral!" Undine interrupted. "We're in a bit of a situation right now..."

"When the hell aren't you in the middle of a situation?!" McCoy ranted.

"Admiral McCoy," Undine said, touching his arm; a very purposeful, but manipulative act that shifted McCoy's mood, bringing down the rant. McCoy's mood shifted because the first thing he thought was that Tammias had been killed. "Garcia fell through a portal along with several other crew members. We don't know their situation. He may or may not have anything to do with your condition, but for now, I want you to report to Sickbay and get yourself checked out. And I definitely need you to keep your wits about you because if Garcia is behind this, well, there is rarely just one change. I need you. Stay focused."

McCoy forced himself to breathe. "Fine. I will go to Sickbay and get myself checked out, but mind you: I am not signing up for another five year mission just to accommodate Garcia's wish to keep me near him, you got that?!" McCoy grumbled, heading towards the exit. "A man shouldn't live forever. I'm a Doctor, not a Highlander."

There was a moment of silence after the storm of McCoy passed.

"Interesting," Losira commented.

"What?" Undine asked.

"Another anomaly," Losira said. "Highlander is a reference to an 80's movie that only Garcia would likely know."

"You think McCoy's mind has been tampered with?" Undine asked.

Losira shrugged. Her eyes tracked up to the right. "Garcia and the others have arrived on the Path Finder. Garcia is in sickbay, unconscious."

Undine activated her Comm. Badge. "Number One, the ship is yours, I'm crossing over to the Path Finder," Undine she explained.

"I understand. We will maintain course and heading," Brel responded.

Losira opened their gateway so Undine could cross where as she simply dematerialized. After all, she was already there...



Kitara, Losira, and Simone were near as Jurak continued to examine Garcia. Kitara acknowledge Undine as she entered a conversation already in progress. If she was reading Garcia's brain scan correctly, he was moving from an REM sleep into N1, a light delta wave that is the typical boundary between sleep and waking.

“We should notify Starfleet that we have visitors from the future on board,” Simone was saying.

“Absolutely not,” Kitara said, looking at Simone as if she were an idiot. “Clearly they were brought here by Garcia for a reason and Starfleet would simply isolate them.”

“They should be isolated,” Simone said. “Their presence could alter the future.”

“A thing that Garcia is interested in doing, if you recall,” Kitara said.

“It could be a random act of kindness,” Undine said. “These are people Garcia has affection for.”

“If he hadn’t brought back Riker, I would concur,” Kitara said. “But he hates Riker. There’s a blood feud there.”

“I don’t think it’s a blood feud,” Simone said.

As Garcia’s brain began to wake up, corresponding lights on the monitor began to illuminate and the interface sounds altered their rhythms. Auditory regions reflected the conversation and ambient sounds in the room. Oddly enough, his visual cortex was fully illuminated, as if he was viewing something, but his eyes remained closed. There was no indication from the scans that he had slipped into REM, and his eyes didn’t move behind the eyelids, but there was activity suggesting he was engaged in the world. They all gathered around. According to the scans, he should be full awake, but he continued to lay there, slow respiration, gentle and steady heartbeat, as if he had simply roused and had intentions of returning to a dream.

“Tam?” Losira asked. She touched him when he didn’t respond.

“I hear you,” he said.

“Are you ok?” Losira asked.

With eyes closed, his face seemed to be contemplating the question. Then it had an answer. A flash of sadness crossed his face.

“The Pa Nun was destroyed, all hands lost,” Garcia announced.

The Captains exchanged glances. Losira had only recently notified them that she had lost contact with the Pa Nun and she hadn’t done so in front of Garcia.

“I only recently became aware of that. How did you know?” Losira asked.

Garcia opened his eyes. They were glowing. “I’ve seen it,” Garcia said.

“Doctor,” Simone said, drawing his attention from away from his scanner.

The Doctor looked up from his tricorder to Simone, followed her gaze back to Garcia, and hardly seemed phased. He brought a scanner closer.

“Interesting,” Jurak said. “That might explain some of the anomalous readings.”

“Is it radiation?” Kitara asked.

“McCoy will know about it, ask him,” Garcia said, referring to the condition. His voice was deeper, more resonant than usual. His eyes met Kitara’s eyes. “I’ve projected a timeline for us to finish some goals before you must kill me. The clock is ticking.”

“What are you talking about?” Kitara asked.

Garcia’s eyes returned to normal. The transition that crossed his face was that of an all knowing presence to a limited, uncertain presence as if he had just woke up. He clearly orientated on the faces and relaxed. He smiled as he realized where he was. “Hey. When did we get back? How did we get back?”

“You teleported us from the fountain. You don’t remember?” Kitara asked.

“Do you remember what you were just saying?” Simone asked.

“I was speaking?” 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?” Losira asked.

“I feel great, why?” He was smiling as if he hadn’t a care in the world.

“We lost contact with the Pa Nun and you just said it was destroyed,” Undine said.

“I don’t remember that,” Garcia said. He wasn’t happy, but he didn’t appear devastated. “Kitara, take the Tempest and assess the situation...” Garcia paused as if mulling it over after speaking and decided that was the right thing to do. He nodded, as if reassuring her that he was confident in that. His hand slid to the belly pack he was wearing as he assessed the status of the babies. They were good. Jurak confirmed it without being asked.

“I will,” Kitara said, with a tone that could wait. “But first, what do you want us to do with the guest you put in the Brig?”

“Guest?” Garcia asked. He nearly asked why guest were in the ‘Brig’ but decided they would get around to telling him things. He felt like there were a dozen things he needed to chase through his mind, but each thread he focused slipped away before he could get a good grasp.

“Maybe it would be better just to show him,” Undine said. “Do you feel like walking?”

“Sure. I feel great,” Garcia said, happy to get up.

“Doctor?” Undine asked.

Jurak shrugged. “He feels great,” he said.

Garcia stood, unsteady on his feet at first, but instead of worried he sort of laughed, as if he had just learned to walk. He paused as he recovered balanced, waving off help from the Losira. He consciously put two hands on the belly pack that contained the twins. After assuring his Captains that he and the babies were well, they proceeded to the Brig. McKnight was in the corridor and Garcia maneuvered to intercept her, even greeted her with a hug.

“You doing ok?” he asked her, genuinely focused on her.

McKnight didn’t know what to make of this, but nodded. “Aye, Admiral. And you?”

“Couldn’t be better. Thank you. Keep up the good work,” he said, and as she passed on, Garcia interrupted Tuer, embracing him with the signature ‘brotherhood’ greeting, laughing a Klingon laugh, brazen and loud. “It’s good to see you, Brother!”

“Admiral!” Tuer said.

“Tam, we have business to conduct,” Simone said.

“Can the schedule permit a moment to celebrate friendship?” he asked. Then Rivan was in front of him. He greeted her enthusiastically, hugging her, kissing her first on the forehead and then, on thinking better of it, kissing her on the lips.

Rivan was pleasantly surprised by the attention. Their bellies touched, as she was merely weeks due to deliver, and he was carrying twins.

“Want to come with?” he asked her.

“Your group looks officious,” Rivan said, noticing that the Captains didn’t seem pleased by the distraction.

“This isn’t classified, is it?” Garcia asked the Captains.

“We haven’t decided yet,” Simone answered.

“Well, then, come along Rivan,” Garcia said, drawing her arm into his and proceeding onwards. He didn’t seem to mind the Captain’s speaking behind his back, as if they were concerned he was drugged. “It seems like forever since we’ve had any time together, Rivan.”

“It has been a minute,” Rivan said.

“We’ll have to fix this,” he said, as the door to the Brig opened and they walked in together. Garcia was not only elated to see the inmates in the brig, he gasped with joy. “Jito! Rivan, you remember Jito, don’t you?”

Jito stood up, surprised but relieved to see Garcia. She tried speaking to him, but Garcia spoke over her. “And Data! Lal will be so happy to see you.”

“I should have known you were behind this,” said the third inmate. Riker, older than the one he had most recently encountered, was clearly not happy. He also appeared to have gained significant weight. And, he was wearing night clothes, sweat pants and oversized flannel shirt.

“Why are they locked up?” Garcia asked.

“We assumed that’s the way you wanted it, since they were placed there. We assumed this was you. We can make an argument it was Q,” 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, trying to put it all together. A profound sense of sadness fell over him.

“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, the lines on his forehead becoming complex as he struggled to recall. Tears dropped from his eyes. Rivan touched his face. As if on cue, his face smoothed over as if he had an understanding, and suddenly his eyes shimmered with a glow. Rivan stepped back. The other Garcia, the ‘enlightened one’ had returned. “Each of you will be instrumental in preserving, restoring this 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.”

The glow faded, leaving Garcia’s eyes a lighter shade of hazel, green. Garcia staggered, but Rivan re-engaged him, overcoming her surprise of the change.

“Tam?” Rivan asked.

He patted her arm, nodding. “I’m okay. I’m okay. 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, nodding. That made sense somehow. “Good. Good you’re here and all grandfatherly. You’re going to love sitting for the babies.”

“You need to put us back,” Thomas said.

Garcia blinked, tracking the part of the convention he could recall, and again, there were these ambiguous threads. “Put you back in the future, at the point of your demise.”

“You can’t violate the time line,” Thomas said.

“Put you back to death?” Garcia clarified.

“No one lives forever,” Thomas said. “You have no right to rip us from the timeline. No right to deny us a good death.”

“Very Klingon of you. And you’re right,” Garcia agreed. “I have no authority over you. I barely have authority over me. Clearly, I have some ethical boundaries issues. Just ask my crew. Still, and let’s have clarity on this point: I am not going to send you back to your death just to correct my error. That, too, is an ethical dilemma, isn’t it. Yeah, maybe Kirk would allow Edith to get run over by a truck to fix the time line. I am not Kirk. Fuck that. I am saving Edith, taking her back to the future so she can’t affect the time line. Oh, but I have taken you from the future. You could theoretically affect your future. Maybe I should be worried, except, I know you. I know all of you, and I suspect your moral code of ethics, your Star Fleet training, will prevent you from doing harm. Minimizing harm. Worst case scenario, I blow up the timeline, none of this has happened, you go back to being dead. Best case scenario, I save the Universe, and you get to live a quiet little life on some back water planet, minimizing your temporal foot print. It’s never the best or worst case scenarios. It’s usually somewhere in between. But, if you’re just mad because I robbed you of the perceived relief death offers from melancholy and unrequited love, then, well, tough shit. Grow the fuck up, Will. No one gets what they want in life. You think you’re only one that ever fell in love with Troi and didn’t get a happy ending. That didn’t come out right. That just kind of fell out of my face. Forget I said that. No. It’s still true! I have news for you. Death doesn’t diminish the intensity of feelings. They get magnified. You want to end your misery, find a way to do it in the here and now.” Garcia stepped closer to the cell. “But if you are so determined to be dead, because you’re really that stupid, well, stick around. There are lots of ways to die around me. I need more crew. I need experienced officers. I need you. We’re saving the Universe. That’s a direct order from an Admiral in Star Fleet, and you consider yourself drafted. We clear, or do I have to do the whole you don’t have to like me or the situation for us to work well together speech?”

“We’re clear,” Thomas said.

“Oh, good, thank you, welcome aboard,” Garcia said. He turned to Losira. “If he tries to escape, shoot him. Now, I’m feeling really tired. If you’ll excuse me. Rivan?”

Rivan accompanied Garcia out of the room. There was silence for a moment.

“What just happened?” Jito asked. “Is he okay?”

“He is under a lot of pressure,” Losira said.

“Something’s not right,” Kitara said.

“You think?” Thomas asked.

“He didn’t seem to notice Data was different,” Simone said.

“That would make sense if he had anything to do with that,” Losira said. “Or, he’s still a little out of it from link he established with the Inconian Gateway’s Guardian, and he was seeing Data with his old eyes.”

“Old eyes?” Jito asked.

“We see with our brains, not our eyes,” Simone said, staring at the door Garcia had just passed through. “Garcia was not focus so he missed important details.”

“Garcia never misses details,” Kitara said.

“We are in serious trouble,” Undine commented.

“Yeah,” Losira said. “I will catch these guys up to speed.”

Undine touched Losira on the shoulder, a reserved ‘thank you,’ and excused herself. Kitara and Simone followed, as they each needed to return to their ships and their own tasks.

“No, really, what’s happening?” Jito asked.

“Change is coming, dear,” Losira said. “Answers, maybe, but change, definitely. Come. Let’s get yawl 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.”

Chapter 2

Tama Orleans made her way down the corridor, slowing as she came to the center. Beneath her feet was a hatch that led to an observation blister on the saucer section of the New Constitution. She stopped, wiped her eyes, stretched, and when the corridor was clear, she opened the hatch in the floor and climbed down in it. Closing the hatch behind her, she continued down to the lowest point of the bottom of the saucer section. The change-over of gravity that allowed her to stand upright opposite of how she was standing on the deck above always caused her to have a spell of vertigo, but it passed quickly enough. This place was peace. It was the only place that she had to herself, since she was not allowed to use the holodeck without supervision.

She sat on the floor, her back against the transparent aluminum. The new Constitution was traveling at warp and the blister was technically off limits, cause if a micro meteor did get pass the screen, the transparent aluminum could be easily punctured. Deflector beams occasionally flashed like lightning, shifting larger threats to one side or the other, and some dust occasionally flowed around the warp bubble, fluorescing like the glow of tiny plankton around the bow of sea vessel from her home world. Looking forward it was possible to see the pin pricks of stars, but only if viewed dead on, and only a moment, before they exploded into their spectra signature and slipped past. There was one particular ‘sweet spot’ of a view where one had the hint of traveling in a tunnel of light. She was told that the tunnel and the rainbow bright stars told were illusions created by the impact photons, star light, against the warp bubble, as if the photon was actually a solid beam of light stretching from star to infinity in all directions. It was as if the star and all the light it ever produced, past and present, was one, singular object the size of the universe, enmeshing with all the light from all the other stars and planets; the light was one. ‘A sea of light,’ Garcia had sung in one of his songs that wasn’t a remake. “Travel Light...”

Though she knew she was at the bottom of the saucer section, it felt like the top of the world with the artificial gravity holding her to the deck plating. Her back was to the main hull, or she might have noticed in one of the windows behind her that Niki Carter, upside down from her perspective, was waving to get her attention. Niki gave up and pushed on past the window.

Tama Orleans pulled a piece of ‘green tea’ chocolate out of her pocket and unwrapped a portion of it. Supposedly, it was a Japanese version of a ‘Kitkat,’ and probably wasn’t technically chocolate, but it was one of the flavors her father had introduced her to and that she had most loved. She bit into it, closing her eyes to savor the assortment of flavors that rolled across her palate. She allowed the chocolate to melt on her tongue before chewing, slowly, breaking the cookie center. When the candy was gone, she wanted more. Wanting more was because she wanted more, but also because she had nothing to drink to wash it down and more candy would save her from going to fetch a drink. She forced herself to resist the urge for more chocolate or for a drink, and focused on her breath. Mastering Garcia’s meditation exercises were frustrating. She wondered if she had a neural implant like his it would be easier. After what seemed like five minutes of the mental exercise, she activated the application on her sleeve and examined the results. She frowned at the biometric data.

Closing her eyes, she started over. She said her mantra, and tried to focus her thoughts. The goal of meditating was not to eliminate thoughts, she reminded herself, but to increase focus. When she became aware that she was having miscellaneous thoughts, she returned to the mantra with only a few unkind self-reprimands.

“Tama Orleans?”

Tama opened her eyes, nearly jumping to her feet from surprise. No one was present. She shivered, wondering if she had actually heard a voice, or had it been her imagination.

“Hello?” she asked.

No response.

“Computer, did someone just page me?” Tama asked.

“Negative,” the computer responded.

Tama Orleans pushed it out of her head and returned to her meditation. It must have been a stray thought which she had mistook for an auditory event. She had had that experience once. She realized she was thinking, scolded herself, and returned to the mantra.

“Tama Orleans. It’s me.”

Tama opened her eyes and stood up. “Computer, did you hear that?”

“I require more specificity,” the computer responded.

Tama sighed. “You’ve been talking to Garcia, haven’t you?” Tama asked.

“Affirmative,” the computer said. It was unable to detect the sarcasm in the question.

“That was rhetorical,” Tama said, and returned to her meditation.

“Tama Orleans, don’t be afraid,” said the voice.

“Who are you?” Tama Orleans asked, her heart rate increasing.

“When you calm and focus, you will be able to see me,” the voice came again.

“What?” Tama asked, spinning, looking for the source of the voice.

“You were mistaken,” the voice said. “You do have some telepathic abilities. Relax, you will hear me better when you’re relaxed. And if you are really calm, you should be able to see me.”

“Who are you?” Tama asked.

The hatch in the floor opened and Niki popped out, feet first, descending through the ‘crossover’ until she was full out and able to stand up.

“Hey,” Niki said. “Whatcha doing?”

“Um, nothing,” Tama said. “Just came up here to be alone.”

“Do you still want to be alone?” Niki asked.

“No, actually,” Tama said.

Niki kicked the hatch closed. “Have you been crying?”

As if that was cue, Tama started bawling again, and just plopped herself down on the floor.

“What’s wrong?” Niki asked.

Niki went to her, sat next to her and pulled her in close. Tama explained how Garcia had missed another appointment with her and how recently she had given him a book and he had rejected her gift, but most of her words were unintelligible. Niki patted Tama, trying to comfort her. The one thing Niki was certain of was that Tama had had her feelings hurt by something Garcia had done. Niki suspected it was because Tama held

the wrong perspective, as opposed to Garcia having actually done something maliciously to hurt her.

“How do you solve a problem like Garcia,” Niki said, in a sing song fashion.

“I don’t know,” Tama said, rubbing her eyes.

“Umm, I was kind of joking,” Niki said. “You know, musical reference to sound of music?”

Tama’s crying increased in pitch and tempo. “How do you know so much? You’re just like him. How can I ever relate to either of you when you’re both so much smarter than me?!”

Niki cringed and tried to turn Tama’s face so that their eyes could meet. “Oh, no, no, no, honey, I’m not smarter than you. I’m really closer to being an idiot savant, very specialized knowledge base, and mostly my knowledge base centers around music. If it’s not music, I’m not going to do so hot, but I can appear smarter because you can sneak other knowledge sets in the form of music, so I can recite knowledge, but I don’t really hold practical applications. I could sing all the parts of a warp core, but I couldn’t diagnose a problem or rebuild it to save our lives, if that makes sense.”

“Garcia is smarter than me,” Tama said, not revealing that she had heard nothing.

“Well, yeah, he is smarter than all of us, in terms of generalized trivia, specialized knowledge, processing abstractions, creativity,” Niki said, and when she realized this wasn’t helping, she frowned. “But that doesn’t mean you can’t connect with Garcia. He’s Kelvan, so he’s kind of smarter than everyone, so you’re in the same boat as the rest of us.”

“If I were more like you, maybe had some semblance of musical talent, maybe I’d have a chance,” Tama said.

“Tama, this just isn’t true. You’re in the in group. Garcia loves you, and you don’t have to do anything special,” Niki insisted.

“Pfff, yeah, right,” Tama said. “Everyone in his entourage has something. The ability to fight. Music. Science. Medical. I’m useless.”

Niki sat there for a long moment, not saying anything, not arguing with her.

“Have you spoken to the counselor about these feelings?”

“See! Even you think I’m crazy,” Tama said, pulling away from Niki. “Surely you can see you have a better relationship with my father than I do.”

“I don’t think you’re crazy, but I think you’re not going to believe what I have to say,” Niki said.

“What do you mean?” Tama asked, rubbing her eyes.

“You probably won’t get the analogy, but you’re kind of like Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz,” Niki explained.

“The Wizard of what?” Tama asked.

“Not the point, really,” Niki said.

“No, it is the point! How do you know all of this stuff? Is this like common Earth knowledge?” Tama asked.

“Not exactly,” Niki said. “Just a musical classic. I suppose an argument can be made that wizard of Oz is still so iconic that it should be general knowledge, but you also grew up on a different planet, so don’t beat yourself up. But back to the point, even if I was the good witch, and I knew all the answers, like I happened to know that you actually

have the power to make the change you want, that you always have the power to go home, you're not ready to hear that, because you're still on the journey."

"I don't have any power," Tama said, truly confused by the whole speech.

"You believe that because you haven't arrived yet but you will," Niki said. "The journey is everything. Look, why do you think Star Fleet believes so fundamentally in the Prime Directive? Giving someone an answer before they're ready can not only be detrimental, but it could be completely rejected. It's like if you needed a heart transplant. I just can't give you my heart, your body will reject it. It's the same with ideas. If I tell you something before you're ready, your mind automatically rejects it."

"So, you're saying I'm stupid," Tama said.

"No, I'm saying you clearly aren't ready to hear what I have to say," Niki said.

"Try me," Tama demanded.

"None of us are perfect, we are all going to make mistakes, me, you everybody, but there is one thing that I know with absolute certainty, and that is Tamma loves you, and there is not one thing that you can do that will ever jeopardize that love because it's not based on your level of success or achievement," Niki said. "If there is one thing that Garcia is good about, it's accepting people unconditionally. He's very nonjudgmental."

"Well, I guess you're right about one thing," Tama said.

"What's that?" Niki asked.

"I don't believe you," Tama said. She opened the hatch and proceeded 'down' the hole head first, but arrived 'heads up' at the corridor above.

Niki followed, making the transition to a new 'upright' faster than Tama.

Tama, wanting to prove her point that Niki was smarter than her, asked, "Why can't we take holodeck matter off the holodeck?"

"Because it's not stable," Niki said.

"But why?" Tama persisted.

They both stepped out of the way as Captain Undine marched past them in what looked like a heated conversation with 'Marvin the Martian' as Marvin Smith was known to them. It was well known that his unusual height was a product of being born on Mars off the grid, and it was further rumored that he had to wear antigravity tech in his uniform just so he could move about the ship without injury. What they gathered as they passed was that he was complaining about Dryac going on an Away Mission without him. After they passed, Tama asked again.

"It has something to do with the artificial Higgs-Bosons, a massive scalar particle that defines the mass of any atom or molecule..." Niki was explaining.

"How can you say you aren't smarter than I am," Tama complained.

"I'm not. I'm quoting trivia, not giving you understanding. Look, you've heard of the formula $E=mc^2$, right? Basically it defines the relationship of matter and energy, so if you reduce the mass, you increase the speed, so, the more bosons you can remove from an object, the faster it goes."

"So, if you remove my bosons, I could travel at the speed of light?" Tama asked.

"Well, yeah. How do you think the transporter works?" Niki said.

"Magic," Tama said. "But I'm still uncertain how this relates to holodeck matter. If we can create matter from energy using a replicator, why can't we make holodeck matter stable?"

“Do you know how much power that would take to create and move all the matter that can fill up that space? There is really very little holodeck matter, most of the stuff you see in There is just illusion, holographic visuals, with the computer solidifying certain aspects of items with force fields and fake particles to give us some tactile experiences. Besides, you don’t want to be in a room that is constantly creating matter from energy and then converting it back again. You could get hurt.”

Tama knew that. She had eaten enough holodeck food that she had caused physical damage to her body on exiting, resulting in her restrictions from using the Holodeck.

“I think you are smarter than you give yourself credit,” Tama said.

“That makes me normal, I guess,” Niki laughed.



“I may not be a trained Starfleet officer, but I am part of Fleet, and my job is to accompany Dryac on her missions,” Marvin persisted. “I think this mobility device is just Garcia’s way of cutting me out of the picture and I will not be made redundant.”

“Mr. Smith,” Undine said, pausing far enough away from Medical that she didn’t trigger the door. “As the Captain, I can assure you that Garcia didn’t dream this up to make you redundant, nor did we anticipate an Away Mission of that nature. It sort of just happened and we weren’t prepared for the fall out. I’m aware of your feelings and I will try to accommodate you in the future, should the situation warrant it. Fair enough?”

Marvin seemed to cool his jets. “Very well.”

“How is Dryac, by the way?” Undine asked.

“Radiant,” Marvin says. “She enjoyed the Away Mission immensely, but mostly, she is in one of these perpetual ecstatic states due to the pregnancy. She had three offspring’s in the past, and apparently every moment was joy like she was tapped into the Cosmos, and she thought she was too old to have another child, so that plus revisiting the Universal plug in, she’s like an over flowing of Rumi or Mohammad. Quite frankly, the positiveness is annoying.”

Undine’s expression of ‘Umph,’ apparently wasn’t transmitted, but then, her human friends considered her fairly stoic. Not the way a Vulcan is stoic, or a Klingon, but subtle, unless she was really angry. “I didn’t think Rumi or Mohammad were always positive. Didn’t Mohammad want to kill himself when he first heard the voice of God because he thought he was crazy?” Undine asked.

Marvin seemed perplexed. “I really don’t know anything about Mohammad other than he was a prophet. I was just trying to speak metaphorically,” Marvin said.

“Really? If you are going to use a metaphor, shouldn’t you understand the context and the multiple meanings that could unfold based on the shared perceptive?” Undine asked.

Marvin seemed more annoyed than perplexed by her question. “You are just as tiring as talking to Counselor Rossi. I was just generalizing.”

“And probably why you’re not Star Fleet,” Undine said. “Specificity can move a conversation towards a collective consensus much more quickly if we don’t have to guess as to the meaning behind the selected vehicle.”

Marvin moved from apparent annoyance to visible irritation. “God, you’re going to be much more difficult to deal with than Garcia, aren’t you?”

“Why are you calling me God?” Undine asked.

“I clearly can’t speak with you,” Marvin said, his frustration shining through.

“Oh, okay. Well, thank you for your time, then,” Undine said, happy that that was over with, and proceeded to Sickbay, not caring that Marvin shifted from irritation to quiet rage. His energy was palpable until the door to Sickbay closed behind her.

Doctor Misan and Admiral McCoy were arguing semantics when Undine entered. Misan immediately took his argument to the Captain, ranting about how McCoy’s mental status was questionable. McCoy was debating him, trying to talk over him.

“Stop it, both of you,” Undine snapped. “What the hell?”

“McCoy’s brain scan has a specific signature that is reminiscent of a Vulcan mind meld,” Misan said. “Twice during our session he has used language sets consistent with Garcia’s out dated dialogue and so, if it’s true that Garcia altered McCoy to be physically younger, then it is highly likely that Garcia also tampered with his mind, which means he is no longer qualified to make a diagnosis.”

Undine looked to McCoy, prompting him to give his side.

“Clearly, Garcia has modified me. It is also on record that he and I share a subtle, constant mind link due to an accidental mind meld in the past. You can’t alter someone physically to the degree that I have been tampered with without some feedback or cross over, so it seems only natural that a little of Garcia has spilled into my waking conscious, but it doesn’t mean there was full blown mind meld or alteration,” McCoy argued. “As far as I’m concerned, I am as fit as I was when I was in my forties.”

“Physically,” Misan said. “Mentally, you have been tampered with and you still have the mind of a centurion”

“Ageism is not an argument,” McCoy snapped. “I can think circles around you, Sir.”

“He’s unduly adversarial,” Misan pointed out.

Her subtle facial expression of ‘umph!’ was more legible than her previous, but they were both too caught up in their own positions to notice her incredulosity.

“I’m not so old I can’t kick your butt,” McCoy pointed out.

“Admiral,” Undine said, interrupting the threat of ensuing violence. “In all honesty, can you not say that your mental state isn’t being slightly affected by the situation, and perhaps your renewed levels of testosterone?”

“No,” McCoy said. “I feel better than I have in a long time.”

Misan crossed his arms, satisfied. Undine frowned at him, but looked to McCoy sympathetically.

“Fine, I concede. I’m unduly influenced, but you can’t say I’m mentally unfit to make a diagnosis just because I want to kick Misan’s butt.”

“I don’t think you’re unfit,” Undine said.

“Great,” Misan said. “You clearly don’t need my opinion.”

Misan stormed off.

“How can you put up with that pompous ass?” McCoy asked.

Undine didn't acknowledge the question. "Could you tell me about glowing eyes?"

"Glowing eyes?" McCoy asked. "I don't understand the question. Is this a test?"

"Garcia said to ask you about it," Undine said. She explained the context.

McCoy went and sat down, as if he were suddenly very old again. It was possible, he thought, to be physically young, but still carry the momentum of an old mind. It would take conscious effort to square his shoulders back and weather things like a young man. He leaned on his elbows, his left fist in his right hand and his chin on his hands. He was certain now that Garcia had messed with his mind, as he could clearly recall the incident in his mind as if it were yesterday. It was more than perfect memory, he could almost see it as if he were watching the scenario unfold from a perspective outside himself.

"We had discovered a ship's recorder of the USS Valiant that had passed through a magnetic space storm. That's what they called it then. More precisely, it's an energy field that encircles the Galaxy. We passed through that storm and two people, Psychiatrist, Doctor Elizabeth Dehner and helmsman Gary Mitchell, were changed at the genetic level. It was as if they were evolving right in front of us, but it was more than that, actually. It was like a super conscious was taking over, suppressing their normal everyday consciousness. It may not be a super conscious, it could have just been their unconscious thoughts and personality made manifest by an increase in their ability to channel psychic energy. One noticeable feature was that their eyes glowed."

"Hypothetically, if this condition is what Garcia has, what's the prognosis?" Undine asked.

"You will have to kill him," McCoy said.

"That's your only solution?" Undine asked. "What did Kirk do?"

"Kirk tried to maroon them on the furthest out post, but Mitchell's became hostile, that's the only word I have for it, and he tried to kill Kirk, a longtime friend," McCoy said. "Kirk was forced to kill them. You won't find any of this in the log. You won't find any evidence that passing through the energy field increases the rate of evolution of anyone that possesses ESP. You make that a rule and everyone that thinks they're the slightest bit psychic will be making a pilgrimage to the edge of the Galaxy to become some super guru or God."

"Kirk killed both of them?" Undine said.

"Dehner did help Kirk, but the assumption was that she had not evolved as far or as fast as Mitchell, so she was still in touch with her humanity when she died," McCoy said.

"But you don't know that for sure," Undine said. "She wasn't given the opportunity. Neither of them were allowed to finish their process so we could know for sure. Maybe delusions of grandeur is a temporary symptom. Maybe humility follows enlightenment."

"You're right. I don't know. Maybe women just naturally maintain more of their nurturing side. But she loved Gary, and was willing to follow him. When she stopped following him, he attacked her, and she died of her injuries. I don't know if we could have saved her. I wasn't there for that part. I suspect Kirk's solution was the only solution. If Garcia has this, there will be a point of no return, where he will cease to be human. Superior humans have a tendency to abuse power," McCoy said.

“Since he is not fully human, he has the potential of not becoming hostile,” Undine pointed out.

“I don’t know,” McCoy said. “But can you risk him being in a position of authority or power when the other personality takes over? He has already demonstrated what he is capable of when linked in with Kelvan Tech.”

“How do you know that this process isn’t where evolution takes all sentient beings?” Undine asked. “How do you know that we aren’t all destined to become Q? How do you know that we aren’t all like the Zalkonians, just one step away from a major step forward physically and spiritually? We can’t just kill people off because we are afraid of what they might become or what we might become.”

“And you were saying I am out of touch?” McCoy said, nodding his head.

“I didn’t say that. I am saying that we can’t conclude that a superior intelligence will automatically have evil agendas towards an inferior species,” Undine said.

“Historically, with every advance forwards, the predecessor dies off, or is killed off. But let’s say we let Garcia become a god, just for the sake of arguments. Have you read all the stories of gods and humans? Gods rarely treat us well.”

“Humans have frequently used intelligence to control and manipulate others; that does not mean all sentient species do this,” Undine said.

“Every time we came up against a superior intellect, it wanted to dominate us,” McCoy said.

“Every time?” Undine said. “What about your encounter with Balok?”

“Okay, one time, there was this one superior good guy, who did screw with us before he showed his good side,” McCoy said.

“And the beings Kirk and Spock met at Organia?” Undine said.

“You win. What’s your point? This isn’t just some hypothetical query, is it?” McCoy said.

“Tam wants Kitara to kill him. He says it like it’s a done deal, written in stone,” Undine said. She paused. “Are you crying?”

McCoy wiped a tear from his eyes. “He’s my son, what the hell do you think?!”

Undine considered McCoy’s present situation, being young, the mission parameters, and recommended: “Perhaps you should speak to Rossi.”

“You know, in my day I was the Doctor and the Counselor and the Chaplain,” McCoy ranted.

“That may be, but Doctors don’t treat themselves, and you seem to be all over the map emotionally,” Undine said.

“Well, what do you expect? I’m suddenly young and flooded with hormones,” McCoy said, standing as if he were going to storm out. He paused and touched her shoulder, chuckling. “I imagine, if you were to talk to Spock, he would tell you that I am acting completely normal for me. I’m okay, Captain. Really.”

CHAPTER 3

Garcia woke himself with a laugh. He became aware of his surroundings. The light was on and Rivan was sitting up in bed, reading. She put the book down. A real book. He smiled at Rivan, biting on his lower lip as if to keep himself from laughing. The more he tried to hold it back, the more irresistible the urge became. He erupted into more laughter. Rivan's smile increased and she scooted down and held him. He laughed so hard that he was crying on her shoulder. There was no talking to him in this state, so she waited until he was calm.

"You okay?" Rivan asked.

He snuggled into her, at the same time, pushing a pillow behind his back, careful not put too much weight onto the belly pack carrying the twins. He had learned the hard way that if he rolled over in his sleep the belly pack would shock him, forcing him to return to sleeping on his side or back. He nodded. "I am happy. I wish I could maintain this."

"You jumped, though, right before waking. Bad dream or another shock from the pouch?" Rivan asked.

"Just a dream," Garcia said. He used a knuckle to check for drool on his mouth. "Though the shock thing is getting old. I didn't realize how often I rotate onto my stomach."

"Um, I could have told you that you were a restless sleeper," Rivan said.

"Really?" he asked.

"You never noticed how you wake up cocooned in your covers?" Rivan asked.

"Never thought of it, really," Garcia said.

"I find that hard to believe," Rivan said. "Weren't you the one that recommended that we each have our own blanket?"

"Yeah, but that's so we're not fighting over covers all night," Garcia said.

"Alright, I concede the point. Besides, you vetoed that."

"I wanted to be next to you." The blanket was heavier on his side than hers. Her right side was exposed. Rivan touched his head. "You know I love you?"

"I do," Garcia said, putting a hand on her belly. Baby was kicking. He closed his eyes and magnified the sensations from his hands. "I love you. I love you both. Don't ever forget that."

Rivan was not happy about that statement, as if she was worried he might be thinking he wasn't going to be around.

"When is the last time you spoke to Mandora?"

Garcia wasn't able to place the last time he spoke to her. Or tried to. She had been presenting with psychosis ever since he had blown up her planet. As far as he knew, she was the only surviving member of her species, and there was no way for them to know a course of treatment. The fact that she was pregnant only complicated the matter, because it limited the number of psychotropic drugs they could try.

"I don't know," Garcia admitted.

"I don't think she's crazy," Rivan said.

"No one is calling her crazy," Garcia said.

"Yeah, they are," Rivan said. "But she said something to me the other day that seems coherent."

“For instance?”

“She said, ‘Don’t speak. Only when one is in their right mind can they travel. Only the quiet inherit the real world.’” Rivan said.

“And, what does this mean for you?” Garcia asked.

Rivan frowned, as if she suddenly was having second thoughts. “Tam,” Rivan said.

“Just say it,” Garcia said.

“We’ve talked about God,” Rican said. “Star Fleet is very clear, they don’t want to talk about God. The thing is, it’s not just a God. There’s a Goddess. My people, the Edo, live in harmony with the God and the Goddess.”

“You’re proposing a Dualistic Theology,” Garcia began.

“No,” Rivan interrupted him. “It’s more complicated than that, even. Look, we know, and your science confirms this; the left side of the brain communicates with language, the right side communicates with whole pictures, and the heart communicates with emotions. This triad is what manifests the human being. Your society is so left brain dominated, you can’t even fathom life with the Goddess, much less process your emotions. Apparently this wasn’t always so, there was a time Earth was more open. I have been reading about them, and the temples that served the Goddess were as open sexually as my people are today. It wasn’t until the patriarchal societies, those that worshiped the male gods alone, preferring the word in an absolute form over the form itself; the left hemisphere that is your world became one of war, crime and legalese. Your poets talk about love, and they come the closest to describing what life is like with the Goddess, but it pales to actually giving up the word and experiencing it in real time. The Priestesses were never temple whores. There is no translation for what their roles were. My people, all of my people, male and female, practice being open to the Goddess by being open to all beings, outside of the chains of language. Language possesses and limits, big picture opens and expands. Do you know why there is so much drama in your world? It’s because you believe love is a limited resource, and you refuse to serve everyone equally. Your own philosophies support this. The meek inherit the Earth. Meek, quiet. Come as children before the throne, meaning less words, more form base.”

“I believe you,” Garcia said.

“Do you?” Rivan asked. “Explain your disconnect with Tatyana.”

“It’s complicated,” Garcia said.

“No,” Rivan said. “It’s not. You’re either loving unconditionally, or you’re restricting. Love is like the sun, it shines on everyone, and you got clouds blocking. The same clouds that keep you from helping Tatyana keeps you from hearing Mandora. Mandora is speaking big picture concepts. She is speaking the language of the Goddess. She is a fifth density being trapped in a third density reality frame. She’s just like Star Fleet people, if I were to take away your communicators and tricorders. Most of you wouldn’t function without tech. When her world was destroyed, she got trapped here, without her tech, and no universal translator. You can’t communicate with her because you’re primarily left brain, male dominated, science based oriented. She is primarily right brain orientated, big picture, love base.”

Garcia was so long in thought she assumed he didn’t agree and was trying to figure out a way to say something nice.

“What?” she asked.

“I just wished you had brought this to me earlier. It reminds me of a book, ‘the Alphabet Versus the Goddess,’ by Leonard Shlain,” Garcia said. “Let me think on this further. And, I will visit with Mandora.”

“Thank you. Would you do me another favor?” Rivan asked.

“Sure. What would you like?” Garcia asked.

“I want you to deliver our baby,” Rivan said.

Garcia looked up to her, studying her eyes for any hint of a problem. “It is standard practice for a non-family member to perform a medical procedure,” Garcia said.

“I’m having a baby, not a medical procedure,” Rivan said.

Garcia chuckled. “You sure you don’t want Jurak or Misan?”

“I don’t want Misan touching me,” Rivan said, very clearly.

Garcia nodded, as if he understood. The fact that he didn’t prompted a statement. “I thought you liked Misan.”

Rivan thought for a long moment, her focus distant, her lips pursed. “I don’t know how to communicate this without disparaging him. Also, I don’t know if the issue is a species bias or he’s just not a nice person. I love him, but I don’t see a way to repair him given his paradigm and the contextual way this crew engages each other.”

Garcia sat up, allowing the covers to fall away, sitting Indian style, facing her. Of course, this action also took the remaining covers from her, revealing that she was only wearing the oversize, flannel shirt. The seriousness of her comment kept his eyes focused on her eyes as he adjusted his position on the bed. He had never heard her say she didn’t like someone. Even so, his mind split into tangents. The peculiarity of the scene struck him. It appeared that they were on a bed free floating in space. A part of him was fascinated that he was distracted by this fact, which was leading him even further away from his focus. He found his eyes back on her legs when he realized the extent of distraction, noting just where the flannel overlapped and fell against her thighs, enticing him to want to explore further. He took a breath and put energy into meeting Rivan’s eyes. Just because he intuitively knew she was communicating something important to him, didn’t mean his natural tendency to protect or fix wouldn’t leak through; he redoubled his effort on hearing her.

“What happen?” Garcia asked.

Rivan hesitated.

“Rivan?” Garcia insisted, touching her foot.

Rivan committed. “I was interested in Misan. I like his skin tone and color, and his general appearance. I wanted to learn about his culture and about him, so I made myself available to him.”

“You had sex with him,” Garcia said, translated, not judging.

Rivan nodded. “He was unreasonably rough. He didn’t have to be, because I was intending to submit to him. I asked him to be gentler, but that seemed to only escalate his intensity. I was unable to participate with joy, so I just endured.”

“He raped you,” Garcia said, again, clarifying, not judging.

“No, I was very clear I was interested in being intimate with him, it just, wasn’t pleasant,” Rivan said. “I assumed it was like you mating with a Klingon. You always have bruises after spending time with Kitara. Is that rape?”

“No,” Garcia said. “But if you said stop...”

“But I didn’t say stop, I just asked him to be gentler,” Rivan said. “Again, we’re discussing what I was trying to communicate earlier. When love is viewed as a limited resource, the philosophy results in a segment of the population being needy. It’s a fear based response to a perceived lack of love. Misan is a taker. He takes not from greed, but because of innate fear that that’s the only way he can get his needs met. He can’t accept genuine submission without subconsciously believing he’s being ridiculed or pitied. And he can’t give. The more you believe in lack, the less you’re able to give. Sometimes, in our culture, we have people that are too rough, but there is always the group, and we can get that under control before it gets out of hand. Most people comply with a group counseling session. But there is no group here. Everyone is individual, living in their own quarters. Hell, each of you are predominantly in your own mind, rarely coming out and sharing for fear of ridicule, or fear that you would lose rank or authority if people really knew just how much confidence you really lack. It’s like you’re all playing roles, like you know you are actors, and you’re afraid of breaking character for fear everyone else will get mad. People keep their emotional lives and their sex lives separate from the group. Everyone here seems so cold and distant from my perspective. There are a few exceptions. Some crew members are open and can talk about any subject, but clearly most of the crew members are not open to talking about sex, so I have kept this to myself, till now.”

“I’m fairly open about sex. Why didn’t you tell me sooner?” Garcia asked.

Rivan laughed. “Have you noticed how busy you are? Besides, you are bias. You’re my friend, my lover, and you’re his commanding officer. It just has potential of blowing up bigger than it is.”

“Screw that. Something like this, blow it up. My job is to take care of this kind of stuff,” Garcia told her. He took her hands in his. “Rivan, I know you think we are not as connected as your people, but there is a group speak. The group comes to me and I see that the rules, spoken or unspoken, are followed. What I am hearing from you is that Misan overstepped some boundaries, not just as a fellow sentient being, but also that of a Doctor, and of a Starfleet Officer.”

“I don’t want this to be a big deal, Tam. I can take care of myself. I put myself in that situation. It was not what I had hoped it to be. I will not go there again,” Rivan said. “Please, don’t make anything of this. But definitely honor my request. I don’t want him involved with any future medical procedures and I don’t want him delivering our baby.”

“I think I am morally obligated to take this somewhere,” Garcia said.

“Why? I’m not a child. I’m not an elder. I am adult who made a choice and experienced some unpleasantness. That’s life, Tam,” Rivan said.

The door chime rang. Rivan nodded, telling him to answer the door without speaking.

“Come,” Garcia said.

A doorway opened in space and Tomoko entered Garcia’s room. She approached without apparent concern that she would fall through space or time, because she knew it was an illusion. Only the open door broke the continuity of illusion. She brought in clothes and set them on the end of the bed. “Good morning. If you’re up to it, I have breakfast prepared and a full itinerary for you.”

“Thank you, Tomoko. I’ll be right there,” Garcia said.

Tomoko nodded and left the room and the door closed returning the illusion of space. A bed floating in space. A part of him wanted to laugh again, but the seriousness of the conversation seemed to warrant him being severe, but then, either one of those suggested the moral tone was set by a social context which he didn't know how to apply. He decided to trust Rivan's wants in the matter. He crawled up over her in order to kiss her, taking her back to the bed, and her belly bump met his pouch. She laughed and kissed him eagerly. It led to a moment of play, in which the majority of the time was spent finding a comfortable position. Afterwards, he slipped on the long sleeve t-shirt with a turtle neck, put on his socks, and then stood up to slip on his pants and over shirt.

"You look handsome," Rivan said.

"I feel fat," Garcia said.

"Not fat, pregnant," Rivan said.

"Isn't that exactly what a husband tells a wife who just said she feels fat?" Garcia asked.

"A really wise, loving husband," Rivan said. "Or wife."

"You're incredibly, wise, loving, and completely bias, but I receive it well," Garcia said. He kissed her again. "Need anything?"

"I have everything I could ever want," Rivan said.

Garcia smiled. "Okay. I'm not promising you I won't follow up on what we talked about, Rivan. But I promise, if I do, it will be discreet. Have breakfast with me?"

"I trust you, and, sure, I am starving," Rivan said.



McCoy entered Garcia's office, and found him alone, reading. He was sitting in a chair, with a coffee table beside him, reading from a PADD. He held the PADD with his right hand, and unconsciously petted the portable womb belly pack with his left, as if he was petting a cat. The tea pot was glass, sitting on a glass frame that heated the tea with a votive candle. Both the candle and the tea had their own aromas, but they mixed well. McCoy coughed intentionally.

Garcia looked up. "Oh, hey dad, come in," Garcia said, casually. "Just reading some reports. Want some tea?"

"You're pouring it?" McCoy seemed surprised.

"Yes. I find doing things manually very comforting all of a sudden. It's like it slows things down," Garcia said, musingly. "I feel it's urgent to slow things down, to try to be more observant. I just want to really savor every experience. Not that I haven't ever been unobservant, but something feels very different. Sorry. Rambling. How are you? Did you get a haircut?"

"Really?" McCoy asked.

"Really what?" Garcia asked.

"You don't see it?" McCoy asked.

"See what?" Garcia asked.

"I'm like seventy years younger!" McCoy snapped.

Garcia's eyes widen and he put the PADD down. "Oh my god," he said, not getting up. He thought about getting up, but getting up with the belly pack was awkward,

and he hated looking awkward. “Are you alright? Was it a transporter malfunction? What happened?”

“You happened!” McCoy said.

“Really?” Garcia asked. He covered his mouth and chuckled into his hands.

“You think this is funny?!” McCoy demanded.

“No. Yes. Maybe,” Garcia said. “I don’t know what to think.”

“I told you I didn’t want this!” McCoy said.

“I don’t remember doing this,” Garcia said, trying to be serious. “I’m not deny wanting this, but I... I just don’t know. I’m sorry.”

“So, put me back the way you found me,” McCoy said.

“No,” Garcia said, forcefully, without hesitation. Is humor was definitely gone.

“What?” McCoy asked.

“I accept that I may be responsible for your present condition, which means that I violated you as a person, violated all sorts of ethical considerations, but I am sure as hell not reversing this just to appease you, and in the process violate a whole other set of ethical issues to correct the mistake,” Garcia said. Linking with the Guardian, Clio, had seemed more like a mind meld in some ways, but it also clearly reminded him of plugging into the Kelvan technology. When plugged in, he had lost all sense of social and moral boundaries and acted out his desire, both conscious and unconscious. The difference, he supposed, was Clio had been guiding his hand. How much of her hand was in it was hard to measure, but he decided not to even try to calculate degrees of responsibility. He was complicit. He wanted this for his father. He would have traded his life for his father’s continued existence.

“I don’t want this,” McCoy said.

“Tough,” Garcia said. “Because as a Doctor I have an obligation to cause no harm, and turning you into an old man, taking you closer to death, is reprehensible, and so I’m choosing that criteria to be the overriding value in this dispute. Let me be very clear, I will not intentionally fix this.”

McCoy sat down heavily in the chair across from Garcia. “I don’t want to live another hundred years or more, Tam,” McCoy said, very serious. “Which is very likely unless I get run over by a bus.”

“A bus?” Garcia asked.

“Oh, yeah, and that reminds me, what the devil did you do to my brain?” McCoy asked. “Damn it, just because you are part Vulcan and a child of Spock doesn’t give you the right to go for field trip through my mind.”

Garcia nodded. “I’m sorry.”

McCoy nodded. “So am I. I just don’t want to do this again. I’ve already watched all of my friends die. Some more than once. I am alone most of the time now, not a complaint, just a normal age disparity when it comes to socialization, as people can’t always connect with me in meaningful ways.”

“Kind of like me, and the whole 20th century mindset,” Garcia said.

“Worse,” McCoy said. “Because I have a clue what people say and think and actually care to be present in the present. It’s just not reciprocal.

“With your hero status, surely you have no shortage of potential romances,” Garcia said.

“Oh please,” McCoy said. “I’m not Kirk. I’m not you!”

“I’m just saying, you don’t have to be lonely, dad,” Jeremy said. “You could make yourself available online. You can even date older. Women tend to outlive men, so you have no shortage of partners.”

“There are few people my age, Tam. The ones that are my age have a higher potential to die, or I die and leave them, and the rest are young enough to be my great grandchildren,” McCoy argued. “That doesn’t even begin to factor in the other complication. The few who have made the effort to connect with me tend to have the agenda of putting me down on a resume as if they met someone important. I’m not a rock star and I don’t want groupies.”

“Can I have them?” Garcia asked in jest.

“You don’t have enough?” McCoy asked.

“I was joking,” Garcia said.

“I get the sense that you’re not taking anything seriously,” McCoy said.

“Why? I have to be morose or gravely serious to demonstrate that I understand reality?” Garcia asked. “Why is everyone so sullen and wanting to be dead. We have forever to be dead and only this one, tiny moment to be alive, to cherish and serve. Should that service come with love and joy?”

“Speaking of death,” McCoy said.

“Why is this so difficult,” Garcia lamented. Now that he was ‘serious,’ he was having a hard time letting it go, and continued to speak over McCoy, not accepting his desire to switch to another topic. “Look, what I am trying to say is that there is no need for you to be isolated, and as a Doctor, you should recognize the importance of social interaction,” Garcia said. Garcia sat for a moment, scrutinizing his father. The man McCoy had shadowed his life from the moment they first met, the moment McCoy had picked him up and held him. “Maybe I didn’t notice your physical change just now because this is how I have always seen you, your mind looks younger than your body. There is no reason why you should not avail yourself of technology to keep you as physically young as your mind. I know, there is this anti-aging sentiment popular in the human philosophical arena, but that could just be a rationalization, to make inevitable aging and death easier to swallow.”

“No, Tam, living longer cheapens life, it makes it meaningless,” McCoy snapped. “If people live longer they’ll take it for granted.”

“Oh, please,” Garcia moaned. “I submit to you that people already take it for granted. Maybe if people actually lived long enough to witness the consequences of their behavior, physically, mentally, socially, environmentally, people would make better personal decisions, instead of leaving the consequences of their folly for their offspring to handle. Screw it; I only have 75 years, who cares about national debt or pollution or deforestation. That sort of short sightedness is the natural product of short lives. We’re people, not Mayflies.”

McCoy surprisingly didn’t have an intelligible response. He was actually surprised by what fell out of his face: “I was looking forward to death.”

“Good. Then you still have something to look forward to,” Garcia said.

McCoy laughed. “Rossi said the same thing,” McCoy said.

Garcia leaned forwards and reached out his hand. McCoy took it.

“I love you father and I need you to be around. I hear that you feel alone, that no one understands being out of time, but I can think of someone else who is equally alone

and feeling out of place, this very moment,” Garcia said. “You both might be able to connect.”

“Janice?” McCoy asked. “You did this to set me up with Janice?”

“I don’t know. Probably not, because I have had a crush on her ever since I started watching your old video logs.”

“Please, you have a crush on everyone you see,” McCoy argued.

“Pretty much,” Garcia said, a little amused. “Still, my point is, knowing me, I probably unconsciously expected a relationship with her, and technically she’s off the table because I think we’re sort of related and all thanks to my Kelvan genetic splicing thing. But you can’t tell me you never thought of hooking up with her, can you?”

“I’m a Doctor...” McCoy started, but didn’t know where to go with it. “Tam, not everyone has the libido of Kirk or the imagination of you.”

“I know,” Garcia said, sighing. “It’s not easy being me...”

Garcia’s intercom went off, Tomoko’s voice: “Tam, Rossi is here to see you.”

“Just a moment,” Garcia told her and killed the link.

McCoy stood to leave. “Well, one thing I’m going to do differently is learn Yoga. I want to be much more limber the next time I get old!”

“There you go,” Garcia said, smiling as he stood. Standing was only a matter of moving the weight forward so that you could fall out of the chair and then recovering was simply pushing with the knees, but he also used his hands. He wondered if he were over exaggerating his condition, or carrying this much extra weight really take its toll. “Give Janice my love.”

McCoy grimaced, not sure how to sort that coming from Garcia. “Just hypothetically, if she and I do hook up, I’m so not sharing her with you,” McCoy said. They laughed. “I can’t believe I’m speaking like this.”

“Kind of fun, eh?” Garcia said.

McCoy nodded. “One other thing. About the elephant in the room. This is just a thought. An overabundance of stimulus seemed to interfere with Charlie’s ability to use his powers.”

“I know,” Garcia said. He showed McCoy the report he was reading.

McCoy nearly asked how he had obtained that, but decided best not to inquire. “I was thinking, as an experiment, maybe an overabundance of stimulus would also do the same for you, slow your evolution down,” McCoy said.

Garcia thought it over. “Sounds reasonable. Let’s go with that. What’s the worst that can happen?”

“Speed it up,” McCoy said.

Garcia nodded. “Yeah,” he said. “But then it will be done. I want it over.”

McCoy could discern that Garcia definitely understood his own longing for death. The longer you live with idea that the next day might be your last, the more preoccupied you get with getting it over with. And in that was revealed his own internal conflict: he would wish more life on anyone else, patients, friends, family, lovers, but gladly surrender to death personally. “If I have to relive my life, you have to tarry as long as you can,” McCoy said.

“I hear beyond the range of sounds. I see beyond the range of sight. New Earths and skies and seas abound and in my day the sun doth pale his light...” Garcia quoted.

“Thoreau?” McCoy asked.

Garcia nodded, his eyes staring off. McCoy saw his friend Kirk in him; Kirk could always surprise you with a random quote of prose or poetry, suggesting a greater depth to him than he usually revealed. Kirk's brilliance was often obscured by his apparent brashness.

"I'm going somewhere," Garcia said. "I can't stop it. The scariest thing is. I am not unhappy."

McCoy hugged him. "I love you."

"I love you," Garcia said.

McCoy stepped away, then, resolute in what he was to do next, or in starting over, it was hard to tell, he turned and departed. Rossi stormed in, slowing down only to allow McCoy to pass with respect. As soon as she was in the room, she was holding up a PADD with the screen facing Garcia.

"What the hell is this?" Rossi demanded. The door closed behind her.

Garcia nearly said "a PADD," but she was clearly not in the mood for his humor. He took a moment to confirm the document was what he assumed it to be. Indeed, it was the orders he had written for her.

"It's a transfer," Garcia said.

"I didn't ask for a transfer," Rossi said.

"I know. I want you to go and fix your marriage," Garcia said.

"How dare you?! That's none of your damn business," Rossi said.

"Just because your husband's commanding officer has signed off on your divorce, doesn't mean I have to. I am not so eager to add my signature to it, facilitating the end of your relationship when I know how important relationships are for you," Garcia said.

"Again, none of your damn business," Rossi said.

"My signature, my business, but deeper than that, neither of you are listing a primary reason for me to grant the request. 'Irreconcilable differences' is a nonsense phrase for adults who can't compromise. Or can't communicate. Not only are you in a field that requires better communication skills, you're in Star Fleet. This is what we do! I have to assume this is about me, or the pregnancy, or both," Garcia said. "And I don't want your marriage to fail because of me."

"Believe it or not, the whole Universe doesn't revolve around you," Rossi said. She plopped herself down into Garcia's chair, deflated as badly as he had seen McCoy just a moment ago. She seemed to be teetering, debating if she was going to ramble, yell, or just get up and leave, but she opted for an option she hadn't seen on the table. She cried.

Garcia sat down in the opposing chair. He sat at the end of the chair, his hands in his lap. A lap that had shortened. He let her cry it out, not offering her tissues, or making any sounds of comfort. He was just very present, allowing her to move through the emotions, ready for her when she returned, ready to speak.

"You're just transferring me because you don't like me," Rossi said.

"Contrary to popular belief, I've been told, that the Universe doesn't revolve around me," Garcia jested.

"You're making fun of me?" Rossi demanded.

"A little," Garcia admitted.

Rossi nodded. "Appropriate. Nice."

“Look, I don’t want to lose you. You have a profound sense of clarity that I have come to appreciate. I actually love the fact you don’t kiss my ass and you say what you think. That’s invaluable, and if more people recognize that gift, people like you would hold higher positions in Star Fleet. You are an integral part of the crew and I don’t have the luxury of getting rid of people for frivolous reasons,” Garcia said. “I love you. You’re needed.”

Rossi leaned forward, right fist coming up, and then her index finger came out as she pointed at him. “Get this straight. I am not sleeping with you! I don’t have any interest in being part of your harem.”

“Can I love you without it being about sex?” Garcia asked.

“I don’t know, can you?” Rossi asked.

“Nice. Okay, probably not, but I respect your boundaries,” Garcia said.

“Really? If you did, I wouldn’t be in this predicament,” Rossi snapped. “Now sign the damn divorce, cancel this transfer, and let me get back to work.”

“I will sign that after you seek counseling,” Garcia said.

“And how do you expect me to do that? Even if I did get off the ship, I can’t share even half of what I’m carrying outside of our circle.”

“I would be satisfied with emergency holodeck counselor,” Garcia said.

“Screw that. Too much like a game that can be reset or redirected at the first sign of resistance, not to mention there is way too many electronic doctors in the world,” Rossi cringed.

“McCoy is available, and he has a lot of life experience,” Garcia offered.

“I’m not talking to McCoy about my problems,” Rossi said. “He certainly doesn’t have the training or skill sets to get past my own resistance.”

“He has ways of surprising people,” Garcia said.

“The only one qualified for this that has the remotest possibility of breaking through some of my barriers is you, and there are a dozen ethical reasons why that can’t happen, not the least of one being that you just announced you love me...”

“Forget I said that,” Garcia said.

“You can’t ‘un-speak’ something!” Rossi said. “We already have a dual relationship. You’re my commanding officer, I’m your counselor. And if that wasn’t bad enough, I counsel your daughter, your friends, your crew, and now just for fun, you want to practice on me? Screw that.”

“I believe I am capable of compartmentalizing well enough that I can track you out of some stuff,” Garcia said. “Your concerns are valid. But here’s the deal. You are no longer doing this alone. You have the weight of the ship on you, the weight of the mission, the weight of the unwanted pregnancy, the stress of this divorce, oh, hell, just the stress of being you. I can only imagine how isolating that is for you, don’t invalidate that by pushing some cliché concepts about being primarily introverted. You are right, you can’t go outside the crew and unload what you’re carrying and I doubt I am going to get another counselor from Star Fleet. So, you either pick a crew member to start unpacking some stuff, spend some time with holodeck Freud, or I will have you off duty and in my office every day until I think you’re stable.”

Rossi blinked. “So, you’re not going to enforce the transfer?”

“If you prefer, I could kidnap your husband and lock him in a cell with you?” Garcia asked.

“Hell no,” Rossi said, crossing her arms and leaning back into the chair. Her left foot began to tap. “He made his choice. I made my choice. It is what it is. I don’t want to be transferred.”

“Convince me,” Garcia said.

“How is convincing you therapeutic?” Rossi asked.

“I’m not trying to be therapeutic. We’ve not established any protocols for our counseling relationship, should we agree to do this,” Garcia said. “So, for now, do what you do best and proceed with arguing with me. Perhaps we can find some clarity in this mess.”

“Fine, convince you of what? That I’m making the right decision?” Rossi asked.

“The right decision about what?” Garcia asked.

“Really? You don’t think I know the ‘answer a question with a question’ game? Get to the point,” Rossi said.

“When you say ‘right decision,’ are you talking divorce, or keeping the baby,” Garcia asked.

“Oh, no you didn’t,” Rossi said, standing. “How dare you.” She paced. “I’m not killing this baby.”

“The baby is important to you,” Garcia said.

“Are you purposely being obtuse?” Rossi demanded. “Of course it’s important to me. It’s a life! It’s completely innocent in this and has nothing to do with any of the other themes in my life. And it is a part of me. It was completely unexpected, but I don’t want to undo it just because this is complicated.”

“So, you want to keep it, even though, from a certain point of view, it was conceived by rape. It was forced on you,” Garcia pointed out.

“It wasn’t rape. The baby is a byproduct of a personality malfunction while in tandem with a sophisticated technology that allowed unconscious, biological imperatives to proceed unhindered by social protocols,” Rossi said.

“Rape,” Garcia translated.

“He didn’t mean it. There is a difference between hurting someone and harming someone. A dentist may hurt a patient, but it isn’t long term harm,” Rossi said.

“Rationalization,” Garcia pointed out. “You have clearly been hurt and harmed. The divorce is harm. The change occurring to your life is harm.”

“People divorce every day, people adjust to babies and change every day,” Rossi said.

“But you don’t divorce every day and you don’t have babies every day,” Garcia said. “Change is inevitable, but these changes are huge in terms of calculating stress points.”

“Oh, don’t give me a lecture on calculating stress points and activating stress relief protocols,” Rossi said. “I invented the most recent Starship stress inventories and the procedures for evaluating good stress from bad stress and methodologies for reducing harmful stress, so don’t go there. I know what I’m doing. I’m pregnant, not stupid.”

“You know all of this stuff, but I’m not aware of you engaging in any stress management activities,” Garcia said.

“And I will, as soon as I have time in my schedule,” Rossi said.

“Umm, not the answer I want. Not only do you need to remain healthy for you...” Garcia began.

“Don’t say I have to be healthy for the baby, too,” Rossi interrupted. “That I shouldn’t experience anger or sadness. If babies were that sensitive to a woman’s fluctuating emotions, or so fragile that any internal or external stressor would mess them up, then there wouldn’t be a human race...”

“I was going to say you are required to set the tone for others by being an example to the crew on how to modulate stress,” Garcia said.

“You really want to go there with me?” Rossi asked. “Have you asked what sort of tone you set as Captain, Admiral?”

“This is where I would insert your line, off of me, and back on you,” Garcia said.

“Screw you,” Rossi said. She got up as if she were going to leave, but she turned and paced around the chair.

Garcia allowed the disrespectful tone because of their ‘counseling’ exercise. Garcia paused only long enough not to say the things one might normally say to that. He managed not to escalate himself. “I heard you say ‘he didn’t mean it.’ Who is he?”

“Oh, please,” Rossi said, taking refuge behind the chair.

“Who is he?” Garcia asked again. The placement of the chair between them, her posture, it seemed more than metaphor.

“You know who,” Rossi said.

“I want to hear you say it,” Garcia said.

“Why?” Rossi persisted, her voice going up in volume.

“Say it,” Garcia persisted.

“There’s no point,” Rossi resisted.

“Say it,” Garcia said, gently.

“You did this to me!” Rossi snapped. She gripped the back of the chair. She tried flipping the chair, but it was a rock, as if it were bolted to the floor. She growled, trying to shake the chair. “Damn it!” she came around the chair and threw herself into it, folding her arms over her chest. “That’s why you have no business counseling me! Hell, for that matter, I shouldn’t be counseling you. You’re a damn menace, killing people, blowing planets up, everywhere you go there is drama, and you drag every one you encounter down to their base level. How does it help me saying it when I can’t confront you? You have us on a course for destruction and there is no way off this damned train. How can any of this end well? And I’m bringing a baby into this?! We’re all bringing babies into this! What is this?! You imagine I’m alone? Yeah, I’m alone. I can’t stop any of this! I was supposed to stop this, stop you, but it’s bigger than you, bigger than me, and I hate that I have no control over any of it! And everyone I work with has lost their fucking minds, just blindly going along with the flow as if everything is normal. Would you be happier if I was singing ‘the hills are alive with the sound of music?’ Yeah, you did this and my life has changed, forever. You suck! I hate you!”

Rossi permitted herself tears. She pulled her legs up into the chair and hugged her knees. She wiped her face on her sleeves, and then returned to hugging her knees. She seemed to rock a little. If she added mumbling, she imagined Garcia would commit her to a rubber room, jacket included.

Garcia was tempted to squash his own emotions, but he allowed his tears to flow. It was not unreasonable for a counselor to show appropriate emotions, just not be out of control. He nodded. There isn’t a measuring device for knowing when it’s time to speak again and there are no magic words to say to ease another person’s pain. Sometimes the

urgency of the emotions fades after being spoken to someone who truly listens. Garcia modeled deep breathing. He was aware of his babies shifting, pushing out with feet and tiny hands to test the boundaries of their artificial womb. The womb had taken a hit so whatever neurotransmitters were in his blood stream was now in theirs. He wondered if Rossi was aware of her baby, if it were equally moved by her necessary rant. He wondered how they were all affecting each other and where they were going.

Rossi laughed. "Wow," she said.

"You're laughing," Garcia observed out loud.

"Cry, laugh, what else can I do?" Rossi asked.

"You could go save your marriage," Garcia said.

Rossi sat forward on her chair, her feet coming to the floor. "Tam, I wanted to be married for life. I delayed marrying, kept my relationships to a minimum, four or five solid core friends, because I wanted a very specific experience for my life. I wanted one husband, one lover, one confidant, and I did not choose my mate on a whim. I love him. I wanted to be with him, but I will not sacrifice my ideals or my child to appease him. Our paths have diverged. He wants different."

"Go be with him," Garcia said.

"Tam, he doesn't want me, he doesn't want this child," Rossi said.

"He will adjust and he will adjust easier with you present," Garcia said.

"No, he won't. He's not like you. He is much more monogamous. His personality won't allow for us to continue being intimate when he sees this as a violation of our relationship. No, more than that. Not even a violation of me. He sees it as a violation of him. He was my first romantic partner. I was his second. He ended the previous relationship because she cheated. I didn't just choose him because I loved him, but because I believed his particular personality had the highest likelihood of being loyal for the long term game, even when we were to be separated by vast distances. Further, I only agreed to this marriage because he seemed so determined to make it work, otherwise I would have waited till I had finished with my career to marry. I was perfectly content with the idea of marrying in my sixties and not having children. I am not blaming him for being convincing. I really thought we could make this work. I was wrong. I am sad. But I am realistic enough to know that it will never be what it was or what either of us wanted it to be. I simply have to come to terms that I'm going to be a single mother."

"You're saying you will never find another partner?" Garcia asked.

"Oh, please. Even you know the statistics of a single mother marrying is much lower than a single woman, no children. And, assuming most relationships are based on proximity, my choices for a human male partner is extremely limited," Rossi said.

"Owens is available. He seems nice," Garcia said.

"You suck at matchmaking," Rossi said, drawing her legs up into the chair, taking on the lotus position. "Forget for the moment he's not my client. He's a whiny, ego damaged human who can't sustain a relationship. He's jealous of your sexual prowess and his rant is that he can't compete and that women don't want a good man, in terms of devotion and settling down and consistency; they want men like you. Of course, his belief that he is presently the 'settling down type' is itself a delusion. He is one of those serial monogamous guys, with each relationship leaving him more desperate for love than the last, because ultimately he believes he's unlovable. He does get an occasional sympathy fuck, which only reinforces his belief that no one loves him, because no healthy female

can stand his neediness for too long, and he abandons damaged females who would stay with him because psychologically he can't stand being with someone who is worse off than he is. Anyone who loves him or has sex with him must be defective, based on his operative subconscious program."

"Maybe being with you would cure him," Garcia offered.

"You would say that, because you don't care if people leave. He might last one year with me, but eventually, yes, if he stuck around long enough, I suspect he would achieve a healthier personality matrix, at which point he would become bored with me, and move to the next healthier relationship, and I become the 'in-between' woman, again," Rossi said.

Garcia closed his eyes, realizing with this new information set, he was now a little biased against Owens. Rossi's assessment confirmed some of his suspicions which he might not have pursued otherwise. This didn't mean Owens was bad or evil, it just meant he had a particular personality tangent that had predictable outcomes. He sighed and returned to Rossi, eyes open. "I suspect you're dead on in this, but my point is that you don't have to do this alone," Garcia said.

"You really aren't paying attention to me," Rossi said. "Hell, my divorce isn't even final yet, and you're pushing me into another relationship? What ever happened to being single for a year and recovering? People don't have to be in a relationship to be healthy. I only wanted one relationship."

"You notice our interaction pattern is naturally argumentative?" Garcia asked.

"That's why you can't counsel me," Rossi said, crossing her arms defiantly.

"But you can counsel me?" Garcia said.

"Yes, because one of the fastest pathway into your inner psyche is through arguments," Rossi said.

"Really?" Garcia asked, surprised.

"Please," Rossi said. "Your keys are arguments, sex, and food, in that order."

"Really?" Garcia asked, again sounding surprised. "I thought you would have at least said sex was distracting me from my ultimate realization of health."

"Paradoxically, it's both healthy and the distraction," Rossi said. "But no doubt that's the key that unlocks it all, which explains your promiscuity. You're searching for something."

"And your theory is I should just give into my compulsion until I hit rock bottom and it no longer satisfies me or I figure out life the universe and everything?" Garcia asked.

"How did this suddenly become about you?" Rossi asked.

"Because you are tossing sex around as if that's one of the keys to figuring me out and the one strategy you absolutely refuse to engage," Garcia argued.

"I am not having sex with you!" Rossi said.

"Get off me! That's not what I meant. I meant, you're not having any sex, and it's what people do," Garcia said. "I am not saying you have to have sex with me, but most people have sex."

"See, you can't counsel me without subtly manipulating me towards contemplating sex with you," Rossi said.

"How about just contemplating sex?" Garcia said. "You held off sex for some magical relationship, which means, what, you elevate sex into some mysterious, spiritual

artifact that blocks you unless conditions are perfect? Life is never perfect. If you're lucky you get one chance at a magical first time, honeymoon situation, but then fucking life returns to normal, and sex is just sex."

"Sex is always meaningful," Rossi said.

"It is! I agree. Which suggest there is some obvious tension here and maybe you're projecting your own frustrations because I am definitely getting some and you're not," Garcia said.

"How dare you accuse me of transference!" Rossi demanded.

"You think you're immune?" Garcia snapped.

"Of course not. I like sex. I get frustrated. That doesn't mean I'm so backed up that I'm going jump you for relief," Rossi said.

"I'm not saying you have to come to me," Garcia said. "There are other potential partners. Or the holodeck."

"Just because you can't go five minutes without doesn't mean I can't!" Rossi said.

"Really? Can you go the rest of your life? Maybe it's not Owens who is jealous of me, but you. Because the way I see it, the only thing preventing you from resolving this internal conflict is this absolute belief that you should only have one partner for your entire life," Garcia said. Rossi was stunned into silence, her jaw hanging. "It's people who romanticize monogamy that seem to have the most trouble with relationships, perpetuating myths that there are many animals that mate for life, like wolves or eagles, when very frequently for them monogamy is for one mating season. Mating for life should be left to preying-mantises and black widow spiders that eat their mates."

Rossi's shoulder slumped. Garcia had pushed her forwards therapeutically, as this was the belief that was holding her back. It was also the very thing that he needed to figure out for his own therapeutic movement. They were both changed.

"If being polygamous and polyamorous is so great, then shouldn't you be the happiest person on the crew?" Rossi asked, her voice quiet.

"Nice," Garcia agreed, bringing his energy down to match her softness.

"Somewhere between us, maybe there is a healthier balance."

"Maybe," Rossi agreed.

"Would you be offended if I suggested we are more alike than you imagine. You seem to get stuck in rational, intellectual constructs, but emotions are harder for you," Garcia observed. She reluctantly agreed. "I believe I'm failing you this session. Maybe the next one will be better."

Rossi stared at him, a look that suggested she could at least touch anger fairly easy. Was he being humble, or had he completely missed the fact that she had moved. "The whole Universe as we know it is riding on what we do next. And if there is any chance that I can prevent you from doing something stupid, by God, I'm going to be there to stop you."

"Back to the mission," Garcia said. If nothing else, she was consistent. "Your job is to keep me in line."

"Yes," Rossi said. "And I'll do whatever it takes."

Garcia nodded. "Even kill me?"

"Without hesitation," Rossi said.

"If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him, kind of thing?" Garcia asked.

"Exactly," Rossi said, chuckling.

“I’m going to hold you to that,” Garcia said. “Cause Kitara might hesitate.”
“Will you sign the divorce?” Rossi asked.
“I want a few more sessions with you first,” Garcia said.
“Will you cancel the transfer?” Rossi asked.
Garcia nodded. “Done. Return to duty on the New Constitution.”
Rossi stood, saluted, and departed. Garcia leaned back, processing the encounter.
He was done reading. He was exhausted. And hungry! And horny.
“Fuck! I hate being pregnant,” Garcia said.

CHAPTER 4

The most accepted theory for explaining Miri's Planet is that it was a rogue solar system from a parallel universe. This didn't sit well with Undine. For one, though parallel universes were confirmed, each one had a slightly different energy signatures. So either Miri's planet had been in this Universe long enough for it to sync with this Universe's energy frequency, or the Universe from which it was from was so close in terms of frequency range that it was imperceptible. Perhaps not improbable, and maybe spill over between universes was more likely the closer they were in terms of frequencies, but without a resonant signature, the theory was virtually impossible to confirm. There were other theories, mostly absurd to those with any science training.

"When considering Miri's planet, in effect Earth 2, Hodgkin's Law of Parallel Planetary Development simply fails to satisfy any scientific sensibilities and my own understanding of planetary development," Undine said, updating her log. "I am up to date on the literature surrounding the world, from Kirk's first visit to present, including reports from Star Fleet colonies that were sent to help the remaining inhabitants rebuild their world. The fact that the planet is an exact duplicate of Earth, down to the fault line, with an exact moon, with an exact solar orbit, with a species that is genetically indistinguishable from homo-sapiens, I find Garcia's explanation, that this is an artifact of Preserver intervention and meddling in sentient development and diversity much more probable," Undine said, updating her personal logs. Of course, as a scientist, she had to admit that even Garcia's theories had the virtue of not being testable. Until they met a Preserver God that would step up and say, I did this, and show the copying machine, involved, the theory would likely not ever be in the running.

Over three hundred years ago, the society on Miri's planet had developed a microbiological tool for prolonging human life, which actually worked; for the children. If you were a child, the virus slowed the aging process down drastically. One century was one month of biological time. After puberty, the aging accelerated, racking their body with pain and scar tissues, until finally they were driven mad, attacking anyone and everyone. The Children, "the Onlies," quickly learned to avoid the grownups, "grups," so much so, that on seeing Kirk's landing party, the hid, they plotted, they attacked. Grups were dangerous.

There were no adults left from the original crisis. Kirk's landing party was attacked by a grup in his last moments, but the grup was no doubt one of the onlies that had transitioned into young adulthood. Had McCoy not found a cure, there would be no people left on Miri's planet.

"We are five days out at warp five. Our mission, to determine why we have lost contact with the Starship retired Admiral McCoy dispatched to investigate a report of Preserver Technology," Undine said. "Special note, Garcia's childhood friend, a dolphin name Star, was assigned to this mission. Had we used the transwarp drive, we would have already arrived, but, by Garcia's orders, trasnwarp is limited to escape maneuvers only, due to an engineering problem that could leave us stranded should the system fail."

Undine was re-reading her log when a call from the Bridge came in. She opened a side screen so that she could see the Bridge and Lt. Brel.

"Yes?" Undine asked.

“There is a ship on an intercept course. Its present velocity should have it catching up with us in ten minutes,” Brel said.

“Hail them,” Udine said.

“They’re hailing us,” Brel said. “They’re asking us to heave to in order to speak with Captain Garcia, in person.”

“And you responded how?” Undine asked.

“I have not responded, Captain,” Brel said. “I would prefer not to speak with them.”

“Because?” Undine asked.

“Because they are,” Brel began, and stopped, forcing himself to breathe. He decided to go with the most applicable label that wouldn’t violate Garcia’s policy of disparaging a species based on social or biological differences. “They are Pakled.”

Undine frowned, pushed herself to her feet, walked from her desk to the door of her Ready Room and stepped onto the Bridge. The lighting on the Bridge was subdued, night shift, and only key personnel were on the Bridge. She turned to the communications officer and was surprised to see Trini.

“Where’s Owens?” Udine asked.

“I switched shifts with him,” Trini said. “He’s working the Pathfinder.”

“I don’t remember approving this,” Undine said.

“I did, Captain,” Brel said. “I saw no issue with the request.”

“There’s not,” Undine said. Clearly Trini was released back to duty, but was she avoiding working on the Pathfinder because of the proximity of Garcia? Ultimately none of her business, but a potential problem in the making. “Open hailing frequencies, both audio and visual, please.”

“Aye, Captain,” Trini said, pushing it to the main screen.

The Pakled Bridge was now visible, a view that allowed them to see at least four of the Pakled Bridge crew. The shared facial characteristics, such as prominent forehead, puffy cheeks, wide eyes, suggested a specific, inherited trait, such as Down Syndrome, or more likely, for their species, that they were all identical siblings or clones with autistic tendencies.

“Our Captain will speak to Garcia,” The closest to the screen said.

“Yes,” the second Pakled, left and behind the first said. “We have an exchange for him.”

“He will want this,” the third said.

“Okay, well, that’s nice and all, but Garcia is not available,” Undine said.

The Pakleds frowned in unison. “Our Captain will speak to Garcia now.”

“We have an exchange,” the second said.

“Well, perhaps you can tell me about it,” Undine said.

“No,” the third said.

“Our Captain will speak to Captain Garcia only,” the first said.

“Only exchange with him,” the second said.

“Well, I am sorry, but he is not available,” Undine said. “And we are on a rather important mission.”

The Pakleds seemed severely disappointed. “This is not good.”

“He will want this,” the second said.

“I am sorry we are unable to help you,” Undine said, and waved Trini to cut the signal. “That was exhausting.”

“They are pulling a long side, matching velocities,” Brel said. “Should we contact Garcia?”

“We’re not calling Garcia every time we have a situation,” Undine said.

A sensor alarm went off on Brel’s panel. “Weapon systems just went active,” he announced.

“Shields up, red alert,” Undine said.

The Pakleds fired an energy weapon which knocked the New Constitution out of warp. The Pakled ship dropped out of warp next to them, pivoting their ship so as to bring their main weapons to bear.

“Damage report,” Undine said. “Helm, bring us about.”

“Permission to return fire,” Brel said.

“Hold,” Undine said, taking in the damage report scrolling across Brel’s screen. “All they did was knocked us out of warp?”

“They’re hailing us,” Trini said.

“On screen,” Undine said.

“Fire at us again, and we will return fire,” Undine said, very clearly, as if speaking with children.

“The Captain will speak to Garcia now,” the first Pakled said.

“It is urgent,” the second said.

“There is an exchange,” the Third said.

Undine sighed. “Stand by,” Undine said, motioning for Trini to kill the transmission. “Page Garcia.”



Garcia lifted the two manifestation orbs out of their cradle and held them up. He only had to think their names and the personality in his head would step forward, taking control of the orbs. Lal and Rogue Troi solidified in front of him. The orbs, somewhere inside of them, were no longer visible. Troi took in a deep breath. Lal tilted her head, engaging diagnostics protocols.

“Operating within normal parameters,” Lal said.

“So, what’s up?” Troi asked, kissing Garcia lightly on the cheek. “Away team adventures?”

“Not today. For now on, I want to run the orbs 24/7,” Garcia said. “You guys have the first tour. Troi, I would like you to go spend time with Riker. Lal, go be with your father.”

Lal didn’t have to be told twice. She was out the door. Troi lingered.

“Are you sure you don’t want my company?” Troi asked.

His communicator badge rang. He motioned one moment to Troi. “Go ahead.”

“Sir, your presence is requested on the Bridge of the New Constitution, urgent,” Owens said.

“Copy that,” Garcia said. “Owens?”

“Yes, admiral?”

“Did Trini not take her shift?” Garcia asked.

“We traded, Sir,” Owens said.

“Okay,” Garcia said. “Let Undine know I’m on my way, and notify Tomoko my change in schedule.”

“I guess you don’t need me,” Troi said. “Good thing the orbs work via the Preserver communication crystals, because I doubt Lal would have tolerated further delay in seeing her father.”

“Yeah,” Garcia said. “I’ll try and be more attentive to all of you. If you’ll excuse me, there is a crisis somewhere with my name on it.”

“Have fun storming the castle,” Troi said.

Garcia laughed as he departed. He yelled back. “It will take a miracle!”

Using the Gateway he crossed over from the Pathfinder and made his way to the Bridge. The Red Alert Klaxons were on. Crew were bustling. Niki was in the corridor and on seeing him, she was suddenly next to him.

“What’s going on?” Niki asked him.

“I don’t know,” Garcia shrugged. He touched her braid which had a noticeable tech attachment. “Are you wearing a cam?”

“Yeah. Is that okay?” Niki asked. They arrived at the turbolift and Niki pushed the call button for him.

“Kind of against protocols,” Garcia said. “What are you recording?”

“Just crew. I’m putting together a montage for music videos,” Niki said.

“Umm, make sure you get people’s permission,” Garcia said, stepping into the turbolift that arrived. “And don’t publish anything without running it through Undine.”

“Okay,” Niki said. “I’ll mass email the crew for consent.”

“Sounds good. Carry on,” Garcia said, blocking her from getting in the lift. He pointed up. She hugged him and then jumped back.



Garcia arrived on the Bridge of the New Constitution. Undine started to update him, but he held his hand up. He walked immediately to Trini. “Are you okay?”

Trini nodded. He touched her arm, knowing it wasn’t really an appropriate time and place to speak, but still, he whispered and assured her they were well. She looked away. They were clearly going to have to speak further, but at another time. From there, he joined Undine, center stage.

“You’re not at warp,” Garcia observed.

“No, we’re not,” Undine said.

“And you’ve not arrived…” Garcia said.

“We were knocked out of warp by Pakleds,” Brel explained.

“Really? Pakleds?” Garcia asked, giving Brel a look that said: ‘you were bested by Pakleds?’

“They want to speak with you,” Undine said.

“Really?” Garcia asked. He was surprised and puzzled all at once. “Did you tell them I was busy?”

“Apparently, they won’t take no for an answer. Additionally, we are trying to keep up the appearance that you are in charge of the New Constitution. So, the quickest remedy is for you to speak with them, unless you prefer Brel to shoot them,” Undine said.

“I think there is a rule against shooting retards,” Garcia said.

“I think the appropriate terminology is mentally challenged,” Undine corrected.

“Until mentally challenge becomes just as disparaging as retard and we have to come up with a new term, so why not just stick with retards?” Garcia asked.

“Idiot savant is more appropriate in this instance,” Sendak offered.

“Yeah,” Garcia agreed. “Sans savants.”

“If I may point out, your orders were to expressly avoid stereotypical labels that might diminish or disparage others based on biological or social factors,” Undine said.

“I stand corrected,” Garcia said. He still didn’t like these guys, but they did deserve respect. His bias was they shouldn’t be a space faring civilization, but then, stealing and borrowing and putting things together wasn’t unheard of in the schemes of nature.

“They did shoot first,” Brel pointed out.

And, they were armed idiots. It’s why we have parents. Children shouldn’t play with matches, he thought, but continued to hold his tongue. He mentally sorted through the Prime Directive looking for a loop hole.

“Their antimatter containment system is unstable,” Brel continued. “It would only take one torpedo.”

“There’s no honor in this kill,” Garcia said,

“The Klingon Empire considers them a reasonable threat to be eliminated,” Brel argued. “Children who play with guns learn faster when they get shot at.”

“The Empire also thought Tribbles were a threat,” Undine pointed out.

“They were,” Brel said. “We wiped them out.”

“No one is getting wiped out today,” Garcia said, sighing, hoping his inner sentiments wasn’t affecting Brel’s tone. “Trini, would you put us on?”

Trini made the signal live. Garcia stepped forward. Before speaking, he took in the randomness of their control system. He noted a Ferengi control dome next to the main console. When one considered the piecemeal, patchwork design, it was amazing it flew at all. Not to mention the effort in acquiring all the tech revealed a subtle cleverness to lie, steal, or bargain. He wondered if their looks and demeanor was simply camouflage.

Bottom line, Garcia had to emit the Pakleds were a space faring enigma.

“Howdy,” Garcia said. “Sorry it took so long. I was, um, occupied.”

“Garcia,” the first Pakled said. “We found you!”

“You need us,” the first said.

“We have things for you,” the second said.

“You beam over, we make you happy,” the third said.

If the Pakled’s language set wasn’t so simplistic, he would have imagined sexual overtones in their message. He closed his eyes to allow his brain to sort through semantics and his subconscious to discern any subtexts. Undine waved Trini to mute the channel.

“You’re not going over there,” Undine said.

Garcia looked at her. “You think?” Garcia said. He told Trini to reconnect. “Um, that’s a really nice offer, thank you, but I must stay on board my ship. Would you like to come over here?”

They seemed sad. “No, you must come here,” the first said.

“We have things for you,” the third said.

“Preserver things,” the second said.

Garcia was a little more interested. Undine still shook her head ‘no.’

“You are safe to bring it here,” Garcia said.

“Only the Captain can exchange,” the first said.

“Exchange in person,” the second said.

“You will be very happy,” they all said in unison.

“Perhaps I could speak to your Captain. Which one of you is that?” Garcia asked.

“Not us, the Captain. You must come aboard,” the second said.

“A good exchange for you,” the third said.

“Yeah, well, I’m not coming over there,” Garcia said.

The three frowned. “You must exchange with the Captain,” they said in unison.

“Well, the Captain can speak via communication channels, or the Captain can come here,” Garcia began.

“No,” the first said, followed by the second, then third. The first continued. “The Captain cannot leave the ship.”

“The Captain cannot speak on an open channel,” the second said.

“Garcia can come here,” the third said.

“It’s a good exchange,” they affirmed.

“You will be very happy,” the first said.

“Well, your Captain isn’t coming here, and I’m not going there, so I guess we are done,” Garcia said.

The three of them looked at each other. A fourth entered, carrying a glowing cube. He placed it on the console next to number one, making it prominent on the screen. The box was thirty five centimeters by thirty five centimeters, and a luminescent gold.

“Yes, you want this,” they said.

“The Captain will make you happy,” the first insisted.

Garcia signaled to kill the conversation. He immediately turned to his science officer, Sendak.

“Is it?” Garcia asked, excited as kid about to have a birthday party.

“The energy signature indicates that it is indeed an unopened Stasis Box,” Sendak said. “However, the only way to be absolutely sure is to have another stasis box. Based on the fact that this one is glowing, we can presume there is another stasis box within a couple light years of this one.”

Garcia turned to Undine. “I want it.”

“You’re not going over there,” Undine said.

“You know what that it is, don’t you?” Garcia asked.

“A stasis box, created by a race Star Fleet refers to as the Slavers,” Undine said. “And you’re still not going over there.”

“There could be something in there we could use against the Preservers!” Garcia said. “This whole conversation is growing tedious. I’m so going over there.”

“It could also be an unexploded bomb that goes off in your face the moment you break the seal,” Undine said. “You’re staying.”

“We have to have that box,” Garcia insisted.

“No, we don’t have to,” Undine said.

“Glowing Slaver Stasis Boxes are Star Fleet’s priority. We are required to take possession of any Slaver Stasis box discovered, document the location and situation,

perform an extensive search for other Slaver technology that may have been unearthed, and safely open and determine the contents,” Garcia said.

“I know what the regulations are concerning Stasis boxes,” Undine said.

“We certainly can’t leave it with the Pakleds,” Brel said

“How do we know this isn’t some elaborate trap? Maybe the radiation leak on their ship is preventing us from discerning it’s a fake,” Undine pointed out. “Or maybe they already opened it and found nothing in it.”

“No one has been able to reactivate a stasis box once it has been open,” Sendak said. “I doubt seriously the Pakleds have that knowledge.”

“You are not going on their ship, Admiral, and that’s final,” Undine said.

“Oh, come on,” Garcia said.

“You can have the box, as long as you don’t board their ship,” Undine said.

Garcia motioned Trini to resume the transmission.

“I’m interested in negotiating the exchange,” Garcia said. “The caveat being, I will not board your ship.”

“We not hurt you,” the first said.

“You are Garcia the Great,” the second said.

“The Captain loves Garcia,” the first said

“We love Garcia,” they all said.

Everyone gave Garcia that special look. “Ahh, aint that sweet,” McKnight said. “You got some little fans.”

Garcia gave McKnight one of those “I’ll talk to you later” glances. He looked at the stasis box and then to the foremost Pakled.

“I will be happy to sign some autographs and all, but I cannot come over there,” Garcia said.

They seemed as sad as puppies that were not selected as Christmas gifts, their eyes so manipulative that Garcia actually felt bad.

“But the Captain will make you happy,” they all said.

“And I would like to be happy,” Garcia agreed. He looked to Undine. She shook her head no. He turned back to the Pakleds. “Your Captain won’t come here?” The Pakleds assured him that was impossible. “And I can’t go there. Would the Captain agree to meet me half way?”

“Listening,” the First said.

“Explain,” the Second said.

“Please,” Undine said.

“We will extend an inflatable bridge between our ships and we can meet in the middle,” Garcia offered.

The three conferred with each other.

“Admiral,” Undine began, trying to pull him aside.

The Pakleds seemed to be coming to a consensus so he motioned for her to wait. The Pakleds each touched their ear pieces. A moment later, they nodded in unison.

“Very thin walls,” the first said.

“Very scary,” the second said.

“But the Captain agrees,” they all said, happy.

“Conditionally,” the second said. “No visual recording devices.”

“No tricorders,” the third said.

“You come alone,” the first said.

“Good exchange,” they all said.

“Very good exchange,” the first said. They terminated the communication link.

Garcia looked to Undine.

“I don’t like this,” Undine said.

Garcia patted her shoulder. “I will be fine. A force field will seal the other end if they disconnect prematurely. And it’s not likely that they will open fire on me in an inflatable.”

“They’re Pakleds, do you think they know not to open fire in an inflatable?” Brel asked.

“Worst case scenario is I’m blown out into space and you beam me up in time to resuscitate me,” Garcia said.

“I don’t like this at all,” Undine said. “We don’t even know what they want in exchange for a Stasis Box.”

“I’m sure they will be happy with just about any tech. You look worried. What could possibly go wrong?” Garcia asked.

“Really?” Undine and Brel asked simultaneously. In fact, the entire Bridge crew was staring as if they couldn’t believe he had said it.

“I am confident that I can out think a group of Pakleds. I will be fine,” Garcia said. “Besides, how often do we get to unpack the inflatable bridge?”

“Brel,” Undine said. “Get Bri on it.”

“Aye,” Brel said.

“Admiral, my Ready Room, now,” Undine said.

CHAPTER 5

The door to Data's quarters opened and Lal hesitated. She had anticipated throwing herself in her father's arms, hugging him with the emotions she was capable of experiencing and hopefully sharing them. Her eyes widened with concern. Data smiled on seeing Lal, his own emotion chip in play, and he was almost overwhelmed, but the growing concern on his daughter's face gave him pause.

"Lal?!" Data asked.

"Father?" Lal asked.

Data pulled her into an embrace, one hand on her back, one hand on the back of her head. He cried with joy. "I'm so happy to see you," Data said. He was acutely aware that she was stiff, uncomfortable. "What's wrong?"

"I am afraid," Lal said.

"Of what?" Data asked, pulling back to look at her, hands going to her shoulders.

"You look..." Lal said, so slowly Data helped her.

"Human?" Data filled in the blank.

"Old," Lal said.

Data chuckled. "Well, I am older than when we last interacted," Data said.

Lal touched his face. "I recognize you, but, I did not anticipate this change. Does it hurt?"

"No, Lal, I am fine. I am actually very happy with the physical adjustments to my appearance, but I assure you, I am still me," Data said.

"Garcia did this to you?" Lal said, angry. "I will speak to him to immediately and have this fixed."

"Lal, no, it's okay. We are pretty sure this was an act of Garcia, and it is necessary," Data said. "It is good on a number of levels. I may have to go on Away Team Missions. I can't very well go interacting with folks looking like the old me. Word would get around that there are two Data's and it would raise questions. Or worse, I get mistaken for Lore and end up incarcerated. I must avoid interacting with past friends and associates. This change in appearance helps."

"But," Lal began to protest.

"Lal. My previous life is over," Data said. "I cannot return to that life nor directly interfere with how that life unfolds. You understand that, right? Starting over with a fresh face is like being born again."

"But it's not a fresh face," Lal protested.

"It's a good face. It's mine, just more human," Data said.

Lal pouted.

"Lal, I am okay," Data said. "My life would have been over had Garcia not extracted me at the very moment he did. I am grateful. I am now part of this crew and we have an important mission, as you well know. But more importantly, I now can spend time with you. This is the closest thing to heaven that I could have imagined."

Lal was allowing tears to run down her face. "I'm happy, too."

Data touched her tears. "You are crying. And stable?"

"Yes," Lal said. "The fastest way to catch you up with my journey would be to update your system files directly."

Data agreed. Data took her hand and led her to the couch. They sat and leaned together, touching foreheads. It was a slower transfer rate than using the direct cable links in the lab, but it was adequate and provided Data an opportunity to process some of the information in real time as the updates to his 'Lal' files were modified.

"Interesting," Data observed. "I had not considered that you might have an emotional reaction to not being able to have children. This is akin to my own desires to have offspring. I am feeling... What am I feeling?"

"Don't be concerned. I don't need my own children to feel complete," Lal said. "I suspect my contribution to the Garcia clan will be more than fulfilling."

"That seems more like work," Data said.

"Is there any work better than family?" Lal asked.

"You are right. It is all," Data agreed, impressed with his daughter's analysis. He paused. "Curious. There seems to be blanks in the data stream. My receiver is probably failing..."

"It is not," Lal assured him.

"Explain."

"I'm holding back some information," Lal said.

"Why?" Data asked.

"It's complicated," Lal said.

Data considered for a moment. "I am uncertain how to respond and feel strangely conflicted. I want you to feel comfortable sharing with me. I am sad that you have held back information. Conversely, I am also happy that your identity strength is solid enough that you are comfortable with selective sharing. It reveals discernment."

Lal halted the file transfer, leaned back on the couch, and stared up at the ceiling. "In some ways, I'm having trouble integrating this," she began.

"This sounds like something you should share," Data said.

"Not with you," Lal said.

"Have you spoken to the counselor?" Data asked.

"Troi?" Lal said, skeptically.

"Garcia's Troi?" Data clarified.

"It's the only Troi I have access to," Lal said. "And I don't want to share with her. She's not quite right. Not evil, just, off. Besides, she knows enough and has a selective focus that promotes her self-interest."

"I believe there is another counselor. Rossi?" Data asked.

"I will consider speaking to her, but I doubt she can help, as I'm not human," Lal said.

"I have found Counselor Troi's insight helpful on a number of occasions. Geordi has frequently helped me process information. Indeed, most interactions help to refine strategies for improved functioning within a social unit. I recommend that you find someone that you can confide in," Data said.

"Like who? How do you decide who is safe and not safe with information?" Lal asked.

Data chuckled. "The selection process gets better with experience, but it is never perfect. You will encounter people who lack discernment when deciding to hold or share a conversation or information revealed in confidence. People fail in that for many reasons, but it is rarely a malicious act. Let me say this, though. You are already engaging

in selective disclosures, which means you are capable of discrimination. I trust you. And if in your search someone fails to keep your secrets to the degree you require, know that you are still safe. Secrets known may be uncomfortable at first, but the impact decreases in time, mostly because people are so caught up in their own stuff that they forget your stuff. Trust me. Have fun, divulge, do not divulge. Make it an experiment.”

Lal hugged him. “I’ve missed you so much.”

“I love you, Lal,” Data assured her. “If all else fails, talk to Garcia. I trust him.”

“I definitely can’t speak to him,” Lal said.



Troi hesitated outside the door assigned to Riker. After a moment, she committed and rang the bell. A moment passed and no response. She considered leaving and was actually looking away when the door opened.

“Well, aren’t you a sight for these old eyes,” Riker said, leaning on the door frame.

“You’re not old, Thomas,” Troi said, flirting.

“Umph,” Riker said. “Your eyesight isn’t what I remember. So either you don’t see an older, fatter man...”

“Are you going to just talk, or are you going to invite me in?” Troi asked.

Riker chuckled. “Come,” he said, turning and walking in, as opposed to stepping aside for her to enter then following. He went right towards the replicator. “It’s not what I’m use to in size, but it meets my needs. Scotch?”

“No thank you,” Troi said.

“You sure? This is the real McCoy,” Thomas said. “I even found some Romulan Ale, if you’re feeling it.”

“No, I’m good,” Troi said.

“Yeah, always were. So, what brings you to the Pathfinder?” Thomas asked.

“I heard this crew needed a counselor,” Troi said.

“Pfft,” Riker said. “That’s an understatement if I ever heard one. I just don’t remember you ever leaving the Enterprise. I never thought you would leave Will.”

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

“Not really,” Thomas said, taking a big swig of his drink. He sat down on the bed, extending from the wall, and stretched out his legs. He seemed too big for the room. “But then, I know your future. You and Will get married.”

“I assure you, I will never marry Will,” Troi promised.

“I still have the wedding invitation,” Thomas argued.

“Did you go?” Troi asked.

“Hell, no,” Thomas said. “Why watch the other me get the only thing I ever wanted?”

Troi smiled. “You can have me now, if you want,” she said, coming a little closer.

Thomas laughed. “I would prefer to be alone.”

“I don’t believe you,” Troi said.

Thomas threw his glass, just narrowly missing her head. It shattered against the far wall. “Do you believe that?” he asked.

Troi laughed and was suddenly on top of him. She kissed him eagerly, but he didn't return her affection. She finally stopped.

"I don't know what you're about," Thomas said. "But I don't want this. I moved on. I'm over you."

"Really?" Troi asked.

"And you can stop trying your telepathy, Imzadi," Thomas said. "I have walls up even you can't penetrate. I have had more time than you can imagine acclimating to solitude. Surrounded by people, and still alone. All Garcia did was transfer me to a different cell block, with better odds of being killed, if I understand the thick of it."

"Everything has a breaking point," Troi said.

"Yes," Thomas agreed. "Yes, everything does."

Troi stood. "You're serious? You're rejecting me?"

"Yes," Thomas said.

"Really?"

"Really really," Thomas said.

Troi seemed more confused than hurt. She got up.

Thomas lay back on his bed, closed his eyes, put his left arm over his eyes, and his right arm over his belly, his knees bent, his feet against the wall.

Troi stood there for a moment longer.

"Really?!" Troi said. "But I want you."

"Frankly, my dear," Thomas said. "You do know where that was going, right? Now, be a good little girl and turn the lights off on your way out. Daddy's tired."

Troi stomped her foot, turned, and strolled out. "Turn them off yourself."

"Lights, off," Thomas said.

CHAPTER 6

After a lengthy discussion about safety protocols, Garcia was allowed to leave; it was as if he were not the senior officer in charge. No, it was more like they were instructing a child. Undine reminded him not to take any undue risks, as it wasn't just him now, but also the twins he was carrying. He assured her he hadn't forgotten the twins. As he headed towards the airlock, Duana and Ilona decided to throw their two cents in as well.

"You're really going to meet with them? Just kill them and take what they got," Ilona said.

"Bad form," Duana said. "Yeah, they're stupid and all, but I am sure they have families, moms, dads, sons and daughters. You can't just kill them."

"Have you ever seen one of their females?" Ilona asked.

"I try not to think about those kinds of things," Garcia admitted. He paused at one of the ports and watched the Bridge extending, reaching out to connect with the Pakled ship. After it connected to the Pakled airlock, it ballooned out. In general, it was the second fastest way to move people and cargo from one ship to another if the transporters were inop. It was certainly faster than a shuttle. Of course, linking two ships directly was even faster, but some species didn't approve, and some didn't have universal mating hatches, and the inflatable bridge could have a new port attachment configured fairly fast. For visual comfort, the bridge was not transparent, as most people just breathed easier when something solid was below their feet, even if solidity was just an illusion. Windows and lights were spaced every two meters.

"Ladies, try not to distract me," Garcia told his two companions as he continued towards the airlock.

"When do we ever..." Ilona began.

Duana grabbed Ilona and pulled her in the opposite direction, blowing Garcia a kiss. He proceeded to the airlock, where Bri was confirming the procedure was complete.

"Admiral," Bri said. "The bridge is extended. I register a secure connection. We have positive air pressure, but if they accelerated or jumped to warp, well, you'll be dead pretty fast. So, I brought you an emergency life belt."

"Is it compatible with the portable womb?" Garcia asked.

"I don't know," Bri said. "Probably."

"Hold on," Brel said, looking down the length of the bridge. "I can't see the other side." He paged the Captain. "Could you tell the Pakleds to hold their ship steady?"

"We are aware of the situation. We keep straightening it out, and the Pakleds keep tilting their ship to put the kink back in it," Undine responded via the com. badge. "They are determined to keep this meeting private."

"I can't let you go across under these conditions, Admiral," Brel said.

"I'm going," Garcia said.

"The Pakleds are hailing. They are sending their Captain out onto the bridge," Undine said. "Sensors reveal one person in the inflatable. Unable to confirm species or

even if it's bipedal. The Pakleds are transmitting a signal that is interfering with our fine resolution. They definitely don't want us examining their Captain."

"The mission is scrubbed," Brel said.

"The mission is not scrubbed," Garcia said. "Just be calm. I will be fine."

"It could be a trap," Brel said.

"It usually is," Garcia said. "I'm still going."

"Fine," Brel said. "Once you pass the threshold you will be in zero g. Use the rope to pull you along. Also, there are foot holds and hand holds along the sides..."

Garcia was amused. "Ahh, thank you. But I have done this before," he said, patting Brel on the shoulder. He stepped off backwards, as if falling into a pool of water. Crossing over from gravity to sudden zero G required a moment of acclimation. The body felt like it was falling and typically there was a moment of panic. Garcia embraced the fall like a long lost friend. He waved at Brel, spun about, and when his momentum decreased, he pulled himself to the middle of the bridge utilizing the rope.

Garcia was in no way prepared for the apparition that met him the middle. The woman practically glowed, as if she were a holographic projection, airbrushed to perfection with a sophisticated AI algorithm designed to purposely exploit human biological and psychological needs. If it weren't for the hair, he would have immediately assumed she was Deltan. Her blond hair was long, and wild, almost alive in zero G, like tentacles. Her simple dress moved as if she were in water. Her eyes were blue, her nose a little short. Her features were so exaggeratedly feminine that had Garcia been in control of his faculties, he would have asked her if she were an android. He was so dumbfounded by her, that he was practically incapable of speech.

"Hello," she said.

Garcia nodded, smiling.

She chuckled. "Yeah, I get that a lot," she said. "If you only knew what a great pleasure it is to finally meet you, Doctor Garcia. Or do you prefer Captain? You have so many titles these days." Her voice conveyed genuine warmth and admiration. She extended her hands and took Garcia's hand in hers. Her hands radiated heat. She drew him closer; they came closer.

"Human?" Garcia asked. He found himself not wanting to let go of her hand, his eyes entranced with hers.

"No, I'm Pakled," she assured him, helping him to let go of her hand. "I guess you expected someone a little more dowdy or frumpy? Maybe even less articulate?"

"I'm..." Garcia didn't know what to say.

"Obviously overwhelmed," she said. "I get that all the time. I doubt you could pronounce my name, but I would be honored if you would call me Glenda. I'm partial to that English Earth name."

"Really?" Garcia stammered.

"What surprises you most? That I know earth culture, or that I'm intelligent, or that I'm beautiful?" she asked.

"Umm," Garcia began. A text scrolled across his vision. (Admiral. Your heart rate seems to be climbing, and respiration is going up. Are you okay?) (I'm fine!) he texted back. (I will page you if I need you!) If it had been his voice, Trini might have thought he was annoyed by her interruption. She tried not read emotions into it. She was pretty sure the emotions she imagined was her projecting.

She laughed. "It's okay. This is why very few will ever see a female Pakled. We don't make public appearances and we avoid recording devices. Do you know how many wars have been fought over beautiful women? The face that launched a thousand ships on earth, that's nothing. The stories of Sirens? That would be us. Hell, I don't even have to speak, and I could have your entire crew, men and women, on their knees begging for time with me. You only think the Orions and the Deltans have power over humans. They have nothing on us."

Garcia just nodded. He tried to resist the buzz in his head, but all he got out was, "You're Pakled?"

"Regardless of species, males are all the same. We are in charge, the males pretty much do whatever we say. It's the way things are," she said.

Garcia found himself nodding again.

"It is unreasonable for me to negotiate with you in your present condition. Unfortunately, there is only one cure for this," she said, stripping out of her clothes. There wasn't an inch of her that wasn't perfect. "It's temporary fix, but you should have the ability to negotiate as soon as we're done; provided you don't go right to sleep."

Garcia swallowed.

She smiled, moving in closer, drawing him into an embrace. It didn't take much effort to convince him to participate. All she did was kiss him and it was a done deal. Of course, in Zero G love making was problematic. Footholds and ropes were only helpful to a point, but when every action resulted in an opposite and equal reaction, the best solution was a Two Suit, or a love suit. Apparently, Glenda came prepared. Better than a sleeping bag, she wrapped them in a "two suit," leaving only their heads exposed, and then caused it to restrict around them.



Brel left Lt. Reyes and Miccael stationed at the airlock with Bri and went forward of his post, hoping to catch a glimpse of Garcia and the Pakled Captain. From one viewing port, he caught a glimpse of Garcia in one of the windows as he was pulling himself along. He went further, until he found the one window which would potentially offer the most hope of seeing into the artificially created elbow. He saw Garcia head bob into view and then out, and sometimes a steady top of the head.

Activating his comm., he reported in: "Captain, I have not been able to get line of sight of the Pakled, but I did briefly have a visual on the Garcia."

"His heart rate and respiration is a bit up, but within parameters. He reported in that he's fine. We are still unable to get the resolution on the scanner to see them separately, so they must be standing fairly close," Undine said. "Can you tell if they're arguing or fighting?"

"I can't see anything at the moment, the windows have fogged up," Brel responded. "Do you want me to send in an extraction team?"

There was a pause. "Um, negative. I'll meet you at the air lock."



"How do you feel now?" Glenda asked.

“Ready for the next round,” Garcia said, enthusiastically.

Glenda laughed. She pulled on a belt on the inside of the two-suit that pulled the cocoon tighter, squeezing them firmer together. “Men are so stupid. If you only knew how this disparity began. As more and more men chose to only breed with beautiful women, the only genes in the pool for women was beauty. Unfortunately, the same genes that made the women beautiful made the men stupider, and with each subsequent generation, the conditions grew more and more severe until now, even you, a non Pakled are reduced to idiocy in my presence, and, well, you’ve met the men of my species. God help them, they’re stupid, but they’re as loyal as dogs, and persistent and determine, if not single minded in purpose. Their only agenda is to secure resources in order to be found worthy enough to serve us. They keep our secret so the rest of the men of the Galaxy don’t rush to our shores like seamen to songs of Sirens. Sometimes the trinkets our men collect for us are worth the journey, and there is no distance they will go to find that unique item that might allow them to procreate. But the females of our species really would like something more.”

“I would like more,” Garcia agreed.

“I’m referring to someone who is capable of meeting our intellectual needs,” Glenda said.

“I’m capable of more,” Garcia her.

“I’m sure you are,” Glenda said, knowing full well that he had missed her point.

“I have a short refractory period,” Garcia boasted.

“So I’ve gathered,” Glenda said, kissing him.

“And I usually last longer with each consecutive play,” Garcia said.

“You don’t have to persuade me,” Glenda said. “I am willing.”

They engaged in another round of play until they were both exhausted. Garcia wanted to go to sleep against her, but she didn’t allow it. Unzipping them from their two-suit, they drifted apart, but he held onto her. “Dress dear,” she insisted. He reluctantly let go and began to dress. She touched her dress and it came to her and enfolded around her as if it were a symbiotic, intelligent creature. He paused to watch the dress enfold around her, looking as if he were jealous of the dress. She smirked, and reminded him he needed to get dressed. He complied like a puppy, only a little protest.

“If I thought you were cured, or at least touching a fraction of your perceived sanity, I would so invite you to come back with me,” Glenda said.

“I’ll go,” Garcia said, without hesitation of any semblance of thought of what might happen from that point forwards.

“You know you can’t, right?” Glenda asked. “Your path is taking you in a different direction.”

Garcia just nodded, just soaking her in as if she was the sun and he was a mere flower.

She sighed. “I wish you could have maintain your presence of mind and attention with me longer than you did. It gets so lonely, sometimes,” Glenda said, lamenting. “It was my hope that a biological union with you might produce healthy, intelligent offspring that could withstand the Pakled female presence.”

“Um, there is always hope,” Garcia said. “Want to do it again?”

“I do, but I think I have all the samples I need now,” Glenda said. She revealed that she had some full vials, which Garcia hadn’t remembered her collecting. If she had

used a medical device to collect samples, it hadn't even registered; he was so distracted by her, pain was an impossibility. "Sisters made me promise, remember?"

"Can I meet them?" Garcia asked.

"Oh, they would eat you alive," Glenda said, laughing. "That's probably why the goddess sent me. My sisters are smart, but not wise. No restraint. In this Galaxy, men can be enslaved by beauty, by drugs that make you think we're beautiful, and even by tears. And human males, they're the easiest to enthrall. I don't want a slave. I don't want a pet. I want an equal. The goddess wanted you to have the boxes, but she didn't want you to get it for free. Oh, and she instructed me to say, 'Hi,' that she loves you and hang in there. Pretty straight forward not cryptic."

Garcia just nodded, unperturbed, puppy dog eyes looking up at a master.

"Alright, honey, you should return to your ship now," Glenda said

"Do you want to come back with me?" Garcia asked.

Glenda laughed. "Your ship would cease to function if I came on board. You only think my ship of Pakleds is crazy. And I have to get back to my ship, because my clan, crew, well, they get a bit jealous and upset if I'm not around. Pakleds fighting, not pretty."

"Okay," Garcia said. Still, he didn't turn around and leave.

"It might be best if you leave, your crew is waiting for you," Glenda said.

Garcia nodded. "Weren't we supposed to negotiate something?"

"You mean the exchange?" Glenda asked.

"Yes, can I do something for you?" Garcia asked. "Anything?"

"You already did. You even performed better than predicted. My sisters made wagers," Glenda said. "I am so impressed, I will leave them both."

"Both? Both your sisters?" Garcia asked.

Glenda laughed. "Go back to your ship now. Your head will clear and you should be back to normal within an hour. You may or may not regain your memory of this moment. It's hard to hold encounters with perfection in the memory. And that's okay. Best maybe if you aren't tortured by a haunting memory of me."

"Okay," Garcia said, but still didn't leave.

"Go, now," Glenda said, command voice.

Garcia nodded, turned and dragged himself away. Pulling himself along should have been just as easy as pulling himself out, but he found it difficult to leave Glenda. Once he was around the bend and saw his crew waiting for him, it took less effort, and before too long, he was in reach of the airlock. Lt. Reyes grabbed his arm and steadied him as his feet hit the deck. Micceal seemed to be sniffing the air, his mouth pinchers extending reflexively, trying to determine the scent Garcia was carrying with him. It wasn't the smell he had expected of Pakleds based on the images he had seen.

"Are you okay?" Brel asked.

"Yeah, I'm great," Garcia said, the euphoria of touching a star still lingering.

"So, what happened?" Brel asked.

"Ummm, well," Garcia thought about it, scratching his chin. He looked back down the way he had come, didn't see anything, and looked back. He could have just blurted out the obvious, but somehow he was still grasping at words, which was a weird feeling for him. He had encountered people that had been star struck being in his presence, but rarely was he so enamored or quieted. Picard probably came the closest to

blocking his speech, but even that had changed with time, exposure, unanticipated conflict. Is that why men and women fight, he wondered. Men hate how subjugated they are to their presence? Maybe when he stopped trying to remember what had happened, the words would come. Undine was suddenly there.

“You didn’t,” Undine said, seemingly interrupting his process.

He knew that she knew... No, he knew she only suspected, and there was flash of what he suspected, like a fantasy rolling out, and he bit his lower lip and accepted it for a reality. “It’s not what you think,” Garcia said. He relaxed, those words came easy enough. Why was he struggling so much?

“Oh, I’m doing my best not to think,” Undine said. “Not doing as well as you, apparently.”

“You ingested drugs?” Brel demanded, still not figuring it out; not because he wasn’t intelligent enough, but because the obvious was just unfathomable.

“No!” Garcia said. “I would never do drugs...”

Undine’s hands went to her hip.

“Okay, I would do drugs, but I didn’t do drugs,” Garcia said.

“You had your mind wiped?” Brel asked.

“It feels like that,” Garcia said, thinking about it. “But no.”

“I don’t understand,” Brel said.

“Really?” Undine asked.

“Is it a secret?” Brel demanded.

“No, not really. I had sex with a Pakled, that’s all,” Garcia said. See, that was easy enough, he thought. No big deal.

“Oh, that’s just not right,” Reyes said, covering her mouth as if to avoid being sick.

“That’s disgusting,” Brel said.

“Pffft, I’ve done worse,” Micceal said.

Undine, Brel, and Reyes gave Micceal the briefest look of disgust, but Garcia offered a knuckle to his chest, a version of a friendly ‘high five.’

“Sober?” Garcia asked, asking Micceal for more details.

“Oh, we are so not going there, either,” Undine said. “We are not competing, or comparing notes on sexual conquests and degrees of self-degradation.”

“Okay,” Garcia said, giving Micceal a look and a wink that suggested ‘We’ll talk more, later.’

“I am curious if your belly pack gets in the way,” Micceal said.

“Excuse me?” Undine asked.

“Well, Pakleds are rather short and fat and well, logistically,” Micceal said.

“Well,” Garcia began.

“Please, don’t, Tam. And, I don’t know how to ask this without you twisting the connotation to something sexual...” Undine began.

“Please, just spit it out,” Garcia said.

“Proving my point,” Undine said, sighing. “But did you get the box?”

Garcia thought about it. “I’m feeling a bit stupid at the moment. I don’t remember even asking.”

As if on cue, the inflatable bridge straightened out so that they could all see down the full length of the tube. From a side window, the Pakled ship could be seen departing,

maneuvering thrusters pushing away, rotating them in the direction they were intending to go. It slipped into a star, and was gone. Two Slaver Stasis boxes were at the other side of the bridge, free floating. A force field closed the far end that once was attached to the Pakled ship, with a light blue tint providing the only evidence for its existence.

“Mission accomplished, Captain,” Garcia said, beaming. “Win win. My job is done. If I can be of further service, you know where to find me. My quarters, Pathfinder, sleeping.”

Garcia made it to the end of the hall. He paused, turned. “Oh, and don’t open the presents without me,” he said.

CHAPTER 7

Tama Orleans was on the verge of sleep when she heard the voice again. She found the PADD that she had been reading on the bed next to her and activated it. It gave sufficient illumination that she could see that she was alone in the room. Clemens, Garcia's cat, and sometimes called 'the ambassador,' looked up at her. Certain no one was in her room, she laid back down, but left the PADD on.

"Can you hear me?"

"Who are you?!" Tama demanded.

"I'm your grandmother, Kelinda," said the voice.

"Really?" Tama asked.

"I am not happy with the way you are being treated," Kelinda said. "I would like you to come visit me."

"I'm not going anywhere," Tama said. "I'm on restriction."

"I know. I don't like this," Kelinda said. "You are capable of much more, and deserve more autonomy, more authority."

"I will ask if I can come see you," Tama asked. "If you're real."

"No, he won't let you come see me," Kelinda said. "But I can prove to you I'm real."

"Why wouldn't I be able to come see you?" Tama asked.

"Your father doesn't want me to teach you what I can teach you, or give you the power that you entitled to. You have been misled. You can do everything your father can and more. They just haven't taught you because they don't trust you. They don't know you the way I do," Kelinda said.

"You know me?"

"You hear me in your head, right? So you know I can hear you, feel what you feel, see what you see," Kelinda said. "So naturally, I know you better than you know yourself, and I can unleash your happiness and you will never be sad again."

"Really?" Tama asked. "What must I do?"

"I want you to come live with me," Kelinda said.

"How do I do that? I'm stuck on a ship," Tama said.

"I want you to trust me," Kelinda said. "I'm going to open the gateway and you can cross over to me, it's that easy. But before I can do that, I need to get access to the security codes to the gateway on your ship. We have to plan this. I can't just change the codes without people noticing it. We have to do small, subtle changes."

"I don't know," Tama said.

"Pick up your PADD," Kelinda instructed.

Tama hesitated.

"Do it, honey. It's the only way for us to be together," Kelinda said.

Tama obeyed.

"It might be faster if you allowed me to take over your hand," Kelinda said. "May I borrow your hand for a moment?"

Tama surrendered control and to her surprise, her hands moved across the PADD, opening pathways that she didn't know were possible. The PADD connected to the ship's computers and from there she lost track of all the things that were happening. She heard Ambassador Clemons hissing and she saw the cat attacking her out of the corner of her

eyes. One of her hands caught the cat by the neck. The cat fell to the bed, and moved no more.

The hands put the PADD down. It wasn't her putting the PADD down, but her hands were putting the PADD down.

"This is all I can do for now, Tama," Kelinda said. "We will see how much further we can get next time, but I predict we can open the gate and let you come to me in two or three more visits. Until then, I don't want you to worry. Don't speak to anyone what we're planning, or they will punish you, and keep us a part. You don't know how important you are to the coming Empire. Sleep, honey. Everything will be okay. Sleep."

Tama Orlenias slept, and when she woke, she found Clemens dead beside her. She openly wept, yelling for her mom. Her mother, Persis entered, going immediately to her daughter's side.

"I killed him," Tama cried.

"Oh, honey, no you didn't," her mother assured her. "He was a very old cat. Did you know outdoor cats live only like four years? Indoor cats live like twenty on average, and Clemens here is like thirty. It was just his time, baby."

"Hold me!" Tama said.

"Oh, baby, shhh, shhh, it's okay," Persis said.



The door open and Rossi was surprised to see Lal. She was touching her chest, practically tapping her heart, or where her heart would be if she were human, as she entered. Rossi couldn't help but come to her feet, wanting to comfort her but not quite knowing how to approach the problem. She waited for Lal to orientate.

"May I speak with you?" Lal asked.

"Absolutely. Would you like to sit?" Rossi asked.

"Is that the procedure?" Lal asked.

"Procedure?" Rossi asked.

"Counseling? Is it compulsory to sit?" Lal asked.

"There is no one procedure. I'm wanting you to be comfortable," Rossi said.

Lal walked around the section of the couch she might sit on, contemplated, then she sat on the edge of the seat. Rossi sat near her, also sitting on the edge of the seat. Lal considered how she should begin, while simultaneously contemplating whether she was comfortable.

"Sitting or standing doesn't change my level of comfort. Is sitting for your comfort?" Lal asked.

"Would you like to stand?" Rossi asked.

Lal thought about it. She shook her head no. She tapped her chest again, as if sending Morse code.

"I'm surprised to see you," Rossi said.

"Why?" Lal asked, almost confrontationally. "Do you not want to see me?"

"I am happy to see you, Lal. I just didn't anticipate you ever visiting is all," Rossi said.

"You are happy to see me because it's me, or because of potential insight in to Garcia?" Lal asked.

Rossi pursed her lips. "I suppose that's in my brain somewhere, but for now, let's proceed as if your personality construct is completely autonomous in and of itself and that this visit is about you, regardless of whether there is any enmeshment issues."

Lal nodded, brought her hand down, forcing herself to rest both hands on her knees, but the right hand slowly came back to her heart. Rossi waited patiently, believing Lal would speak when she was ready. When a full five minutes went by, she decided to speak first.

"It is sometimes helpful in counseling for you to just speak what's on your mind," Rossi said.

Lal nodded. "I don't know how to begin," Lal said.

"Imagine you did," Rossi said. "What might that sound like?"

"It's complicated," Lal said.

"Well, that's a relief," Rossi said.

Lal's eyes narrowed, skeptically. "Really?"

"If it was easy, we wouldn't need each other," Rossi said.

Lal nodded. That made sense. "Do you promise not to laugh?"

Rossi put on her best serious face. "No," she said.

Lal seemed surprised.

"I will promise that if I do laugh, I will not be laughing at you," Rossi assured her.

"Lal, you are safe to speak your mind in here. "

"I'm in love with Tammias," Lal blurted her truth.

"You're in love..." Rossi started, surprised to hear that another person was infatuated with the Admiral. She found herself sucking in her bottom lip as if resisting the urge to laugh.

"You didn't consider I might love?" Lal asked.

"I, well, I'm sorry," Rossi said.

"You are sorry that I love or that I love Garcia?" Lal said.

Rossi struggled not automatically responding to that. "That I hadn't considered the full potential of you," she finally managed.

"This is a predictable outcome. I'm sentient. I have emotions. Even in multiple personality disorder, the personalities are complete persons, full of potential, but that's not what I am," Lal said. "I'm a person who was downloaded into someone else brain, which presents its own set of unique problems."

"And that's why I apologized. I appreciate you pointing this out to me, and I would like you to continue to point out any future misunderstandings the moment you become aware of them," Rossi said. "It's good to have bias revealed."

Lal nodded. "I'm sorry if I came on too strong."

"Don't be. Counseling is a relationship. You are supposed to call me on my bullshit," Rossi assured her. "So, you believe you are in love with Garcia. What is your evidence for this?"

Before speaking, Lal began to gather her inventory. "I suppose I could be unduly influenced because I share his brain."

"While considering the evidence for love, you are expressing doubt?" Rossi asked.

“It isn’t the first time I have held doubt,” Lal said. “Sometimes I am so angry with Tam. He treats me like a child. Of course, this might be an idea that my father planted in Tam when he downloaded me into his brain.”

“Anger sounds normal,” Rossi said, ‘especially around Garcia’ she didn’t add. “How about jealousy? Are you disturbed by the other women?”

“This is complicated,” Lal said again.

“Please, help me to understand,” Rossi said. “I want to know you.”

Lal sighed, tapping her chest with her fingers. “I feel this. I know I love Tam. But, I also think I am a lesbian.”

“This sounds complicated,” Rossi agreed. “What is your evidence for being a lesbian?”

“When Tam is intimate, I experience it as he does. I have access to all his senses, and, well, I enjoy the sensations. I feel his pleasure, but I am also absorbed in the sensation of other, of female, I think even more than he is. But when I am alone to my own thoughts, when I imagine being intimate, I only want to be with Tam. I don’t know! This is complicated.”

“I hear how this might be confusing for you,” Rossi said. “You love Garcia and want to be intimate with him. Simultaneously, because you share his brain you can’t help but be an observer or even a participant in his own sexual experiences, and maybe sometimes it’s difficult to distinguish between your desires and his, but over all you find the experience pleasant.”

“Yes,” Lal said.

“And you want more,” Rossi said.

“Yes,” Lal said.

“And maybe you have hinted this to Garcia, but because you believe he sees you as a child, he doesn’t hear your subtle wish for more,” Rossi said. “Or maybe because you are Data’s daughter, he is over protective.”

“Yes,” Lal said.

“Okay, have you considered going from subtle to overt?” Rossi asked.

“I’m afraid he will reject me,” Lal said.

Rossi nodded, understanding. The most common artifact shared amongst humans was the fear of being rejected if others knew about their sexuality, and Rossi believed it was frequently the underpinning of all resistance to counseling, because many people don’t want to grapple with just how much of their own libido they suppress on a daily basis.

“This can’t be normal,” Lal said. “My programming must be faulty. For example, I know Garcia criteria for selecting partners is fairly simplistic so there shouldn’t be a reason for him to reject me. But I am afraid. He is also so busy.”

“You are with him 24/7, so it is not unreasonable to want more quality time, especially when you don’t always have access to the orbs or the holographic projection systems,” Rossi said. “There is nothing wrong with your programming.”

“This feeling can’t be normal,” Lal said.

“Oh, it is very normal. It is hyper-normal. I can’t imagine what this is like for you. Typically if a person gets rejected, they simply go about their business, sometimes even changing environments so as not to have encounters with the person they desire, but you,

you are trapped in Garcia's mind, and utilizing the manifestation orb only gives you a little bit of distance, which is probably more an illusion than real separation."

"Yes," Lal said.

"So, being afraid of rejection in this instance is probably a survival skill. If you were rejected you would still love. You would still reside in Garcia, and still be subjected to his escapades, and you would always be wondering why he sleeps with who he does but won't be intimate with you. I can't think of a worst place to be," Rossi said.

"Yes!" Lal said. "Please help me. I don't want to feel this!"

Lal began to hiccup and weep simultaneously. Rossi switched over to Lal's chair and put an arm around her.

"Okay, breathe, honey," Rossi said. "Breathe deeper. You have human like regulatory processes, and breathing helps slow things down. Analyze the molecules in the air, slow this down, and realize you are safe."

"I'm feel so much," Lal said.

"I know," Rossi said. "I know. Take as long as you need. I'm here with you."

Lal seemed to calm a bit.

"I'm curious, Lal," Rossi said. "You have been dealing with this for a while now. What changed?"

"I spoke with my father," Lal said.

"You spoke with your father," Rossi said, not really getting it.

"Yes," Lal said. "Garcia altered his appearance and I was shocked, because he looked so much older, and it occurred to me that even though I am an android, there will be a termination date, and though I am not lonely, I want to maximize my contribution to our community, and be intimate, and Garcia isn't going to live forever, in fact, his termination date is approaching faster than anyone suspects, and, technically, I end when he ends. Oh, God. I'm wasting time here. There is so much to do!"

"Slow down, Lal," Rossi said. "No one really knows when they're going to die."

"True. Given the complexity of Garcia's interactions, there is high probability that he might die ahead of schedule," Lal said. "Oh, God. Why am I saying God? Do I believe in God? Is this a human colloquialism or is this an enmeshment issue?"

"I don't know," Rossi said. "What does God mean for you?"

"Hope that there is something bigger than I. That something goes on even after physical death," Lal said. "Is this what it is to be human?"

"Sometimes," Rossi said.

"Tell me it will be okay," Lal said.

"I can't," Rossi said.

"What kind of counselor are you?!" Lal demanded.

"I will leave that for you to decide," Rossi said. "I can tell you that what you are feeling is normal. I can teach you strategies to cope. But right now, as raw as this feels for you, this appears to be normal emotional fall out due to a complex social situation mixed with an existential crisis."

"Is this love?" Lal asked.

"Sometimes," Rossi said.

"This sucks!" Lal said.

"Sometimes," Rossi said.

"I hate sometimes," Lal said.

CHAPTER 8

There are libraries filled with books describing the depths of boredom on ships, from sea to space. Routine can only take a person so far. After a certain pace, the little gems of social interaction can help break the monotony, and make everything well again. It was this moment that Undine was looking forward to. Undine looked at the dinner for two Karsat had prepared, for her and Garcia, and thought it ideal. Candles, subdued lighting, aromas, everything in its place, except, no company.

Undine paged Tomoko. She answered promptly.

“Where is he?” Undine asked.

“I’m sorry,” Tomoko said. “I was just notified and was about to call you. He had a bit of an emergency. He is in on his way back to the Path Finder so he can change and should be there in about twenty to twenty five minutes.”

“Thank you,” Undine said.

Undine terminated the link. She was surprised that she had so much nervous energy. After all, it was just dinner with Garcia. Sure, they had spent time together before, but not like this, not alone, not since the marriage, and never with the potential of intimacy. Not that she was going to force that, but she was very aware of her own expectations. Or were they fantasies? Did he hold the same towards her? Obviously she was selected to be one of the mothers for a reason. Though she knew it potentially meant nothing, she didn’t want to believe that it was just a clinical analysis of the best combination of genes that brought her and Garcia together. Conversely, she didn’t want the marriage to just be one of convenience.

Her infatuation with Garcia came way before Admiral Pressman recruited her to serve with him. Indeed, had Pressman known the depths of her feelings for Garcia, he probably wouldn’t have recruited her to kill Garcia in the event that their mission went south. True, her feelings were initially just the crush of a fan of his writing; and she had been a fan since childhood. It was as if everything she had ever read of his spoke to her, as if it was meant for her personally. She found evidence in his writing for synchronicity, where the reality of her life was mirrored in his fiction. More on that, it was only when she was an adult that she rediscovered his writing and it reminded her of another book series she had read as a child, that she only later became aware that it was Garcia using an alias. It was only when he became an adult that it was possible to confirm that the childhood author’s pseudonym was actually him. This amazed her enough to be open to consider magic as a real thing. She had believed she had secret, invisible friend guiding her. She read his stories and believed the author and she were telepathically linked and he was writing her. It was sufficient evidence to cause a belief in a soul mate.

But those kinds of things come increments, flash updates that build on memories only after the memories have been forgotten and rediscovered. Undine was older than Garcia by ten years, and she had been out of the Academy for five years when he entered. A friend of hers, still in the academy had told her about Garcia and shared an excerpt from something he wrote, something she had discovered, and suddenly Undine was caught up in that wonder again. She couldn’t resist keeping tabs on him. With increasing admiration, she followed his exploits in the Academy, which she gleaned from reports, and through a friend who was working towards graduation simultaneously with Garcia. Her feelings had blossomed into full love only after serving with him. How could they

not, she asked herself; everyone loved Garcia, but as far as she was concerned, she had always loved him.

“Grr,” Undine sighed. She was frustrated. Sharing Garcia wasn’t an issue, but scheduling was a nightmare, and since their relationship technically hadn’t advanced to intimacy she wasn’t even sure that she had a right to be frustrated. “Grr,” she said, as if louder would ease her stress. “Grow up. This is not high school.”

To alleviate the stress of the situation, she stripped down and stepped into her hot tub. It was the most recent update to the NC’s Captain’s Quarters. It was flush with the floor and long enough that she could stretch out and float on her back, or set the jets to flowing so that she could swim laps against a stream that held her in place. The water was usually body temperature and the tub had the unique property of being able to change the salinity of the water, adding so much Epson salt that the pool had more density than the Dead Sea, making it a floating spa. It was currently at its highest density and was impossible for her to stay submerged. She lay on her back and allowed the waters to lift her. If she didn’t have a dinner date with Garcia, she would have turned off the lights and given into the healing sleep of the supersaturated salt bath. Magnesium Sulfate was known to increase healing time by one third, and at this density it was the closest thing to actually floating in zero G. Skin absorption was also the fastest way to get Magnesium into the body, not dietary.

It took a moment for her to relax into the water, trusting the knowledge that she wouldn’t sink; experiential knowledge as well as knowledge of physics. Floating in supersaturated liquids felt like being supported by billions of tiny invisible hands, as if each atom of her body was being lifted. There were points where she felt the support was concentrated, such as the arm right behind the elbow, shoulders, back of the head, the small of her back. Candle light played across the ceiling. If she allowed herself to pass into a trance, she could have meaningful auditory and visual hallucinations, but she wasn’t mentally prepared to dive into her subconscious mind. She nearly caved to the potential of sleep, but the sudden chime at the door announcing a visitor dissolved that possibility. She figured it was too soon to be Garcia and so her mind considered social protocols: should she exit and dress? No. this is not high school. Her crew would just have to deal with her culture and this was her normal when off duty.

“Come.”

Garcia entered, apologizing. She rolled over to observe better, taking hold of the side of the tub. He was covered in mud, even the portable womb was dirty “I was going to be later, but I decided I could just shower and change here...” he stopped. “There’s a hot tub in my, I mean, your quarters?”

“Yes,” Undine said.

“Nice,” Garcia said. “And, you’re naked.”

“Is that a problem?” Undine asked.

Garcia shrugged indifferently, not the answer she had hoped. She wasn’t sure if he was measuring her or the depths of the tub, which clearly reached down into the quarters below. Then he noticed the stairs leading down at the far wall from the door. “You’re utilizing both cabins?”

“Yes. I sleep down stairs, I use this room for relaxation, exercise, entertaining guests,” Undine said. The hot tub was also transparent and was the source of light for the

room downstairs, so when she retired she slept with the illusion of being in an underwater habitat, reminiscent of home.

“Nice,” Garcia said again. He couldn’t resist taking one of the shrimps from a plate, and then chased it with synthehol, the fake wine stuff. He pointed to the lavatory. “Is that still the lavatory?”

“Yes,” Undine said.

“Give me a minute,” Garcia said, taking the fake wine with him. “Just stay there and I’ll join you.”

Undine nodded. She activated the floor control to decrease the salinity and increase the heat, kicking the jets on. The water swirled and bubbled. When Garcia emerged from the lavatory, he was naked except for the belly-pack carrying the twins. He was also free of the mud. He slipped into the hot tub and sighed, surprised by the salinity but as he recognized the oily feel to the water, his brain made sense of some of the aromas available to him.

“Oh, this is great,” Garcia said, sighing with relief. “I might come back here more often.”

“My home is yours, Tam. Try not to get water in your eyes, there are salts in the water,” Undine said. She pointed to a towel and a spray bottle with fresh water in case salt did get into his eyes.

Garcia nodded, conveying he understood. His attention didn’t linger there, but returned to his preoccupation. “I feel bad being late. This is our first time alone together.”

“I know,” Undine said.

Garcia closed his eyes and leaned back into the closest jets. “I think I was less busy as a Captain,” Garcia said. “The quietest moment I have had today was watching the Five.”

“Karsat’s offspring?” Undine asked.

“Yeah. They don’t get names until they become sentient, but I think I might just give them pet names,” Garcia chuckled. “After that I made a quick trip to Iotia... I’m sorry. This is your time and I’m talking about my day.”

“I am interested in your day,” Undine said.

Garcia took her hand and squeezed it. “Let’s just be present.”

“Is this relationship based solely on proximity and situational context?” Undine asked.

Garcia pulled her towards him. He kissed her lightly on the lips. “This relationship is based on choice. I want to be here.”

Undine kissed him back. “Are you aware that pregnancy can increase a woman’s libido?” she asked.

“I have been so notified on a number of fronts,” Garcia admitted, chuckling. Then he was serious. “Every culture has its customs and social norms, and every individual couple has their own customs and norms. I’m still learning us. Do you want me to minimize talk of others?”

“No, just be you,” Undine said. “I want you to be comfortable and not worrying that you have to restrict conversations or be different with me than how you normally are. If this has any chance of working, we both have to be ourselves.”

“Thank you,” Garcia said. “Lately, I am experiencing increased difficulty remembering the preferences of my partners. Maybe I have pregnancy brain.”

“Or, you’re tracking too much, even for you. Anyway, I consider your other partners my sisters. Ideally, we should all be family,” Undine said. She lowered her voice to a whisper. “That said, I have some needs that aren’t getting met.”

“Tell me,” Garcia whispered back.

Instead of telling him, she showed him.

“Umm, I thought it wasn’t good doing it in a hot tub,” Garcia said, as sex in health tub could lead to health issues for females, such as UTIs.

“I’m a Zaldan,” Undine said. “It’s best in the hot tub.”



Undine was on the Bridge when the New Constitution was close enough to the destination that long range scans detected the emergency transponder beacon for the USS Oriskany. It pinged a subspace warning others to avoid the system, but the message was incomplete and cycling. They detected the Oriskany in orbit of the third planet, no energy signature, but otherwise, seemingly intact.

“Alright,” Undine said. “Helm, prepare to transwarp, I want to be at the ETB now. Senior officers to the Bridge. Take us to yellow alert.”

Sendak arrived on the Bridge first, probably because he had already been on his way. He went right to his station and began systematic scans of the system and the ship in orbit.

“Captain,” Trini said. “The message continues to repeat the warning to avoid Miri. I’m able to remote access it using subspace channels and there doesn’t seem to be other logs or explanation for the warning. I suspect there was damage to the files and that I might be able to reconstruct the data if I have physical access to the drives.”

McKnight pivoted slightly in her chair in order to see the Captain. “Ready when you are.”

Undine pressed a button on the arm of her chair to make a ship wide announcement to prepare the crew for immediate transwarp jump, which often came with severe vertigo accompanied by nausea. McCoy arrived on the Bridge along with Brel and several others. McCoy approached the captain’s chair; old game, new faces.

“Didn’t Garcia tell us not to use the transwarp jump?” McCoy asked.

“Captain’s discretion,” Undine said.

Undine nodded to McKnight to do her magic. McCoy took hold of the back of the Captain’s chair. McKnight executed the procedure. In a blink of an eye they went from warp five to nearly infinity, dropping out of warp five meters from the Emergency Transponder Beacon.

“Nicely done,” Undine said.

“You bet,” McKnight said.

Sendak began multiple scans, one of Miri’s planet, one of the Oriskany, in orbit, and one of the ETB. “The Oriskany appears to be dead in space, zero power, no life signs,” Sendak announced. “Life pods appear to have been launched. Unable to scan the planet’s surface from our present position.”

Console lights and overhead lighting flickered. Undine punched up Engineering on her console. “Bri, did we blow the warp coils?”

“No, Captain,” Bri said.

“We had a power fluctuation on the Bridge,” Undine said.

“Aye, it was ship wide,” Bri said. “I’m still trying to trace the source.”

The main viewer popped on as if a communication was coming though.

“It’s not me,” Trini said, knowing the Captain was looking at her for an explanation even though she hadn’t looked up from her console. Auto multiple frequency scanners (MFS) had detected noise and started an analysis, and something was piggy backing off the reports, trying to break through the communication protocols, like feelers searching for direct access to computer programming. In fact, the analysis itself seemed to be virtual hacking programs.

A figure began to condense out of the patterns on the screen.

“Captain, something is trying break through our fire walls,” Sendak said.

The image on the screen coalesced into what appeared to be a human. The human stepped forwards until it was just a torso and finally just a talking head, scrutinizing the Bridge Crew.

“Bring your Starship closer,” the entity said.

“Captain,” Sendak said. “We need to sever communications with this entity. It’s trying to rewrite software.”

“I can’t block it,” Trini said. “Its opening channels faster than I can shut them off. Also, it’s creating software in virtual memory.”

“Captain, talk to it, try to distract it,” Sendak said.

“Bring your Starship closer and I will permit you to live,” the entity said.

McCoy put a hand on Undine’s shoulder, communicating he’s got this, and stepped forwards. “What need does God have with a Starship?”

The entity focused on McCoy. “You. I remember you!”

“Oh, good, we can save on the formalities,” McCoy said. “Do you recall we kicked your butt?”

“You will be the first to die,” the entity said.

“You failed to do that last time, what makes you think you can do it this time?” McCoy asked.

God became angry simultaneously with the ship lurching. McCoy reached for the chair to steady himself, wondering if making god angry was any wiser now than it had been back when they first met. The screen went dead, the ship stilled.

Undine looked to Trini, who was sighing with relief.

“Communications has been severed,” Sendak announced. “All virtual memory systems have been shut down, reformatting chip sets in process.”

“How did you do it, Trini?” Undine asked.

“I shorted out the entire antenna array,” Trini said.

“Was that necessary?” Undine asked.

“It was, Captain,” Sendak answered for her. “Had we arrived within transporter range of Miri, the entity would have compromised all systems faster than we could have blocked them. The entity would now be in possession of our ship. Trini’s decision was the correct one.”

Undine nodded. She turned to McCoy. “What is it with you, Garcia, and gods?”

“I haven’t met a god, yet,” McCoy said.

“Could you have distracted him without making him angry?” Undine asked.

McCoy shrugged. “I’m a doctor, not a monk.”

“It must be one of the Preserver gods,” Brel speculated. “They can take over computer tech in this fashion.”

“McCoy?” Undine said.

“It’s definitely a malevolent, noncorporeal entity,” McCoy said, musing. “I suppose it could be manifesting through some kind of tech. We didn’t see him until after the stones emerged.”

“Stones?” Undine asked.

“Some kind of architecture, similar to Stonehenge, but older than say the architecture we found surrounding the Guardian of Forever. If this is the same guy, he tried to kill us. And he wanted the ship to escape the planet shielded behind the Great Barrier,” McCoy said. “If I’m not mistaken, he went by the name Sha Ka Ree. If it wasn’t for the Klingon Bird of Prey, we probably would have lost Kirk.”

“Sha Ka Ree couldn’t take over a Bird of Prey?” McKnight asked.

“If it needs computers to take over a ship, then no,” Brel explained. “We don’t utilize computers in the same way human ships do, so we would be less vulnerable to this sort of attack.”

“So, how is it communicating with us?” Undine said.

“If it’s on Miri’s planet, it must have access to the subspace communication array at Colony One,” Trini said. “And if this is true, we can speculate further that there is a limited range in its ability to hijack tech, probably limited to the Solar System. The closer you are to the source, the quicker the assimilation program. We need to warn off any further traffic until the situation has been rectified.”

“Yeah,” Undine agreed. “Thank you, Trini. I want you to prepare a buoy with the appropriate warning and launch it outside this system. Also, send a message through the gateway and have them bounce it to Star Fleet so they can know what we are up against here. The next thing we need to do is take out the antennae ray on Miri. Ideas?”

“Photon torpedoes,” Brel said.

“My God, man,” McCoy said. “You can’t shoot blindly from here. What if there are people there?”

“Casualties of war,” Brel said. “Garcia blew up an entire planet to lock out the Preserver gods.”

“That planet had more sophisticated technology,” Trini said. “Surely that’s not warranted here.”

“This entity must not be allowed to leave this system, and we will not be able to get close enough to determine what the situation is until that antennae array is knocked out,” Sendak said.

“If the god got to this planet from behind the great Barrier, can’t it get off this planet without a Starship?” Trini asked.

“Right, we need more answers. But I’m not prepared to shoot indiscriminately into a potential public arena,” Undine said. “We’ll hold this as a last resort. So, I want some other options.”

McKnight pivoted her chair to face the Captain. “I could fly a shuttle in, bring in an assault team, take out the subspace emitter array directly.”

“Your shuttle would be compromised before you reached orbit,” Sendak said.

“Not if we disabled all the computers, put in direct manual controls,” McKnight said.

“Is that possible?” McCoy asked.

“I suspect only Garcia could fly a shuttle with zero computers,” Undine said.

“He and I are the only ones on staff with the appropriate ratings,” McKnight said.

“Really?” McCoy said.

“We’re not fully staffed,” Undine reminded him.

“Captain, can we assume that the Oriskany crew would have come to the same conclusions we have?” Brel asked.

“Safe bet,” Undine said.

“Then the fact that Miri is still broad casting means there may be other technological barriers to overcome. I volunteer to go,” Brel said.

“Don’t worry. You’re going. Pack heavy. I want an assault team and an investigation team ready to go as soon as McKnight gets the shuttle prepped. I want to know what happened to the crew of the Oriskany, how this Sha Ka Ree got to this planet, and how we get rid of him,” Undine said. “Priority one, though, is take out the subspace transmitters on Miri. Let’s go. McKnight, go make your modification to a shuttle.”

McCoy touched her arm. “I want to go.”

“It’s too dangerous,” Undine said.

“I’ve been there, I know the terrain, I can help,” McCoy said.

“You haven’t been there in a hundred years, things have no doubt changed,” Undine said.

“Look, you need a medic on the away team, I’ve been there, and I know the Oriskany crew. This was my mission, I sent them there,” McCoy said.

Undine seemed to be contemplating. “Garcia would kill me if something happened to you.”

“Maybe he knew I was going down there. Maybe that’s why he made me younger. I can run faster now,” McCoy argued.

“Not a good argument,” Undine said. But she nodded. “I want you in armor lite and two Klingon body guards.”

“Thank you,” McCoy said.

“Don’t thank me,” Undine said.

CHAPTER 9

The change in atmosphere from the New Constitution to the Spaceship Yonada was palpable. Not as drastic as going from a sauna to an ice room, but a clear difference. And it was probably not just the quality of air that influenced Undine's interpretation of the coldness, but the lack of people made it feel lonely, and then there was the smell of age, not inconsistent with a generational ship that had sat empty for more than a century. Undine was surprised that Athena was present and waiting as she arrived on the on Yonada, but then, had she been the sole resident here, she imagined she would also stick by the Gateway, or at least a window. This place felt lonely.

"You just missed Garcia. He has already departed," Athena said.

Undine hadn't even known Garcia had been here, but she was happy to hear that he was at least making good on his promise to visit Athena. The loneliness factor was prominent in her mind again, but she also knew it was a projection of her thoughts and feelings. Though Athena appeared to be human, the simple truth was that she was anything but, and her social needs were probably just as alien.

"I came to speak to you, actually," Undine said. "What can you tell me about Sha Ka Ree?"

"He's my father's brother," Athena said. She motioned Undine to sit and to share in a pomegranate she had peeled. She had been separating it into its individual seeds, prior to Garcia's visit. "Severe obsessive compulsive, manic much of the times, fairly paranoid, masochistic, excessive grandeur, and never plays by the rules. He is presently incarcerated on a planet near the center of the Galaxy, with minimal technology, only sufficient to allow him to manifest as a simple light hologram. If he is industrious enough to gather the resources available to him, it might take him a hundred million years to develop technology enough to escape his planet, but he still has a force field to contend with, and if he doesn't have warp, the black hole at the center of the galaxy should prevent his escape back into civilization. He is blocked from ascending."

"He is on Miri's planet," Undine said.

"Earth Two?" Athena asked. "That's where we originally tricked him through a gateway to the planet we isolated him on. It was a limited two way gate, which we buried in Earth, fifty meters below the sea."

Undine nodded, as if now she understood. The Oriskany crew must have found the gateway and opened it. "Why didn't you just destroy the gateway?"

"We believe in redemption," Athena said. "If he had modified his thoughts, made the right behavioral choices, the gateway would have opened for him."

"Onto a planet with sentient people," Undine said.

"His planet, his people," Athena said. "It was his failed longevity program that almost decimated that population. It's only serendipity that Kirk intervened."

"I doubt serendipity is the right word," Undine said. "Alright, so how do we get him back through the gateway to his prison planet?"

"He will go where the tech is. Put the planet in the stone age and he is limited to whatever Preserver Tech is remaining, destroy that and he might go back through the gate to the tech he has available there, but if I were you, I would take a lesson from Garcia and just blow up the planet," Athena said.

"There are people on that planet," Undine said.

“No. There are the dead and the soon to be dead,” Athena said. She cut into a second pomegranate and began picking the individual seeds out and dropping it into wooden bowl. Undine took a few, spreading the seeds out in her hand, revealing the webbing between her fingers. “If you think the war between the gods and Garcia is bad, watch what happens if you let Sha Ka Ri off that planet. If he gets a hold of just one Starship, he will infect the entire galaxy with his personal software. If he got to Earth, how many starships could he launch? Thousands? He will spread faster than a virus in a human host.”

Undine’s comm. badge rang. She considered Athena for a moment before answering. “Captain, you have a call from Starfleet,” Trini said.

“Be right there. Thank you for the information, Athena” Undine said, standing. “Do you require anything?”

Athena shook her head. Undine took her leave and returned to her ship. Trini was waiting for her as she came back through the gateway.

“I know I said Starfleet, but more specifically, it’s Admiral Pressman. He’s waiting to speak with you,” Trini said. She didn’t have to explain communications was being routed from the Pathfinder.

“I’ll take it my quarters,” Undine said.

“Aye,” Trini said.

Undine retired to her quarters and descended to the second level. The lower portion of the hot tub took up much of the room, but it was organized well enough to hold a twin bed, a lounge chair, a desk and chair, and a dresser. No windows, since it was the center of the saucer section. The ambient light bleeding through the tank gave the impression she was below sea level. She took a seat at her desk and opened the channel to Starfleet.

“You’re not going to play this keep me waiting game like Garcia, are you?” Pressman asked.

“Depends. If I’m busy, maybe,” Undine said.

Pressman smiled, which hinted at sarcasm. “Let’s start our working relationship over.”

“I think you should be coordinating all communications through Garcia,” Undine said. “I no longer work for you.”

“You work for Garcia you work for me,” Pressman said. “Besides, I’m about to do you a favor.”

Undine didn’t bite, merely waited for Pressman to wiggle the bait.

“Look, I know you are unhappy about how the original mission seemed to fall through,” Pressman said.

“You assume that I am unhappy with how things turned out. My mission was to serve Starfleet and you put me where I needed to be to do just that,” Undine said. “Had Garcia not blown things up, I would have still served Star Fleet, and completed my mission in a fashion very similar to how he did.”

“I like you. Always direct,” Pressman said. “Very well. I got an update on your situation. Here’s your favor: any surviving Oriskany crew is to be integrated into the New Constitution Crew. Assuming they all survived, you should be over complemented, and you can shift surplus back to the Path Finder. I want you to scuttle the Oriskany.”

“The Oriskany may be salvageable,” Undine said.

“If the Captain followed procedures, circuitry and hardware will need to be replaced, software reintegrated, and system checks to verify there is no lingering malware waiting to take over. That’s five years’ worth of work at a quarantined Starbase. It would be faster and easier to just build a new one from scratch.”

Undine nodded, noncommittal.

“It’s just a Starship, Captain,” Pressman said, as if reading her concern.

“No, Admiral, it’s not JUST a Starship,” Undine said. She stopped herself from spelling out what it is: a community, a shining city on a hill. “Since you assigned me to this, there has been nothing but destruction and death. I want better options for us. The crew of the Oriskany certainly deserve better.”

“The ship is already dead. Bury it,” Pressman said. “We clear?”

“Aye,” Undine said. “Anything else?”

“Yeah,” Pressman said. “I want you to give Soran access to your Starburst weapons.”

“I will run it by Garcia,” Undine said.

“No, you will just do it. He believes he has a way of stopping the run away fusion initiated by the genesis wave. He might give us a defense against the weapons the Preservers used to take out Phylos,” Pressman said.

“I will be happy to comply, after I speak with Garcia. Anything else?” Undine asked.

“Do I need to remind you what I’m holding over you?” Pressman said.

“I have not forgotten, but I am banking that my present mission is more important than your petty play for power,” Undine said.

“This isn’t about power! I’m protecting the Federation from imminent Romulan invasion, the threat of the Borg, and now the Preservers. I assure you, the Romulans are violating the treaty, they are working on phasing cloaks, and this is tech we need in place to give an advantage against present enemies.”

“You can spin it any way you like, but there is a reason we have laws. Run your suspicions up the chain of command, let the legislature work it out. Either way, I will not be blackmailed. I can’t stop you from disclosing your secret, but I doubt your actions against me will have the impact that you imagine. So do your worst, if you must, but till then, let me do my job,” Undine said. She terminated the call.

Undine spent a few moments trying to compose an email to Garcia, but wasn’t sure how she could spin the conversation without revealing that Pressman was still trying to blackmail her. Most of Garcia’s Fleet personnel probably had something exploitable in their back ground, or they wouldn’t have been chosen for the initial mission that had brought them all together.

The chime to her downstairs door rang, interrupting her contemplation.

“Come,” Undine said, spinning to face the door.

First Lt. Katarina Marijić entered, standing at attention.

“At ease, Lt.,” Undine said.

“Are you aware that I’m an expert in ancient dialects and technology, specially trained to recover Slaver Stasis boxes?” Marijić asked.

“I am,” Undine said.

“Then why aren’t you utilizing my skillset to open the boxes you recovered?” Marijić asked.

“For starters, setting up an isolation chamber to specs...” Undine said.

“Screw procedures. I’ll just take a shuttle out a safe distant away and open one,” Marijić offered. “It can’t be a coincidence they were given to Garcia.”

“And that’s one of the reasons why I’m leaning towards going by the book,” Undine said. “You do know there are a significant number of people who want him dead?”

“And more than a few that have a vested interested in him staying alive,” Marijić said. “Look, if it’s a big enough bomb, even if we followed protocols, I could still end up dead. I know it’s risky and that’s why I’m volunteering. I want to share in the risk that you and your crew have been taking since you got drafted into this.”

“It’s a needless risk. You’re more valuable to me alive,” Undine said.

“I might buy that had you integrated us into the crew, but you’re not utilizing me at all, and this is my specialty,” Marijić said.

“How many boxes have you opened?” Undine asked.

“None. But I was trained by a guy who was trained by a guy who did open one. Captain, I assure you, I’ll take all the precautions I can. If you want, I’ll even take two shuttles and open the boxes remotely.”

Undine stood up. “Garcia will be angry if he’s not involved. Prep two shuttles,” Undine said.

“Thank you, Captain!” Marijić said.

Undine returned to her unfinished email. She deleted several of them without even reading them. Family.



Garcia piloted shuttle ‘Back Bird’ out to the designated rendezvous area, where he mated Black Bird to ‘Purple Haze,’ piloted by Marijić. Serendipity had them both opened their hatches simultaneously so that their eyes met, not quite a startle, but unexpected synchronicity. Marijić gave a genuine smile that reached her eyes.

“Ready for Christmas?” Marijić asked, inviting him into the shuttle.

“Yes, but I forgot to get you something,” Garcia said.

“No worries, I got presents,” Marijić said. “And a replicator. We could summon up some misltoe if you like.”

“You got jokes, for sure,” Garcia said.

“I heard you liked jokes,” Marijić said. “Come in, come in... Let’s get this party started.”

Garcia watched as she prepped the work station, humming the song Purple Haze by Jimmy Hendrix, which he suspected she had just researched because of the shuttle’s name, as opposed to the assumption she knew the song. Her humming actually distracted him from the details of her craft. He leaned against the bulkhead, watching her face attentively, his mind going where it normally went, enhanced by the lyrics popping in his head.

“Excuse me while I kiss this guy,” Marijić sang.

“Actually, it’s- ‘excuse me while I kiss the sky,’” Garcia corrected.

“Really?” Marijić asked, looking up from her work. Her smile flashed on when she realized how seriously he was examining her. She turned the calipers another notch.

“Pretty sure,” Garcia said.

Marijić finished her task. “Okay, I’m done here.”

They returned to Black Bird, closed the doors, and disconnected the shuttle. As Garcia piloted the Black Bird away from Purple Haze, he noticed Marijić staring at him at him out of the corner of his eye. He did a double take off her to confirm. She was sitting comfortably across from him, just staring, giving him back exactly what he had given her. He wasn’t sure if it was a smile or a smirk; it was as if she knew a secret.

“Something on your mind?” Garcia asked.

“Sure,” Marijić said, a substitute for ‘yes’ that typically confused Garcia.

“Loads,” added some clarification, at least confirming ‘sure’ was an ‘affirmative.’ “I read your paper on...”

“Oh, please don’t do that,” Garcia interrupted.

“Discuss your theories on the Slaver Empire?” Marijić asked.

“Oh, yeah, well, that will be alright, I guess,” Garcia said.

“Where did you think I was going to steer the conversation?” Marijić asked

“Um, never mind, continue, please,” Garcia said.

“I concur with your opinion. I know that the Thrintun didn’t leave any writing and so any conjecture is pure speculation, and most of the history and writings that does exist was handed down through conquered species, but to suggest they were more noble than history seems to portray them, as if they were not enslaving and conquering species but preserving life by gathering samples of all species, seems to be a bit of a leap,” Marijić said.

“Yeah,” Garcia said, nodding at the usual dismissal of the paper she had mentioned.

“Well?” Marijić asked.

“Did you ever have a pet?” Garcia asked.

“Sure. Several dogs. A cat. A rabbit. My father was horseman so I always had access to a horse,” Marijić said.

“Did you love your pets?” Garcia asked.

“Of course,” Marijić said.

“Ever pick them up against their will? Maybe hold them even though they were determined to get down? Ever take them to the vet or do medical procedures or grooming that was in their best interest though they were clearly protesting?” Garcia asked.

“I don’t think that’s the same,” Marijić said.

“There was absolute evidence that gorillas and dolphins were capable of communicating before universal translators came online, but humans treated them at best as if they were pets,” Garcia said. “A superior intellect would likely regard us as pets, and would do things to us with indifference to our feelings about what they did, and they would do it regardless of our protests and without explanation. It doesn’t mean what they do is good or bad, because you can’t discern intent without context. We do hold a superior perspective and most the time we do things for their benefits, even if they don’t get it. Some do. Some actually figure it out and show a knowingness that we’re helping, but that is rare.” He thought about it further. Was this how he saw the humans when he was plugged into the Kelvan technology? Was this who he was as a Kelvan? Marijić could tell he had gone somewhere but didn’t pursue. He returned soon enough: “I am going to have to update that theory. When you add in that the Preserver gods gained

access to this Universe through telepathic species, and the Thrintun weren't known for their intelligence, they seem like a great vehicle for god's to start their work. The fact that the Thrintun became extinct, given they are credited for seeding the whole Galaxy with life, just seems unlikely, unless there were other players involved."

He frowned. It seemed like a fake frown. "I may have to modify that theory, a little. But consider this, the Preserver gods gained access to this Universe through telepathic species, and the Thrintun, who weren't known for their intelligence, but then, a telepathic species is often more likely to be super empathetic with other life forms. This, unfortunately, made them a great vehicle for god's to start their work because there was less competition between egos. What bothers me more than motives is the fact that the Thrintun became extinct. Given they are credited for seeding the whole Galaxy with life, total extinction just seems unlikely. Even we believe we've established enough colonies that human life won't go extinct, but what if there is a bigger, cyclic extinction level event that spans the entire Milky Way Galaxy? Scientist frequently wonder why we don't see more life in the Galaxy?"

"You're just uncomfortable with the fact that all species, civilizations, eventually become extinct," Marijić said.

"Maybe. I'm definitely unsatisfied by the answers we have. The Thrintun is just one mystery. The Iconian civilization is another," Garcia said, bringing the shuttle to stop, relative to Purple Haze. "Alright, that's 200 kilometers precisely."

They had one stasis box with them; the other was on the workbench on the Purple Haze. That way if anything strange or bad happened, they still had at least one more box with the potential prize. Marijić and Garcia went to work station on Black Bird where Marijić began recording telemetry. Everything was go for 'open.'

"You want to do the honors?" Marijić asked.

"No, go ahead," Garcia said.

Marijić wasn't about to argue further for the privilege, so she simply push the button that opened the box remotely. The lid popped up slightly and fell back to the closed position. Both boxes ceased their glowing. She smiled at Garcia in triumph, because at least the contents didn't blow up, yet. Using the key pad on her display, she moved a mechanical arm that lifted the lid and dropped it over to the side. The camera looking down on and into the open box revealed what appeared to be a child's toy, broken into three pieces.

"Well, that's anticlimactic," Marijić said, with a bit of a pout. She checked all the sensors. "No known contaminants or pollutants. No bacteria. No viruses. No electromagnetic, radioactive, or other known energy readings. The atmosphere in the box contained nitrogen, carbon dioxide, and oxygen." She sighed. "And I was so hopeful that we would find Schrodinger's cat."

Garcia was still staring at the screen.

"That was a joke," Marijić said. "You know Schrodinger, right?" She touched his arm.

"Uh?" Garcia asked, coming out of his trance.

"You okay?" Marijić asked.

"I'm confused," Garcia said.

"By what? The toy? There have been lots of miscellaneous items found in stasis boxes," Marijić said. "Probably some kid was sad about the broke toy and he couldn't fix

it, but thought someone later in time might fix it, and so sealed it in stasis. Or some parents buried it next to their child's grave. We don't really understand the Thrintun, if this was them. It might have been one of the slaves making a statement to a future generation." She paused in her analysis to stare at Garcia. "You seem more sad than confused. It's possible that it's a scale model of something useful, that might be able to be backwards engineered, but I'm leaning towards toy."

"That's my toy," Garcia said.

"You mean, it looks like your toy?" Marijić asked.

"No, it's definitely my toy. Kelinda tripped me, I fell, the toy broke into three distinct pieces. That is mine," Garcia said.

"You're telling me that someone traveled back hundreds of millions of years to put a toy in a box simply to send it back to now?" Marijić asked.

"No, I'm not saying that, but I am confused. The toy didn't exist in physical reality. It was part of a computer simulation my brain was plugged into while I was still with the Kelvan, much of it even prenatal. It was also the last simulation I was allowed to interact with my mother," Garcia said.

"Okay. A mystery. I like mysteries," Marijić said. "Shall we see what's in the next box?" Garcia was miles away. She patted his back. "I'll pilot."

Marijić returned Black Bird to Purple Haze and mated the two shuttles together. When she came back, she found Garcia was sitting, staring into space.

"You okay?" Marijić asked.

Her voice startled him out of his thoughts and a moment later he had reconstructed her question to make sense. "Yeah, thanks," Garcia said. "Let's see what else the fates have handed us."

Marijić retrieved the unopened box, which still had a glow, though much more subdued. They only 'shine' when within a light year of another unopened stasis box. She followed Garcia through the hatches to the other shuttle. His first instinct was to pick up the pieces from inside the open box. Realizing she was still holding the unopened box, he set down the toy parts, and removed the empty box so she could set the unopened box down into the cradle. This time he assisted in hooking up the components, but it was obvious he was thinking about the toy.

"I'm sure there is an explanation," Marijić said.

Garcia agreed as he picked the pieces up again to examine them. Part of the toy grazed the closed stasis box and the lid popped open with audible pop, like opening a jar of fresh jam. All the power in both shuttles went out. Garcia collapsed. It took a moment for Marijić eyes to adjust to the lack of lighting, but glow strips provided sufficient illumination for Marijić to see that Garcia had indeed fallen to the floor. She attended to him, turning him over on his back.

"Tam? Can you hear me?" Marijić asked. She put an ear to his lips and confirmed that he was at least breathing. She took his wrist and clocked his pulse. "You better be okay, or Undine going to be upset she broke protocol." She shook him and shouted and laughed with relief when he grimaced.

"My head hurts," Garcia said, not opening his eyes. "EMP?"

"Our power systems are protected against EMP's, so it must be something else," Marijić said. "Your implant?"

“It’s off. I know the brain doesn’t feel pain, but that hurt like hell,” Garcia said, sitting up. Marijić tried to prevent him from getting up, but his persistence made her change her mind. She helped him to his feet. “Let’s see what they left us.”

Marijić retrieved and activated a chemical glow stick to increase the available light and peered into the box. Directly on top was a cracked crystal, warm to the touch. She handed this to Garcia. “The source of our EMP? Probably activated by air or the normal residual energy in the shuttle.”

“Are you cold?” Garcia asked, rotating the crystal in his hand, fascinated by how it captured the green from the glow stick.

“No,” Marijić said, going for the next item in the box. “We should have enough residual heat to last us an hour. We’ll be rescued way before then.”

Marijić took the next item on top; a sheet of paper folded in half. She held the glow stick to the paper to read the writing on the inside.

“Do not transport. Do not make reports. Do not record or save data or images on computer files. Do not scan with tricorders. Do not break sample container,” Marijić read.

“You translated all of that?” Garcia asked.

“No,” Marijić said. “It’s English.”

“Really?” Garcia asked, taking the paper from her.

Inside the box was another item, a cube, fitting snugly to the interior of the box. She upended the stasis box and gently allowed the inner cube to slide out. It appeared to be a perfectly solid, black marble box; only its weight suggested it wasn’t solid marble. It might have been pure gold, given the heaviness. On the top of the box, which had been the bottom of the box before she slid it out, was an imprint of a human hand; below it written in English, offset in white, was “Tammis Parken Arblaster Garcia.”

“No way,” Marijić said.

Garcia reached for the imprint to see if his hand fit. He paused, his hand hovering, looking to Marijić to determine if she was game. She placed her hand on his as a sign of her commitment to opening the box, and pushed. Garcia resisted.

“What if it causes our souls to swap bodies?” Garcia asked.

“Then I will finally know what it’s like to be a guy,” Marijić said.

“Seriously?” Garcia asked.

“Yeah, seriously,” Marijić said. “Hypothetically, if that happens, want to make out?”

“Seriously?” Garcia asked.

“For science,” Marijić said.

“For science,” Garcia repeated.

“Are you okay?” Marijić asked.

“I am confused,” Garcia said.

“By flirting?” Marijić asked.

“You know my reputation?” Garcia asked.

“Do you know mine?” Marijić asked, a subtle smile and curious eyebrows.

“This could explode in our faces...” Garcia said.

“Innuendo much?” Marijić asked

“I meant, it could be a bomb,” Garcia said.

“I doubt it’s a bomb,” Marijić dismissed. “Why go through all the trouble to send such an elaborate device through hundreds of millions of years in time that can only be operated by you? Getting two boxes, clearly meant for you, well, that’s astronomical,” Marijić said.

“Maybe the broken toy is a warning against this?” Garcia asked.

“A note in English would have provided more clarity,” Marijić argued. “But even if it is a warning, I doubt your curiosity will allow you to go the rest of your life not tripping the trigger, and it may be a bomb if anyone else puts their hand there, so I know you’re going to do it if for nothing else eliminating a threat to others and I’m not going to let you do it alone. Whatever this is, we do it together.”

Garcia approved of her logic and lessened his resistance. Marijić eased his hand down into the imprint, which fit his hand fitting perfectly. A light flared up from beneath his hand and they both felt the pulse of the device unlocking. A seam appeared midline and the top rose. He lifted the top off. The inner box was illuminated with a white light, revealing four fifty centimeter long, six centimeter wide transparent cylinders, each capped with silver on either end, in which three CC’s of a red liquid that quivered like mercury was suspended in another clear fluid. Next to the samples was a booklet, written in a language neither he nor Marijić recognized. The cover book had stellar graphics, utilizing galactic images to mark time.

“You okay?” Marijić asked.

“Just feeling a little weird,” Garcia admitted.

“Have you seen this before, too?” Marijić asked.

“I think so. Maybe. I don’t know. In a dream. Something isn’t right,” Garcia said. He heard an echo in his mind, Spock’s voice, saying ‘you’re fault.’ He staggered, but Marijić caught him and eased him back to the floor. He sat against the bulkhead, unwilling to lie down.

“You’re shaking,” Marijić said. She procured a blanket and covered him and then, for lack of a better idea, she climbed under the blanket with him.

“I don’t remember ever being so cold,” Garcia mumbled, his teeth chattering. He mentally reached for his implant to determine his core temp as compared to the ambient room temperature, but no information was available to him. It was a blind spot, a gaping hole like a missing tooth.

“Shhh,” Marijić said, hugging him.

“I should be able to generate more heat,” Garcia complained.

“It’s okay,” Marijić assured him. “Between my Gypsy, Viking blood, and long winters in Croatia, I think I can make enough heat for both of us. Plus we have the thermal blanket. I’m sure the NC will come get us soon enough.”

“And f-f-find us together. More fire to the g-g-gossip about my nature,” Garcia said, stuttering he was now so cold.

“I don’t mind,” Marijić said.

“Gossip or my n-n-nature?” Garcia clarified.

Marijić laughed and kissed him gently. “Hang on. They should be here any moment now.”

“I want to ask you something,” Garcia said.

“Anything,” Marijić said.

“Would you fix my toy?” he asked.

“Umm, sure,” she said; clearly she had expected something else. He fell asleep in her arms.

CHAPTER 10

“Alright folks, if you’re going with me, you have to be seated and strapped in,” McKnight informed them on the way to her modified seat. All the controls were tactile in nature, with force feedback. In many ways, the controls resembled the sort of controls that would be in a helicopter, modified of course to handle the difference between spaceflight and air flight.

“How quaint,” McCoy said, strapping into the seat next to the pilot.

“Inertial dampeners may not work,” McKnight said.

“So I gathered,” McCoy said.

“Perhaps you would prefer the transporter?” McKnight said.

“Perhaps,” McCoy said, meeting her eyes. He knew she was messing with him and he should take it playfully, but he was taking it just as he would have fifty years ago. Had he lost his ability to deal with anxiety with a calm demeanor that had taken him most his life to gain, or was this just part of a young physiology? He wondered. Being human isn’t no cake walk. Being young and human, well, sometimes he was amazed there were humans.

McKnight looked over her Away Team. It consisted of two parts; Boris Koslov, Sendak, Brel, and Micceal were designated to take out the subspace emitter. McCoy, and his two Klingon body guards, Or’Ton and Skar, McKnight, Nancy Carter, and Owens, were to gather Intel on the Oriskany mission. The two body guards were barely contained by their seats, which garnered a few comments about their size from McCoy.

Shuttle ‘Midnight Rider’ departed, a little shaky on the lift off before thrusting out.

“I thought you said you were rated for this,” McCoy complained, gripping his seats.

“I am. Just haven’t practiced in a while. I should have it down before we hit atmo,” McKnight said, winking at him.

“I hate space travel,” McCoy said.

“And yet, you joined Starfleet,” McKnight said.

“Umph,” McCoy said. “I think I have had this conversation before.”

“Not with us,” Carter said.

“I’m sure we’d all love to hear it,” McKnight said.

“I hate to be repetitious,” McCoy said. “At my age, people think you’re senile.”

“I hope I look as good when I’m your age,” McKnight said.

“Looks are over rated,” McCoy said.

“You’ve never been a woman before,” McKnight said.

McCoy chuckled. “You got me on that one.”

McKnight fell silent, her face somber. Nothing sadder, she thought, than a dead Starship. At first it had just been a small prick of light in orbit, but the sun reflection started giving way to shadows and relief as they approached, bringing out the depth of the ship. In many ways it looked like a smaller version of the Ambassador Class Starship, such as the New Constitution. Carter unbuckled her seat and came forward for a better look.

“The Mighty O,” Carter said.

“What?” Boris asked.

“The nick name for the Oriskany,” Carter said.

“Do we have time for a fly by?” McCoy asked.

McKnight nodded. “We’ll hit atmo pretty soon after we pass. You best take your seat.”

Carter held her place. The Oriskany was a Korolev Class starship. Its length was 417 meters, beam 190 meters, draught 84 meters, and a mass of about 990,000mt. It could reach warp 9.1 for short durations. NCC-41057.

“Are you crying?” McCoy asked.

“She was on the USS Von Braun at Wolf 359,” Boris explained, his voice surprisingly soft.

This didn’t help the general mood.

“Nancy, take your seat,” Boris said.

Carter returned to her seat.

“Alright folks, might get a little rough,” McKnight announced.

“How rough?” McCoy asked.

The shuttle, Midnight Rider, hit the atmosphere and the shudder increased in intensity until everything was rattling, including their bones.

“You’re coming in too fast,” McCoy snapped, holding on for dear life.

“Actually this is pretty slow,” McKnight said, her voice just as choppy as McCoy. “Relax, it’ll even up here pretty quick.”

As if on cue the flames slipping up past the windows disappeared and the shuttle eased over so that they could see the earth and clouds as they continued their descent.

“We’re going to over shoot Colony One and then come back around,” McKnight said.

“You’re still too fast,” McCoy said.

As they came over their ultimate destination, the main tower opened fired with a sustained phaser beam. Midnight Runner shook, even slid into a crab as McKnight rotated the ship to disperse the phaser’s energy over more of the shielding. Colony One went by so fast they wouldn’t have had time to discern much, even if their shields weren’t flaring with the dissipation of energy.

“Any other observations?” McKnight asked.

McCoy just shook his head no. He looked to Owens who was fussing at his tricorder.

“You should have left that off until you were ready to use it,” McCoy said. “Any tech capable of recording data isn’t going to function long. Whatever signal Sha Ka Ree is putting out, it’s effectively coopts technology to extend its own signal. When we split up, we’ll be incommunicado.” Even the ‘ident’ chips on the weapons had been disabled, effectively turning off the safety feature that allows Fleet to track their weapons, or turn them off remotely.

“When we take out the emitter, we should regain the use of our comm. badges,” Brel said.

“Unless the signal comes from Sha Ka Ree himself,” McCoy said.

“The same building that fired at us,” McKnight said. “So, as planned, we’ll have to park outside city limits and take a little hike into town to see the Wizard.”

“The who?” Or’Ton asked.

“Ya don’t know that reference yet?” McKnight asked. “I thought that was like required viewing for anyone working with Garcia.”

“If we chased every allusion Garcia dropped, we’d never get anything else accomplished,” Brel said.

As they came back around, McKnight descended to 1,500 meters above the surface. McCoy pointed to a life pod on the ground, but McKnight had already been steering towards it. Brel unfastened his seat and came forwards to observe. There was evidence it had received a direct hit from phaser fire.

“It must have hit pretty hard,” Brel said.

“Yeah. Compliments of Sha Ka Ree,” McKnight asked.

“Land. We need to check for survivors,” McCoy said.

“No, we need to get closer to the Colony,” Brel said.

“We can walk from there,” McCoy said. “And if there are injured, McKnight can fly them back to the NC.”

“Not leaving till the missions accomplished,” McKnight said.

“Which makes it imperative that we land and render first aid,” McCoy demanded.

McKnight and Brel exchanged glances. Brel decided it was best, gave a slight nod, and McKnight slowed their approach further. She set the Midnight Runner down next to the life pod as easily as a feather; a wobbling feather. Dust settled as she powered down. Before opening the door and exiting Brel verified everyone had weapons. McCoy wasn’t carrying.

“I’m a doctor, not a soldier,” McCoy said.

“Today, you are both,” Brel insisted.

“Just in case your old friend brought some of his critters with him,” McKnight insisted.

“Absolutely not. I preserve life, don’t take it,” McCoy said.

“Carry or stay in the shuttle,” Brel said.

McCoy took a phaser and attached it to his belt. Brel opened the shuttle and they exited in order. McCoy’s guards separated to inspect the area and then returned to escort him as he emerged from the shuttle.

Carter edged up next to him. “Been awhile since you’ve been on an Away Team, eh?” Carter asked.

“The last time I was on an Away Team it was called Landing Parties,” McCoy said.

The life pod was partially buried, but the hatch was accessible. One of the view ports was broken. A scraping sound could be heard from inside.

“A survivor,” McKnight said.

Brel tried to open the door, but it was jammed.

“Everyone stand back,” Koslov said. He opened a recessed panel and pulled a lever. Explosive bolts fired in sequence and afterwards Brel was able to pull the door free. As he handled the door, McCoy approached the pod. At the same time, one of the occupants was emerging. The person tripped over the threshold, staggered to an upright posture, orientated, and then limped towards the closest person, McCoy. His eyes were sunken, cheeks hollow, and he was wheezing. He growled, his arms coming up, reaching for McCoy.

“Stand back,” Or’Ton ordered, raising a weapon.

“Don’t soot,” McCoy tried.

“Stop!” Or’Ton insisted, stepping between McCoy and the ‘survivor’ to impede his progress. The survivor attacked and was only able to bite Or’Ton because he was showing restraint.

Skar grabbed the ‘survivor’ by the arms and pulled him back. The ‘survivor’ was too weak to pull free but didn’t cease in his efforts to bite anyone that approached, while growling fiercely.

“He bit me!” Or’Ton said.

“What the hell is this?” McKnight asked. “A zombie?”

“What is a zombie?” Brel asked.

McCoy was trying to understand the information on his medical tricorder.

“Dear God,” McCoy said.

“Oh, that so doesn’t bode well,” Owens complained.

“McCoy?” Brel asked.

“We’re looking at a mutated version of the original virus that took out this world’s population,” McCoy said. McCoy cursed and tossed the tricorder down. It was now useless. “The initial virus was intended to extend life, and did for those who hadn’t reached puberty, but after that, the aging process was accelerated and people died within days, if not hours. This virus has the ability to rejuvenate dead tissue. What’s left of this person’s brain is rudimentary at best. For all intents and purposes, he’s...”

“A zombie,” McKnight said.

“Dead,” McCoy finished.

“The living dead?” Brel asked.

“Zombies,” McKnight repeated.

“Every damn place we go,” Owens complained. “Alright, I vote we get back on the shuttle, return to the NC, and fire torpedoes till we take out the subspace emitter.”

“This isn’t a committee,” Brel said. “But I concur.”

“We can’t go back,” McCoy said.

“I beg your pardon?” Carter asked.

“We’re all infected,” McCoy said. “The moment we started breathing this air, we were infected.”

“We are all going to become one of those?” Boris asked, talking over Owen’s lamenting.

“If we die, the virus will reanimate us,” McCoy said.

“Or, if we get bitten?” McKnight asked, noticing Or’Ton seemed suddenly pale.

Or’Ton collapsed, displaying symptoms of an epileptic seizure. McCoy went to aid him. He took a second tricorder out from his medical bag, turned it on, and began taking fresh tricorder readings, tracking as much as he could knowing that he was going to have to remember it all. Brel removed his Gorn weapon from its holster and pointed at Or’Ton’s head.

“Let me save him!” McCoy snapped.

“You have until he turns,” Brel said.

McCoy retrieved a hypospray, filled it with antiviral and anti-seizure medicine. The tricorder ceased working. McCoy tossed it, and activated a third. As McCoy was trying to save the officer, McKnight examined the life pod. There were two other zombies, restrained in their harness, reaching for her. They became more energetic as

they saw McKnight. She stepped away from the pod and nodded towards the pod to Brel. Brel understood. McKnight took out her phaser and destroyed the two hijacked tricorders.

McCoy injected another serum into Or'Ton's arm and he went still.

McCoy stood up. "We need to get him to a medical facility."

Or'Ton sat up, growling, reaching for McCoy's leg. Using the Gorn weapon, Brel fired one shot to the heart. The sound the weapon made was like muffled thunder, as it was basically a mini rail gun that shot gold clustered molecules at relativist speeds. The whole in Or'ton's chest didn't bleed, and there was a gold tint etching the wound. Or'Ton staggered, but then redoubled his efforts. Brel fired a second shot right through the forehead. Or'Ton went down.

"Damn it, I was trying to save him!" McCoy snapped.

"My first priority is to preserve your life," Brel said.

"Why didn't he die with the first shot?" Brel said.

"You don't know about zombies?" McKnight ask.

"No heart, no blood to the neurons and muscles," Brel said.

"The brain could take hours to die, even after the heart stopped," McCoy said.

"You mean, if I die of a heart attack, my brain could keep on ticking?" Owens asked.

"Yes," McCoy said.

"Fuck," Owens said.

"Let's focus on not dying," Carter said.

"I've read your reports on your visit here. You found a cure for the initial virus. I suspect you can find a cure for this. In fact, I am betting our lives on it. The caveat being, you survive. Got that, team? McCoy is priority number one."

"I'm going to need a bigger computer than a tricorder," McCoy said, trying to suppress his emotions and prepare himself mentally for the task before him. "And I'm going to need live samples."

"I think you're about to get it," Carter said, pointing.

A mob was approaching, the slow gait of the infected.

"Back to the shuttle. Now," Brel said, using his Gorn weapon to put down the 'survivor' Skar was restraining.

"Stop shooting people!" McCoy snapped.

Brel instructed Skar to get McCoy on the shuttle. McCoy protested, saying he was young enough to walk on his own now. The mob loomed closer. Micceal and Owens took out their phaser, set for stun. Each fired at the nearest zombie. It didn't seem to faze the living dead in the least.

"Oh, again, everywhere we go!" Owens cursed.

"Try kill," Brel said, firing his Gorn weapon.

Owens and Micceal increased the severity of their attack. Kill setting only caused the living dead to pause. As soon as the beam ceased, they pushed ever forwards.

"Why was I assigned to this mission again?" Owens complained.

"Your knowledge of subspace emitters?" Micceal asked.

"Set to disintegrate," Brel ordered.

Again, Owens and Micceal increased the severity of their attack, this time to its maximum lethality. They fired their weapons. The victims of the beams fully illuminated before their atoms were completely scattered to the wind. They continued firing at the

oncoming mob, retreating towards the shuttle. As soon as they were in, McKnight lifted off.

“Okay, folks, set phasers to disintegrate. If you’re conservative, you’ll get at least fifty kills before the battery is dead,” Brel said. He opened a chest and began to distribute the Iotia weapon, the P90, and ammo clips and an extra Gorn weapon for each. He got close to McCoy, kneeling so he would be eye to eye. “McCoy, answer me truthfully. Can these living dead be cured?”

McCoy looked away, staring hard out the window before turning to look Brel in the eyes. “Even if I remove the virus completely, they’re gone. They will probably maintain enough brain function to breathe, move, and eat, but their memories, their personalities, that’s permanently gone.”

Brel nodded. “Then I’ll hear no more of your protest about killing these things. As far I’m concern, it’s a mercy killing.”

McCoy sulked, but based on what he had seen before the tricorders died, that was indeed what this was. He considered all the times he had used a phaser, all the times he had assisted in a medical death, and he wanted an alternative. It took this moment for him to notice an increase in sympathy towards Garcia using god like abilities to make him young again. If he had it, there would be fewer dead and no dying.

“Well, if I might offer another regret,” McKnight said, going for humor. “Garcia is going to be terribly jealous of our stories about surviving a Zombie apocalypse when we get back.”

Carter laughed and leaned into her ex-husband Boris. She didn’t cry, but she so wanted to. Everyone else remained quiet.



Garcia woke in sickbay, with no one standing over him. He sat up, noticed Jurak reading some files, drinking something from a mug that had a pungent odor, distinctly not the fresh smell one might find in sickbay. He finished what he was reading before he set his material aside to focus on his patient.

“Welcome back,” Jurak said.

“Where’s everyone?” Garcia asked.

“I think you like waking up with everyone hovering over you, so I chased them out,” Jurak said, getting up. He set his mug down, approached Garcia, and at the last moment threw a punch. Garcia didn’t block fast enough and got a solid knock to the forehead and went back down.

“Reflexes are still a bit off,” Jurak said.

“You think?” Garcia asked, applying pressure to his forehead, clearly not happy with his Doctor’s methods, and hurting.

“I didn’t hit you that hard. Don’t be a big baby,” Jurak said.

“Oh, God,” Garcia said, reaching for the babies.

“They’re fine. Surprisingly, the portable womb was the only electronics not effected by the EMP,” Jurak said. “Of course, it probably helped that your body is the backup power supply. That’s one of the reason you felt so cold.”

Garcia sat back up, a bit weary of being hit again. “What are you doing on the NC?”

“Good question,” Jurak said, picking his mug back up. “It’s called continuity of care. I’m you’re attending and they tend to call me every time you’re sick or injured, which, interestingly enough, seems to happens quite a bit.”

“I bet Misan isn’t pleased,” Garcia said.

“He’ll get over it,” Jurak said.

Garcia got up without Jurak impeding his efforts. Coddling the sick wasn’t his way. There was a moment of vertigo but he pushed through it.

“So, what happened?” Garcia asked.

“Your brain has become so dependent on your neural implant that you went into shock,” Jurak said. “The babies sucking you dry didn’t help any. No neural damage, but the connecting clusters surrounding the implant got stuck in a feedback loop. I’ve replaced the power supply and updated the internal components to your implant, bringing them up to the latest specs. You may experience some technical errors as you learn to navigate the new system. Start slow, maybe use the gaming or bio-feedback mode till you get the hang of it.”

Garcia touched his communicator badge but it failed to activate. “You’ll have to get a new one. The tech on your clothes are out as well.”

“Where’s Undine?” Garcia asked.

“The main conference room, discussing your find,” Jurak said.

“Thank you,” Garcia said, headed for the door.

“You bet,” Jurak said, stealing one of Garcia’s expressions. He gave a cheers motion with his mug. “Oh, and congratulations.”

“For?” Garcia asked.

“Marijić pregnant,” Jurak said.

Garcia was confused. He pressed his brain to recall details, but found only empty space. His brain took him as far back as to being under the blanket with her. She did kiss him, but, that was it, right? Socially, given her culture of origins, innocent enough; professionally, definitely inappropriate but not a grievance Garcia would pursue. Angry at himself, he stormed out without further word, not observing or even able to recall in retrospect the details between Sickbay and the Conference room. He barged right into the meeting in progress and went straight to Marijić, oblivious to Jurak behind him.

“I’m so sorry,” Garcia told her.

“For what, Admiral?” Marijić asked, smiling politely.

“Your condition?” Garcia said. She still seemed confused. “For impregnating you.”

Everyone in the conference room laughed out loud, except Rossi, who clearly didn’t approve of the joke. Marijić wiped her eyes. “I’m not pregnant,” she said, laughter leaking through.

Garcia was confused. “But Jurak said…”

“You should have seen his face!” Jurak interrupted, standing in the door way. “I so sold that! He didn’t even hear me following.”

Garcia was angry. “Not funny!” he snapped.

“It’s pretty damn funny,” Weisberg said.

Garcia sat down at the table. “Undine, you are in on it?”

“I think the whole crew is in on it,” Undine said with a smile.

Garcia outwardly sulked, but if the jest made his crew happy, well, if anyone needed a good laugh, they certainly did. He noticed Soran studying the book that accompanied the cylinders. He was purportedly a weapons expert, so Undine made a good call bringing him in.

“You can read that, Doctor Soran?” Garcia asked, picking up one of the four cylinders resting in the box. No matter how he turned the cylinder, the red matter stayed pretty much in the center. He shook it.

“I would be very careful with that,” Soran said, raising a finger but not looking up from the book.

“What is it? A component for a lava lamp?” Garcia asked.

“I haven’t labeled the substance yet, but it seems to be an artificial, super dense hyper-meta material capable of spawning black holes when it comes into contact with ordinary matter,” Soran said.

Garcia quit trying to agitate the red matter and set it gently back into its cradle. He had a moment of ‘deja vu,’ believing he had been in this moment before, making him hyper aware of the present and all the actors and props in play. “Go on,” Garcia said.

Soran set the book down. “This book is basically the schematics for building the technology to make more ‘red matter.’ What makes it difficult to read is the technical aspects are buried in a story format resembling an epic poem. Lots of talk about the underworld and the over world, we seem to exist in the between worlds, if you’re interested in the mythology. If you allow me to speculate, I think this is a defensive weapon designed to stop the expansion of a supernova event, more specifically, a Preserver Supernova, such as the one that happened at Phylos. The Preserver weapon didn’t just accelerate the destruction of the star, it hyper accelerated it, increasing the magnitude exponentially way beyond anything seen in nature. This red matter, does just the opposite, accelerating an implosion.”

“It stops the expansion how?” Undine asked.

“When the red matter comes into contact with ordinary matter, it somehow becomes a black hole. Unlike a natural black hole which growth is determined by the amount of mass entering it, this one will grow exponentially as long as it’s being fed,” Soran said. “Increased pressure and heat would increase the rate of growth, which is why I believe this was specifically tailored as a defense to the Preserver Supernova weapon, as this would neutralize the expansion phase of their hyper-supernova event expeditiously. I’m sorry I am unable to be more mathematically precise, but my access to data has been limited.”

Garcia wasn’t pleased by the public and subtle ploy Soran just gave for a higher security clearance, but he understood the manipulation was probably intended for the better good. Garcia met him gaze for gaze, accepting the challenge.

“So, this might come in handy if our war with Apollo escalates” Undine said, looking to Garcia, trying to decrease the tension.

“Not likely,” Soran said. “Even if you sent this manual to the Vulcan Science Academy, it would be years before they can make even a drop of this stuff. Not to mention, it probably isn’t wise to go around creating singularities. A better bet would be to stop the fusion process altogether. You still loose the star, but there won’t be a massive black hole necessitating major navigational changes. I think I have a way of modifying a G-device to stop all fusion within a star...”

“I’ve read your proposal, Doctor,” Garcia said. “And I will let you know my decision soon.”

“How soon?” Soran asked, not hiding his emotions. “Because if what happened at Phylos is an example of the Preserver’s destructive power and they use it on a star closer to Galactic center, they could theoretically unleash enough radiation to kill all life in this Galaxy, like knocking over dominoes one by ten by a 100...”

“You think I’ve forgotten what I’m been up against?” Garcia asked.

“Pressman has ordered...”

Garcia slapped the table. “I know what he wants!”

There was quiet. Undine spoke first, not intimidated by the emotional outburst. “Has Pressman spoken to you recently?”

“Yeah,” Garcia said, still contemplating his own response. “He reminded me I am not a real admiral and you’re in charge of Soran, not me.”

“I’m sorry,” Soran tried. “I’m afraid that after the Borg destroyed my home world, I have become fairly passionate about weaponry, defensive and offensive, and I believe you hold the key to giving the Federation sufficient advantage we could end all conflicts.”

Garcia nodded. “Never apologize for holding passion,” Garcia said. “But have you considered, building bigger and better weapons has never ended conflict, but rather simply prolonged the animosities?” Garcia didn’t wait for an answer. “Anything in that book that explains why they didn’t want any reports or records of this material?”

“Just myths,” Soran said, turning to a page. “They believe there are three ways to get information to the gods. The first and primary way is through an informant, but I suspect telepath is a better translation. The second way is to store the information with the oracles, which I interpret as a computer, but probably artificial intelligence is more accurate. The third is for someone to deliver the message in person when they die, or they are in flux. I interrupt flux to mean a transporter beam.”

“If the Preserver gods have access to basically all electronic data and media, then there is no way to keep a secret,” Jurak said.

Soran agreed. “Not impossible, just impractical. In fact, the text offers several ways to transmit data through time that can’t be directly intercepted by the gods. One way is to put objects or messages in a stasis box and set it adrift through time. The language set here has a common two word phrase that roughly translate to ‘baby basket in a stream.’ It tends to be fairly random. Even if you had a method for viewing or predicting the future, there is sufficient noise in the random flux of space time that the deeper in time the package travels, the less likely it will arrive to a specific person.”

“Then how do you explain Garcia receiving a package from the distant past?” Undine asked.

“I can’t. Getting this specific package, this precise message, with his name on it, is so unlikely that we can consider it miraculous. I couldn’t duplicate this feat with today’s technology. Two get two boxes apparently tailored to Garcia, well, it’s impossible by our understanding. The other method of transmitting messages through time is via stories, which unfortunately usually get so convoluted with alterations with each rendition that the original message is lost. For example, the Dogon Tribe of Old Earth knew that Sirius B orbited the sun every fifty years, but the message came down the line as fifty Argonauts.”

Garcia was tempted to elucidate his knowledge of the Sirius mystery, but decided that Soran was simply generalizing, and wasn't aiming for precision.

"What if the book isn't describing a myth?" Marijić asked. She turned to Garcia. "You said the toy in the first box came from a computer game you were plugged into as a child? Maybe they found a way to access or view the gaming sessions you were in and considered those events as actual, physical history?"

"You are suggesting that someone or something has access to every data ever logged into a computer?" Undine asked.

"Maybe we all do," Marijić said. "Maybe, they subtly influenced your own development in addition to what the Kelvin were doing to you. If it seemed random enough, the Kelvin would have just ignored it as anomalous, if they noticed anything at all."

"You're suggesting these entities can access computers from their universe and manipulate data?" Undine asked.

"Why not? We know they can utilize telepaths, why not computers, too?" Marijić asked. "Let me add this. There are stories on Earth about the Akashic Records, that all knowledge, all things knowable, is encoded in a holographic medium that all souls can access. Akashic is Sanskrit for space or air, and there are still scientist playing with the theory that the entire Universe that we know is really just a hologram itself, that nothing is real. If this is even remotely true, then this medium the book discusses permeates all known space and time, and it's just a matter of plugging into to the medium to access information, the same way we access information with wireless technology, or the cloud." She turned to Garcia. "What's more likely? You went back in time hundreds of millions of years and sent your present self a present, or, someone accessed the information and sent you something helpful downstream, or more specifically, down time. In context with today's discussion, this could explain why Gilgamesh and Moses share the same story of being put adrift in a river. It's a metaphor for conveying information to future generations."

"So, you're saying we live in the Matrix?" Misan asked. "What, we're suddenly all going to become Gnostics and I'm supposed to start using holistic and new age remedies to cure patients?"

"Belief does affect health," Jurak said.

"There are no such things as ghosts," Misan said. "Dead is dead."

"How do you explain the toy?" Marijić asked.

Misan scoffed. "Pfft. Easy. It's a psychological phenomenon. Garcia remembers having a broken toy and he finds a broken toy and see's what he wants to see."

"That does fit what we know of about human memory," Rossi said. "The Loftus Effect. A Doctor Loftus demonstrated that memory wasn't just malleable over time, but it can be easily influence and altered, through either internal or external means. Basically, every time we access a memory, take it off the shelf, dust it off, examine it, we change it just a little, and then we put the altered memory back on the shelf with a false belief in continuity of the story we created. That is more likely why many of the metaphysics claim reality is an illusion, because reality is colored by perception through a filter of perceived accuracy to memories. Even DeJa-Vu can be explained by the firing of cells in the hippocampus and the belief that something has happened previously is just an illusion, the mind filling in blanks to satisfy or reduce feelings of anxiety."

“Why not save yourself time and say all memories are self-made artifacts, and there is no continuity because there is no world out there, except we invent it on the fly,” Marijić said.

“And back to the Gnostic beliefs,” Weisberg said.

“Not just Gnostics,” Garcia said. “It was proposed by neural surgeon in his 1993 book, ‘the man who tasted shapes’ that the brain projects the world being...”

“Oh, so now we’re disembodied brains imagining bodies?” Misan said.

“There’s a world for that, too,” Garcia pointed out.

“In other words, myths are just myths, let them lie,” Weisberg agreed, pleased with his pun.

“How do you explain we got this box with Garcia’s name on it, and it opened to his biometrics,” Marijić said. She turned to Garcia, as if imploring him. “I know, you don’t want to talk metaphysics, but we’re all watching this incredible story unfold right in front of us. Garcia is plugged into something and its changing him. And this crew has been encountering gods left and right.”

“Aliens, not gods,” Weisberg said.

“Agreed. So, I’m not suggesting anyone has to accept my metaphysical beliefs, but I am asking that we consider that the Akashic Records are some form of high tech, which monitors other tech, and can be accessed by telepathic creatures, or people who have figured out how to access it,” Marijić said. “Consider this; if an active Iotian Gateway exists, and they can be operational 24/7, then a person or a computer could be monitoring us even this very moment, or watching certain locations, just waiting to receive the correct verbal command, radio signal, or password. Once received, it opens a Gateway for passage.”

“When you can teach me how to plug in, I will buy it,” Misan said.

“Apparently, Soran isn’t the only one passionate about something,” Undine said. All eyes went to Garcia. “Tam, what are you thinking?”

Garcia was staring at the table during all of this. “When I first saw the toy, I was worried, but I was able to rationally work through the anxiety. When I saw my name inscribed into the marble box, I was chilled to the bone.”

“You were in shock,” Jurak corrected.

“Maybe,” Garcia said, dismissively. “But I was scared. I was scared that I was still plugged into the Kelvan training program and this, all of this, my whole life, is just another fiction. I wanted desperately to wake up to know truth and simultaneously I wanted to remain in the dream. I was angry, this is all just a dream, and then I was relieved, this is just a dream, the upside being that all the wrong I have done never happened. The complexity of my thoughts and feelings compressed into a moment of time... But mostly, I was lamenting the loss of everyone I know, which is odd, because if it’s a dream, or a game, then everyone I know never existed, so what am I truly lamenting?” Tears were flowing.

At the time the stasis box opened, Marijić had been so focused on the power outage and her own fears of what might have emerged from the box that she had missed the fact that Garcia was suffering. The fact that she had failed to realize the severity of the loss of his implant, or the simple fact that he had gone into shock, and failed to engage in even the simplest emergency care, like putting his legs up, bothered her

tremendously. Her present concern was apparent on her face. Rossi was professionally attentive and she motioned Misan to be silent, as he was about to interject his opinion.

“If this is a dream, or a program, then it’s pretty damn solid illusion, that’s for sure, because none of the techniques I use for lucid dreaming are waking me up,” Garcia continued. “I feel this overwhelming sense that I am being railroaded into a particular eventuality that I don’t want and I can’t escape. I’m growing tired of fighting, but the only thing left is acceptance. I don’t want to accept that I am the reason Romulus gets destroyed, and in that, the entire Universe as we know it unravels.”

Marijić touched Garcia’s arm compassionately, which sparked Rossi’s silent ire, as the gesture clearly interrupted a therapeutic moment. Garcia touched her hand, patted it, and then changed his tone, resolute in a decision path for the present moment.

“Counselor, I need to speak to you alone,” Garcia said, getting up. He departed the room before Rossi had even stood up.

“Are we done?” Jurak asked.

“Yes, everyone is dismissed, except Bri,” Undine said.

Bri seemed a little apprehensive about being held back, but took it in general Klingon stride. He was confident he hadn’t made any engineering mistakes to warrant being singled out, still he kept his gaze on the table not wanting to make eye contact with peers for fear of transmitting concern. There was no conversation between until the others had departed and the door had whispered shut.

“You’re not a warrior,” Undine said.

“No,” Bri said, his concerns shifting from his technical skills to the general and observable reality centering on his physical prowess. Hearing that, even from a non-Klingon, bothered him to the core. He wanted to be other than who he was.

“But the others don’t pick on you, and frequently, in a fight, they will support you even when you don’t ask for it,” Undine said.

“I’m special,” Bri agreed. That wasn’t meant in a good way. “I can fix things. It’s a gift. This gift is recognized as valuable to society, so I am given some leeway when it comes to physical fortitude.”

Undine nodded. “Right, so, imagine for a moment, you were stranded on the Oriskany, alone,” she said. “What would be the first thing you would do?”

“Establish power, life support,” Bri said, brightening a little as he contemplated the problem. “Once life support is on, I can restore minimum computer function by building isolated systems, aiming for warp next.”

“Warp?”

“Yeah, force fields and artificial gravity emitters are easy enough, so I could establish a reasonably stable antimatter mix in the chamber,” Bri said. “With the Fed tech, I could probably sustain warp .8 for fifteen minutes, sufficient to get out of this system and out of range of the enemy signal. It would basically be point and shoot, but then I don’t need sophisticated navigating just to escape.”

“How do you feel about being alone?” Undine asked.

“You mean, alone on the Oriskany?” Bri asked. She nodded affirmative. “Fine. In fact, I would enjoy it.”

“Good,” Undine said. “Cause we’ve been ordered to destroy the Oriskany. I want to salvage it. Modify the Little St. Nick similar to Midnight Runner and take what you need for an extended stay on board the Oriskany.”

Bri stood up, excited. "Thank you, Sir!" saluting, first to heart.
"You bet," Undine said.

CHAPTER 11

Rossi sat in her spot on the couch, which gave her a view of her door to her right, and the large window to the left. It was the six o'clock position of the clock, if you were looking down at the total circumference of the couch. From this position, she would typically be facing in the direction of travel. The room was boxy, except for the outer wall with the windows, which suggested a curve. The counseling couch was in four sections, also curved, and together the section, with the empty spaces, described a circle. There was a round coffee table with a noticeable, circular, Lazy Susan. A dish with spicy cinnamon flavored candy, and a container of water, illuminated, was on the table. Garcia walked the perimeter of the couch, counter clockwise, trailing his hand along the back of the couch, letting it fall in the in between space, and catching the side and dragging it up along the next couch. Rossi tracked to the point where he disappeared behind her, and then waited for him to return to the other side of her periphery vision.

"My mood is fluctuating," Garcia said.

"We've noticed," Rossi said.

Garcia paused, looking at her, and then resumed his pacing. "I was in a fairly reasonable mood until they played that joke."

"Yeah, not cool," Rossi said.

"Yet, you didn't stop them," Garcia said, stopping directly opposite of her in the circle. He was a moon at perigee.

"I am not policing that," Rossi said. "And though I disapprove, it suggest a modicum of health. That kind of joke has normative functions that allow people to understand the social landscape. It helped them feel better about themselves, and your response was sufficient to let them know you're reasonably in a good place. Had you responded in anger and shut that down, that, too, would have allowed them to understand the social landscape."

"So it was a calculated gesture?" Garcia asked.

"Tam, please tell me you have not forgotten everything you learned from basic psych. That was completely spontaneous. It was an unconscious probe by the group to understand the present trajectory of the personalities involved in the group," Rossi said. "Even bullying has a normative function outside of the individual agents and so if you look at the phenomena from a system perspective, all the agents are caught up in archetypal subconscious roleplay."

Garcia faced Rossi, leaned into the couch. Though he seemed to accept her response, he was still calculating variables. A brief smile flashed across his face. "I guess it was funny," he said. He almost admitted to flirting with

He became serious. “My name was on that box.”

Rossi nodded.

“Someone put another weapon of mass destruction into my hands,” Garcia said. “Which means, what? Someone knows I’m going to blow something up and wants to give me the means to fix it? Or someone else is going to blow things up and that’s the remedy? Or...”

“Tam,” Rossi said. “There is no end to this speculation. We don’t have enough information.”

Garcia came around the segment of couch and sat on it. He pulled his legs up, crisscross apple sauce. He rubbed his head. “I experienced a profound sense of *déjà vu* when I saw the toy. That feeling creeps me out, because it’s as if I have done this all before, and yet, I don’t remember what I should do next. Conversely, I have experienced a lot of really good moods lately, which is odd to me because I don’t have any clue what life is about to serve, but I am genuinely happy, as if there is something bigger than me in charge and I don’t have to worry. I wonder if that good mood is because that other me, the glowing eye me, has access to more information. Maybe he is my subconscious personified, and he isn’t trying to necessarily make things right, but to make sure I am okay.”

Rossi drew her legs up, crisscross apple sauce, mirroring Garcia. “So, part of you feels content, that you can let go of this illusion that you have any control over reality, and this other part feels like you’re stuck in a repetitive game that you should know the solution, but you don’t. Sounds pretty human.”

Garcia frowned, leaned forward, putting his chin on his fists, and his elbows on his knees. He thought long and hard about what he was about to share.

“I don’t want to be melancholy, or moody,” Garcia said. “And yet, what we’re engaged in seems to call for a level of seriousness... All the things I have done calls for perpetual mourning... Life in prison.”

“And yet, you are free, sometimes even happy, and supported by the people around you, the very people you have injured,” Rossi said.

“Yeah, just one big happy family, making jokes,” Garcia said.

“People adapt. Fleet personal tend to be better at adapting to reality than the general public,” Rossi said.

Garcia seemed to agree. “As you know, there are aspects of me, personalities that lived their entire lives on Earth, most of them in the late 20th century, going into the 21st. I know it was fiction. Well, now, looking back at it, I know. It was a simulation geared to shape my overall personality. My memories of it don’t feel like memories, mostly because they’re not contiguous with my own, as if I am getting flash back into past lives. I can visit them in my dreams, and when mediating, and those lives are as real to me as this one I am living is. When I am there, this world feels like the fiction. Anyway, there is this thing, I don’t know what to call it, a feature of 20th century American culture that is fear based, a spinning of conspiracy where malicious entities and black-op government agencies and secret occult groups have the entire population enslaved. On one level, that was true because I had these Kelvan Overlords and Watchers influencing my life, interjecting random variables to elicit responses. Many times while engaged in the simulations I was eager to participate in those conspiracies, infiltrate groups, mostly because I just wanted to know truth, partly because I was bored. Every time I thought I

had figured something out and that I had a solid hold on reality, there would be this new level of conspiracy interwoven into the plot. There were Reptilians. There were Grays. If I line up all the aliens I encountered there, there is a parallel here. From the Gorn to the Ferengi, they're all here. When I am here, I find myself thinking about there, and that was the fiction. Those beings feel like they're metaphors, and all the interaction was simply symbolic in nature..."

"And because it so parallels you present reality, you feel desperate to figure this out, as if there is a meta-purpose to reality. If you could only understand your role, and the roles of all the agents in your sphere of influence, you might end the game," Rossi said.

Garcia bit on his thumb nail. "I don't expect you to answer this. It's been asked before, by better, and there may not be a solution. How do you know if you're dreaming? My life, it is so bizarre. It's complexly convoluted, filled with amazing people, and adventures... At the risk of sounding arrogant, it's as if it was tailored to me. Sorry. I'm still wanting to find a conspiracy here to explain my life."

Rossi unfolded her legs, poured herself some water, she took a candy and tossed one to Garcia, and then unwrapped one and put in her mouth. She sipped water over it. Garcia unwrapped one end of the candy with his teeth, and then put the candy, wrapper in all, in his mouth, and pulled out the wrapper leaving the candy in.

"Your life is amazing, and it is definitely complex, and you are entrenched in a conspiracy," Rossi said. "Forget about Pressman. We're going up against aliens that are the equivalent of Gods and they have clearly influenced our history."

"Yeah," Garcia said. He crunched through the candy. "In several of my life cycles, there is a version of life where the present day world, Star Fleet, is presented in a fiction format, as if they were preparing me for this reality, inspiring me to dream of being a Captain of a starship. In fact, one particular cycle..."

"Cycle?" Rossi asked.

"Life times," Garcia said, not even pausing. "The simulations I lived in were called cycles. In many ways, it was kind of like Groundhog day, only, instead of just one day, it was whole lives," Garcia said. "Anyway, in this one version I was an alien, a Pleiadian, incarnated onto Earth in order to help them through their crisis. Oh..." Garcia nearly came off the couch again. His eyes focused on something way beyond the room they were in. "The Metrones."

"What about the Metrones?" Rossi asked.

"They're the Pleiadian," Garcia said, closing his eyes and tracking something. "Mandora is in that world. Oh, wow. Everyone I know, they're all their, support characters in my cycles..."

"Tam," Rossi said. "You must be remembering it wrong."

"You think?!" Garcia asked, coming off the couch to resume pacing. "Because if they're there, then, I am definitely still in a computer simulation, right?"

"Or, Kelinda, who now has access to time travel tech, is messing with you by inserting additional simulations in your past," Rossi said.

"Which, I am only now, conveniently, becoming aware of? We're screwed," Garcia said. "There's no stopping her, if she already has access."

"No, it means, we're winning. She can't do anything big without unraveling it all, but she can make you start second guessing yourself," Rossi said.

“You’re there, in one of the cycles,” Garcia said.

“Don’t even go there,” Rossi said, raising a hand to block. “I don’t want hear about it.”

“How could I have missed all of this? The Mandela affect?” Garcia paused. “What if I am actually reliving this life, and each time I remember a little bit more of the past? But, because it’s real life, there are also permutations in the flow that result in cumulative net changes over time.”

“Because that’s not insane,” Rossi said.

“It’s not the first time someone has suggested such,” Garcia said.

“I familiar with the Eternal Return,” Rossi said.

“It’s more than that! Marijić was right when she brought up the holographic universe concept,” Garcia said. “We’re in the Matrix.”

“Tam, lots of folks, great scientists, have explored that concept as a metaphor for explaining some odd features of the quantum mechanics that underlie our reality, but that’s all it has ever been, metaphor,” Rossi said. “As Einstein pointed out, reality may be an illusion, but it is persistent.”

“We have participated in a time loop,” Garcia said.

“Yes, Tam, I was there. We created a time loop to prevent a time loop,” Rossi said.

Garcia sat back down and leaned back. “I am exhausted,” he said. “And I am going to make a command decisions. I am going to give Soran access to a G-Device.”

“I think that’s a discussion that needs to happen with your Captains present,” Rossi said.

“No, I want them out of the loop on this one,” Garcia said.

“He’s a rogue agent given to us by Pressman,” Rossi said. “You can’t trust him.”

“Of course I can’t,” Garcia said. “And I am going to use that. If he helps us stop the destruction of the timeline, we gain. If he goes rogues and does something bad, I will use that to burn Pressman. Either way, our gain.”

“You do understand, the core principle of being Star Fleet is that if we have to sacrifice our principles in order to survive, then we have already lost,” Rossi said.

“We’re already in that end game!” Garcia said.

“Oh, I thought you wanted my opinion,” Rossi said

“I do,” Garcia said. “I am talking to you.”

“You’re talking to me or at me,” Rossi asked.

“I am telling you what I am going to do,” Garcia said.

“Why even tell me this? If this blows up in your face, and it most likely will, when there is an investigation and they ask me, I will tell them we had this conversation, that this was a calculated ploy on your part,” Rossi said. “There are limits to confidentiality in this office.”

“And that is why I am telling you,” Garcia said. “You always speak your truth.”



Niki found Tama Orleans in her usual hiding spot, the observation dome on the bottom of the saucer section. With no nearby objects and the ship’s running light minimized, the back ground of stars was absolutely brilliant. Tama was aware of her company, but

continued in her present task of drawing on a jumbo-PADD, a design generally used by artists. She had a variety of stylus available to her, but she generally used her fingers. She had a regular PADD on the floor next to her, displaying text. With a pull of her fingers she could zoom in, fill in details, and zoom back out. Niki pulled up next to her and marveled at the photo. It revealed a saucer section of a ship resting in a pedestal that was resembled Stonehenge.

“Wow,” Niki said. “That’s pretty good.”

Tama shrugged, indifferent.

“I think the saucer section has extendable landing gear, though,” Niki said.

“According to the text, the gear was stuck in the up position,” Tama said, filling in another details, moving the orientation around to verify a 3 dimensional continuity. “Had they sat down without the gear, it would have never flown again, so they beamed stone from 500 kilometers away and positioned it under the ship until they could repair the underlying engineering issue. It’s fairly technical and I couldn’t follow most of it. All I gathered is it broke and they had to kill all power and reboot.”

“It looks like Stonehenge,” Niki said.

Tama looked up. “I should hope so. This is from one of Garcia’s alternate histories, offering an explanation for Stonehenge and the King Arthur stories. The ship is the USS Camelot.”

“No way,” Niki said, picking up the PADD next to her. She scrolled to the top of the text. “Shining City on a Hill, by Jeremy Vale, Garcia’s childhood pen name. Wow. I thought I read everything by him. How did I miss it?”

“It’s rated adult,” Tama said, spelling it out for her.

“Really?!” Niki asked.

“I found a passcode which allowed me access to hidden files,” Tama said.

“Really?! You got past the filters?” Niki asked.

“You’re not going to tell on me, are you?” Tama asked, a little fearful and a little angry.

“No. I want to read this and any others you may have found,” Niki said. “Why is adult rated? Graphic violence? Profanity?”

“Pornographic material,” Tama said. She pushed her hair out of her eyes. “I quit reading when I got to the love scene between Tam’s character and Guinevere.”

“REALLY?!” Niki said, instructing the PADD to search ‘Guinevere.’ A side panel opened with a listing of the chosen word in order of its usage in the text.

Tama interrupted her curiosity. “Gross, don’t read that here next to me,” she said. “It’s bad enough you’re clearly in love with my dad, but to force me to witness you salivating is just not right.”

“I thought Deltans were highly sexualized and open minded people,” Niki said.

“Everywhere I go, ‘your part Deltan, you must know about sex,’” Tama said, sarcastically. “Just because I lived in a society that has no apparent boundaries doesn’t mean I participated. And I hate knowing my father’s a freak and, based on that text, I would say he’s been a freak since at least six years old! Reading this is like finding his first diary and discovering he wrote about all his sexual conquests. It’s disgusting.”

“I would no doubt feel the same if I found my parents writing about their intimacy, but this is fiction,” Niki said.

“Please, it’s my dad fulfilling his fantasies through his writings,” Tama argued.

“But isn’t that all fiction? We are all ultimately sexual beings. But it sounds like not only are you not curious, you hold the subject of sex in contempt,” Niki pointed out.

“Deltans are inherently telepathic, typically physical touch induced telepathy, but sometimes you can pick up projections without touching, and, it just gets old, that’s all they ever think of,” Tama complained.

“That can’t be the only thing they think of. They’re supposed to be better at math and physics, basically much smarter than humans,” Niki said.

“So, you’re calling me stupid?” Tama Orleans asked.

“No,” Niki said, wondering where that came from.

“So what’s your point?” Tama snapped.

“That they think about more things than sex, but that’s the part that really seems to bother you,” Niki said. “Have you been forced against your will to participate?”

“No!” Tama said, angry. “I’m not included in any dialogue at all. I’m an outcast, cause I’m not fully Deltan, but I’m not anything else, either!”

“Oh,” Niki said. She thought about it further. “That actually makes sense. Do you think maybe because you don’t receive telepathic invitations they think you’re ignoring overtures or request, or maybe they hold back for fear of overwhelming you?”

“Why are we discussing this? Are you Deltan curious?” Niki said.

“Well, sure, I’m curious,” Niki said. “It’s reported that a Deltan can take away pain with a single touch. Not cure, but no pain is cool. I’ve also heard humans who have sex with a Deltan are never satisfied with partners from the same species again, and that sex with Deltans can even drive humans insane. Garcia’s not insane, but I wonder if his number of partners is because he was intimate with a Deltan and he’s been chasing that high ever since...”

Tama eyebrows narrowed, almost searing Niki’s eyes out. “Why can’t you understand that I’m embarrassed at my father’s behavior? Nothing justifies or explains his promiscuity, but you could care less about my feelings because all you can think of is Tam! Oh, Tam is so talented. Oh, Tam is so smart. Oh, Tam is so athletic. Tam Tam Tam! Ugh! You’re so obsessed I’m surprised you didn’t ask him to marry you, too.”

“I’m sorry,” Niki said.

“For what? Loving my dad? Entertaining inappropriate thoughts about him? Wanting to read filth?” Tama asked.

“I was trying to communicate that I can’t imagine what it’s like for you,” Niki said. “That I don’t understand, but that I truly want to.”

“Ask Rossi. She seems to know everything,” Tama said.

“She offered an explanation for your feelings? She only ever asks me more questions, no input,” Niki said, a little surprised.

“Umph, she must tailor session based on her perceived idea of the client’s need,” Tama said, a new wave of fury causing her to make fists. “My anger and disgust is probably derived from my mother unconsciously transmitting her feelings of unrequited love towards Tam, compounded by the physical and emotional abuse of my stepfather, plus my perceived abandonment of my biological father, and whatever other ‘isms’ you might like to add,” Tama said.

“What do you think?” Niki asked.

“If she’s right, then there are going to be a lot of babies with similar issues because no matter how good your math, Garcia clearly can’t spend quality time with all of us,” Tama said.

“You’re jealous?” Niki asked.

“How dare you?!”

“Sorry, it’s just a question. I would think more family is good. I’ve read stories of people from big families and they tend to be better adjusted than the families that had one child,” Niki offered. “People tend to learn to share faster when in big families. I would love having siblings.”

“Yeah. Big families are great. Except for the big families where the family wasn’t well adjusted. I’m sure you can find stories about that, too,” Tama said. “Meanwhile, my father’s running all over the entire galaxy making more kids like me. Kids without a father. Who needs a father that doesn’t give a damn whether they live or die because he’s just a selfish sperm donor?!”

“I think you’re seeing it wrong,” Niki said.

“Or, more likely, you’re so biased in Tam’s favor that you will never understand my position,” Tama said. “No one understands me.”

“Maybe so,” Niki said, agreeing that she didn’t understand. “Help me understand. What do you think about Rossi’s explanation?”

“You’re not my counselor,” Tama said.

“I’m a friend,” Niki offered.

“Proximity based friendship is more a coerced acquaintance than genuine companionship,” Tama said.

Niki frowned. “I’m sad that you feel this way.”

Tama shrugged.

“Are you saying you don’t want to be friends?” Niki asked.

“I came here to be alone, what do you think?” Tama asked.

“I don’t think you want to be alone,” Niki said.

“Really? I came here alone. I’m clearly engaged in an activity that doesn’t require help or interruption. How much more of a hint do you need?” Tama asked.

“Okay,” Niki said, getting up. “May I take the PADD?”

“Go ahead. Just don’t let anyone know I opened those files,” Tama said.

“Is this a test, to see if I’m really a friend?” Niki asked.

“Maybe,” Tama said.

Niki nodded. “Okay,” she said. She opened the hatch leading back into the ship. “Tama Orleans, I do want to spend time with you. Would you let me know when you feel up to some company?”

Tama returned her focus to her drawing, ignoring the question. Niki took the PADD and departed. As soon as she was gone, Tama minimized the drawing and returned to the program running in the background, various computational codes scrolling next to ship schematics displaying the Path Finder.

“I’m sorry it to so long,” Tama said.

The voice of Kelinda was in her head. “You should have been more direct in dismissing her. I told she would take the book and leave.”

“Don’t you think a minimal dialogue was necessary to keep her from suspecting something was wrong and reporting this to Rossi or father?” Tama asked.

“I believe you’re too stupid and naïve to know what’s best, much less how to read people,” Kelinda said. “And you are too slow and clumsy. Give me control of your hands.”

Tama sulked, tears streaming, making fists.

“Look,” Kelinda said, trying a new tactic. “I know you are hurting now, but until I can see you in person and correct the genetic flaws that they have failed to fix, you will continue to be a pathetic loser. Give me control, and after I fix you, not only will you be more physically capable, you will be ten times smarter and faster than your father. You think everyone loves your dad now, wait till they see the new and improved you. You are going to be such a shining star.”

Tama closed her eyes and surrendered to the hope of being better. Her clenched fists opened and she watched them navigate through programming field as if watching alien hands.

“That’s my granddaughter,” Kelinda sang.



McKnight set Midnight Runner down on the roof of a hospital. There were several zombies on the roof top, but far less than what was roaming on the grounds around the hospital. She extended the shields, pushing the zombies far enough back to allow Brel and Skar to exit the shuttle. When they were in place, McKnight turned off the shields, and they utilized their bat’leth’s to dispatch the zombie. After wards, they proceeded to secure the rooftop.

“Why would Sha ka ree release this virus?” Carter asked.

“Control,” Owens said.

Micceal grunted approval. “It would distract or eliminate the population, giving him time to accomplish goals unhindered,” Micceal said.

“What could stop a god?” Carter asked.

“Tech,” Boris said, suddenly inspired. “He needs tech and tech needs power. We turn off his power, we decrease his ability to affect the world. Assume he needs a minimum operating system, bigger than a tricorder. Did we bring any hard copies of maps and schematics of Colony One?”

McKnight handed him a map container.

Brel stuck his head in the shuttle. “Roof is clear. Micceal, Skar and I will go clear the next level. Stay here till we get back.”

“Shouldn’t we all stay together?” Owens asked.

“No, you should stay here till we get back,” Brel said.

“And if you don’t come back?” Carter asked.

“We’ll come back. If not, stay put till tomorrow morning and do what you think is best,” Brel said.

Micceal exited the shuttle and Brel shut the door.

“So,” Boris continued, looking at one of the laminated copies he had unrolled.

“What I’m thinking is we need to take out the power to Building One. Not only will that kill the power to the emitter, it will take out most of the computer networks there by decreasing Sha ka ri’s hold.”

“Most of this world is powered by solar. We’re not going to take out enough panels to make a dent in the supply,” Owens argued. He was also thinking if they used

solar-paint, a type of solar power that you just painted onto your house and attached a lead, then taking out the batteries and emitter was compulsory.

“Let’s focus on taking out the emitter,” Boris said.

“When I met Apollo, he had technology that helped him manifest his powers,” McCoy said. “I would imagine there is Preserver tech on the planet, disguised in the form of ancient masonry.”

The door to the shuttle opened.

“Come with me, now,” Brel said.

McKnight, the last one out of the shuttle, took time to secure the door. She didn’t want to rush back only to find a zombie hiding in her seat. They followed Brel down the stair well and into the hall where they found a group of people waiting. One of the waiting, a lady who appeared to be about forty five, brunette, approached McCoy, slow at first but then full speed. She hugged him like a long lost family member.

She laughed and cried. McCoy pulled back enough to gaze in her face, pushing her hair back out of her eyes. “Miri?” he asked.

“You remember me?” she asked. “After all this time?”

“I will never forget you,” McCoy said, marveling at her appearance. “You’ve hardly aged at all.”

“Neither have you! Is your lack of aging because you visited my planet?” Miri asked.

“Oh, no. That’s another story for another time,” McCoy said.

“I’ve got time,” Miri said.

“I need the most recent maps of the terrain going to building one,” Boris interrupted.

“You want to cut power to tower one,” Miri said.

Owens was surprised. “Have you tried?” he asked.

“Survivors from the Oriskany have been making attempts, but the zombies are densest around that building. It’s some sort of mecca to them,” Miri said.

“I don’t approve of the analogy,” McKnight said.

“I don’t understand,” Boris said.

“I don’t think she’s implying Zombies and Muslims are equivalent,” Carter said.

“No,” Miri said. “Why would you think that?”

“They don’t know,” McCoy said.

“Know what?” Boris said.

“On this world, the major three religions, Judaism, Islam, and Christians were united,” McCoy said.

“Seriously?” Bowen asked.

“Why not? Didn’t Apollo feed off the energy of human’s adoration?” Carter asked. “If this god is the same as Apollo, he would want people in agreement not fighting.”

“This god seems more like the fighting type,” Brel said.

McCoy nodded. “That’s likely. Apollo wanted us to worship him and in return he would have met our physical needs. This one is more adversarial. We’ve categorized a number of species that feed off of emotional energy. One specific one that I personally encountered fed off hate, and would encourage fights, then heal the injuries just to keep us fighting.”

“Then, maybe my society united their religious idealities in order to combat the true enemy,” Miri said.

“If only everyone could make that leap,” McCoy said.

“I think it’s called a parasite,” McKnight said, and then an afterthought, jested: “It would suck if the dead are part of the ‘system’ that allows him to manifest.”

“Marching around in circles isn’t really worshiping, is it?” Carter asked.

“He is hijacking brains for more processing power.” McCoy said, realizing McKnight was onto something. When he returned to the present moment, he was ready for work. “I need access to a medical computer.”

“I can show you where one is, but there’s no power to the hospital,” Miri said.

“There’s a portable power plant in the shuttle,” McKnight said.

Brel interrupted. “First, things first. We need transportation that isn’t automated.”

“There’s a parking garage across the street, I’m sure you can find something,”

Miri said.

“Great. Koslov and Micceal go get our explosives. Carter, McKnight, you chaperone McCoy,” Brel said. “The rest, you’re with me in securing a vehicle.”

“Skar was assigned to guard McCoy,” McKnight said.

“I’ll need him to get to Building One,” Brel said.

“You’re not leaving me out of a fight because I’m female are you?” McKnight said.

“You need all of us,” Carter said.

“This has nothing to do with you being female. We’re not leaving McCoy unprotected,” Brel argued. He didn’t feel it necessary to say he was not taking both of Niki’s parents on what might very well be a suicide run.

“Do I get a say in this? I am old enough to care for myself and I outrank all of you,” McCoy said.

“This is not negotiable. I’m the Commanding Officer and I’ve made my decision,” Brel said.

“He’s right, Nancy. Your chances of getting off this planet are better here, and Niki needs one of us to survive,” Boris said.

Carter knew he was right. And McKnight was the only one who could fly the shuttle.

“Maybe you should all stay here until I have a better grasp at what we’re up against,” McCoy said.

“Our job is to take out the subspace emitter so that the NC can approach the planet. We do that, and you’ll have access to all the medical support you need to solve this,” Bri said.

“Alright, then,” McKnight said. “We’ll stay and hold the fort, y’all go and have some fun, but come back alive. I’ll go get that power plant for you, Admiral.”

CHAPTER 12

Piloting a shuttle without computers is difficult, but not impossible. For the first part of the journey, he used a self-contained, and isolated GPS which enabled Bri to get close enough to the planet to steer by sight. The GPS actually lasted longer than that, but once he had the planet in his eyes, he ignored the recommendations from the AI and maneuvered on his own. He was nowhere as skilled as McKnight, but then, he wasn't having to land on the planet, much less land at a particular set of coordinates, blind. He just needed to reach orbit, and he was confident he could hit a target the size of a planet. He was in orbit when he noticed the face of a false god on the GPS module, calling to him. He turned it off. Once in orbit, it didn't take even one orbit to find an object the size of a starship. All of this took a lot of fuel, as he would speed up and slow down, a lot, and there was some initial risk when approaching the planet that he would have been coming in too fast and wouldn't be able to slow enough to maintain an orbit, but for docking with the ship, the accelerations and decelerations were much smaller. Docking the shuttle against the Oriskany was softer than colliding cars on a freeway, but hard enough had the computers been recording he would have been relieved of duty until an investigation had been conducted over potential negligence, and all sort of alarms would have sounded. The fact that the shuttle maintained its atmosphere convinced him he had docked with-in tolerance. 'Tolerance' in Starfleet terms was a bigger continuum in reality than in practice.

Still, Bri touched his life belt to ensure it was working. It was. He proceeded to open the shuttle's door, revealing the outer airlock door to the Oriskany. The recessed panel did not open on touching it, not unexpected, and so a tool popped it right off. He was not concerned that he broke it. It was cosmetic. The ship would be alright. He tossed the piece behind him and studied the inner panel. He sorted through his open tool box for an appropriate tool, couldn't find one, and then simply used two tools in a manner that completely broke the inner panel enough that he could get past the 'pretty' mechanism to the inner components. He removed a chip and inserted a special tool that would energize the circuit. Nothing happened. He ran through the scenario in his head, direct power should have opened the door, unless he had somehow broken the circuit, or it had been fused, or he was on the wrong circuit. He decided to do it the hard way. If you go deep enough, you eventually get to a mechanical thing, and then it's just a matter of moving mechanical things, like disengaging the lock, and then turning a gear, which turned other gears, and with some time and sweat, as it's really difficult working through a small hole, even with the correct tools, but he opened the outer door sufficiently that he could move all his tools inside the airlock. There was no gravity inside the airlock, which sucked, because he didn't want to have to secure all his tools, but he did, which took more time. The boxes, and his boots, stuck just fine to the floor. He aimed a flare gun at the ceiling and fired. A 'sticky flare' attached itself to the ceiling and gave off an orange glow, emitting a spectrum that optimized Klingon vision. Once his campsite was transferred into the airlock, he closed the door to his shuttle. He then broke the inside panel to the outer door to get at the same set of gears so he could close the door. He then spent time on the inner door, using the same procedure, got it opened, moved his boxes further into the ship, then worked on closing the door.

When the inner door opened, his life belt activated. There was sufficient air to breathe, but it was much too cold and the force field helped preserve his body temperature. The corridor was outlined with glow in the dark material, enough to navigate once his eyes adjusted. He had no intentions of waiting that long. He fired a flare down the corridor. The illuminated, orange sticky ball lit up the corridor in sections as it flew down the center, finally hitting a wall as the corridor turned. He proceeded down the corridor towards engineering, carrying his tools. He lit up several walls on the way. The door to engineering opened without him having to tear up the whole mechanism and inside were all the tools and equipment he would need. A portable generator was secured, the wireless receiver transmitter was removed, and then he exposed a portion of the floor and ran a cable directly from the generator to the artificial gravity plating. A light came on under the floor board. It took a moment for the entire mechanism to reach capacity, but when it did, there was gravity. There was a tremendous crashing sound nearby.

Bri went to investigate. The sound could only have come from the room next door. Using his tool, he opened the door and found a swimming pool, the water agitated, the floor, the ceiling, and the walls were wet. He fired a flare and it lodged on the ceiling, but it came with a fuss as it evaporated water. He was drawn to a table. Upon the table was a scale model of an open temple, with a gateway, very much like the gateways Bri had become familiar with since working with Garcia. There were other pieces that seemed to contribute to an open air temple. The ground around the temple seemed to be mud, and there was a bit of coral. There were pictures on the wall, and map of an underwater area, and then he understood. Humans and dolphins were collaborating, and dolphins think in three dimensions and so the table was their work area. This was clearly the Preserver site they were studying. He studied the picture, and realized the Oriskany crew had used the dolphins to put down fore field emitters and cleared out a section of water surrounding a majority of the underwater site so that humans could work.

Bri knew the Captain would want this information, but he decided he would get life support minimally functioning so that when he brought back help, they would be more comfortable.



Soran arrived at the holodeck and found Garcia waiting for him. Garcia introduced him to a Gateway, and took him through to the other side, and then introduced him to Club Bliss. From the private quarters down to the bar proper, without so much as a word. On seeing Garcia, staff quickly spread the word that Garcia was there, and his primary table was immediately cleared of present patrons. Garcia sat with his back to the wall, and Soran took the opposite side of the table. The booth chair wrapped around the entire corner, following two walls. The table was softly illuminated. Patrons of the bar looked on, trying to figure out who the celebrity was. Those who recognized him quickly found other things to do, like drink their drinks, and move further away. Music played, dancers danced in cages and illuminated alcoves cut directly into the rock. A hologram, center of their table, showcased one of the dancer, but any of the dancers could have been made prominent.

“Is this a test? Are we still on the holodeck?” Soran asked.

“We’re off the grid,” Garcia said.

The staff were still falling over themselves to serve him. Brock was not on duty at the bar. Clio was also off duty. A waitress name Umeka introduced herself, assigning her bracelet to the table so they could page her whenever they needed her. He asked for a bottle of Saurian brandy and four glasses.

“Oh, would you like company?” Umeka asked.

“Company should be arriving shortly,” Garcia said.

“Do you want me to fetch Brock?” Umeka said.

“No, we’re good,” Garcia said.

Umeka departed to fulfil the requests. Soran leaned back.

“Come here often?” Soran asked, trying to be funny.

“I thought you knew I owned this place,” Garcia said.

“Yeah, well, quite frankly, I don’t believe all the rumors,” Soran said. “Why have you brought me here?”

“Because I also don’t believe all the rumors,” Garcia said.

Umeka was back with the bottle and four glasses. She could see that this was business and retreated, indicating her call bracelet should they need.

“I had a long talk with Rossi after our meeting,” Garcia said. “Mostly sorting out my fears that you’re not here to help us. I don’t trust Pressman. I don’t know if I should trust you, but I have this huge dilemma. I know that I or the gods or both are going to make the Romulus star go nova. I want to stop that. One of the person I love most in the Universe is Guinan. She’s like that loving grandmother I never had. You, are also, El-Aurian. Tell me I can trust you.”

Soran leaned forwards, elbows on the table, leaning a fist to his mouth, as if deliberating what he was going to say. “I can’t make you trust me. My world was destroyed by the Borg. I am not some vengeance hungry, martyr going around preaching the end of your Federation, and saying you have to arm and take the fight to them. I am advocating for superior weaponry, because I know, beyond a shadow of doubt, you are not finished with the Borg. I am not in this for your war with the gods. I am not in this because I am a Pressman fan. I am in this because I don’t want to see another civilization fall to them.”

Garcia broke open the bottle and poured two glasses of brandy. He pushed one to Soran. “Very well. The El-Aurian know this galaxy pretty well. I need you to find me a star, an isolated star, with no life in it, and I want you to detonate a G-device, causing the star to go nova, and then inject some red matter into it, and tell me this will work.”

“It won’t stop the inevitability that without their star, Romulus is dead,” Soran said.

“I know that,” Garcia said. “But if it makes the difference between their world being burnt up in an instant or just snuffing out their star so that they have time to evacuate their whole population, then I prefer the latter. And I need to know this will work. So, I am going to give you a G-device. I am going to give you a container of red matter. I want you to show me this is a viable option for minimizing the number of lives lost. But what I am asking you to do, you’re going to have to do it under the radar. If there is any hint that another G-device has been deployed, I am going to tell them you went rogue and use you as a way to bring down Pressman.”

Two female Klingons arrived at the table, their entourage holding back as they each slid into either side of the booth. B'Etor scooted in next to Garcia, while Lursa went opposite. Lursa did not give Soran the same attention that B'Etor was giving Garcia.

"I told my sister you would be begging us for help before too long," B'Etor said.

"I never intended to cut you out of the loop," Garcia said. "I was simply securing my station and increasing my access to wealth."

"Yes," Lursa said, not too convinced. "You're a very clever human." She rubbed her belly. "We love you. But, you are too much of a trickster."

"I want what my sister has," B'Etor said. "I bet there is a suite available here, if you would like to play."

"Yeah, let's focus on business," Garcia said. "I would like to hire your ship."

Lursa laughed. B'Etor hands went low as she purred into his neck. "That will definitely cost you," B'Etor said.

"Name your price," Garcia said.

"You're serious?" Lursa asked. "You expect us to just jump because you call."

"I called, you came," Garcia said.

"We did," B'Etor said. "More than once."

"Which is always fun, but we want more than that this time," Lursa said.

"Look, things are changing. You can either be with me on this and come out the other side on top, or I can recruit someone else," Garcia said. "I know you. I don't trust you. But I like that you're both consistent, and that I can work with."

"What do you want us to do?" Lursa asked.

"Soran works for me. He has a private mission that needs to be accomplished off the radar. No Empire. No Federation. Just a quiet little mission to test a weapon system," Garcia said.

"Very well," Lursa said. "You know our going rates. We're doubling them."

"Okay," Garcia said.

"And, you need to spend an hour with me in a suite," B'Etor said.

"Okay," Garcia said.

"Seriously?" Soran said.

"You didn't think the whole bottle was for you, did you?" Garcia asked, refilling his glass. "Go with Lursa. I will have your items delivered to you within the hour."

"Thank you," Soran said.

"Come with me," B'Etor said, dragging Garcia out of the booth.

Garcia went, taking the brandy bottle with him, giving Soran a look that suggested 'don't make me regret this.'

He was led eagerly away to one of the special gaming suites.

"I don't know what his true mission is, but he is seriously devoted," Lursa commented.

"Yes," Soran said. "We all do what we have to in order to advance our cause."

"Come along," Lursa said getting up. "Don't expect the accommodations you are accustomed to in Fleet."

"I will manage," Soran said.

"We'll see," Lursa said.



The hum of the portable generator was noticeable in the confined space of the medical lab. One instrument, an electron microscope, was active. There were a variety of human tissue cells in the sample, easily identified by McCoy. The virus was visible, drifting like a snowflake in water. There were others in the background, coming and going, but he had managed to lock onto this one and magnify. The virus defied everything he knew about viruses. It defied physics. At one point, while chasing a sample, he was sure that the virus passed down through the surface of the table.

He pushed away from the instrument and went to the room next door, where McKnight, Carter, and the survivors were gathered. Carter was looking down out the window, watching for signs of Zombies. Miri had told them that they were close enough to downtown that anyone that turned would orientate and head to Building One. That didn't mean they wouldn't stop to feed if you were close enough in proximity, but outside of their senses, they were simply determined to get to down-town. Carter was making a Garcia joke, singing a bit of a Petula Clark song. None of her group got it and she muttered she was probably hanging out with her daughter too much.

"You okay?" McKnight asked.

"You look like you've seen a ghost," Miri said.

"Maybe," McCoy said. He looked to McKnight. "I need to test a theory, but the only way to do it is to get off planet."

"You're leaving us?" one of the teen agers in the group asked.

"Honey, McCoy would never leave us," Miri said. "We'd all go."

"No, you'd have to wait here," McCoy said. "It's not enough to just leave orbit. I need a medical computer to prove my suspicion. The nearest one will be on the Oriskany, and I don't know the conditions up there."

"The shuttle bay doors were closed," McKnight said. "And there is no power to the ship. Also, our shuttle isn't equipped for external dock."

"Can you get me on that ship, or not?" McCoy asked.

"Oh, I can get you on," McKnight said. "If you're okay wearing an emergency life belt."

"Can't stand them, but that would give us what, an hour's worth of air," McCoy said.

"They will provide us enough time get on and secure other life support options," McKnight said.



Brel's team had recovered a 1930's Chevy truck with a wood gate. It was stopped near a park. Three were in the cab, everyone else was in back, including six newcomers, survivors of the Oriskany.

"This can't be right," Miccael said, his mouth pincher flexing with the stress of driving an antiquated vehicle. "We're lost."

"We're not lost," Owens said.

"Do you know where we are, or not?" Brel asked.

"Yes!" Owens said. "Sort of. This is not a GPS, you know."

"Give me the map," Brel demanded.

"Do you hear that?" Miccael asked.

“I don’t hear anything,” Brel said, taking the map and turning it upside down. Owens tried to help him and he pushed his hands out of the way.

Miccael turned the truck off.

“Seriously?” Owens said. “You know how hard it was to get this started?”

Miccael held up a finger, asking for silence. He got out of the vehicle, ignoring the person in the back who was asking if everything was alright. Brel handed the map back to Owens, got out of the vehicle and accompanied Miccael up the hill. Owens scooted over awkwardly, got out and followed. Folks in the back of the truck also got out, spreading out in a reasonable defense posture, looking for threats. Owens reached the top of the hill and his first thought was to say, “I told you we weren’t lost.” His comment was lost in the sheer horror of what he saw. Tower One was visible. There was a mass of zombies walking around the building, all in a counter clockwise fashion. Oriskany crewmember, John Gaffney joined them on the top of the hill.

“Hundred thousand?” Miccael asked.

“At least,” Brel said.

It was difficult, but not impossible to discern Fleet uniforms in the mix of civilians. Though there was Fleet on the planet, it was impossible not to recognize the Oriskany uniforms in the mix: many of their crew had joined the march of Zombies.

“This is impossible,” Owens said.

“We have ten phasers,” Brel said. “Highest setting, dispersal, we can clear a path straight to the front door.”

“It won’t be enough,” Owens said.

“It will be enough,” Brel said. “We will get you, two others, and the explosives to the front door.”



Garcia was paged to the NC, where he found Undine waiting for him. She was smiling, broadly as if she had discovered a great secret. Her smile shifted to concern when she noticed the bruise on his neck.

“What happened?” Undine asked, peeling the mandarin collar back to discover just how far it went.

“Don’t ask,” Garcia said.

“Kitara?” Undine asked.

“Klingon inflicted,” Garcia confirmed.

“Okay, so we’ll leave it at that. Thanks for coming so quickly,” Undine said.

Garcia closed his eyes, trying not to see the humor in that, and couldn’t leave it.

“Not quick enough. What’s up?” Garcia asked.

“I have a surprise for you,” Undine said.

Garcia was a bit skeptical. “I don’t like surprises,” he said.

“Oh, you might like this one,” Undine said. She closed the Gateway that had brought Garcia to the NC and reopened it to an undisclosed destination. She took his hand and led him through the Gateway.

They arrived at their destination, which was unmistakably a Star Fleet shuttle bay. Based on the temperature, and the smell of the air, the life support systems were only

recently activated, or reactivated. He nearly track the statistic on how quickly things can go bad when life support fails.

“You got me a Starship?” Garcia asked.

“Slightly used. It’s missing the Captain’s yacht and all the life pods,” Undine said. “Most of the computers have been wiped clean, but I’ve restored minimal power and can give you warp 1 for ten minutes, if you don’t mind going in a straight line.”

“No way!” Garcia said, like a child at Christmas. The writing on the wall spelled it out for him. “The Oriskany?!”

“Pressman wanted me to scuttle it,” Undine said.

“Tell me you told him to shove it,” Garcia said.

“Essentially,” Undine said.

“Good for you,” Garcia said. Then he reflected. “Still, what he doesn’t know...”

“I’ve recorded a simulation on the holodeck which should help Pressman believe that I followed through with his directive to destroy the Oriskany,” Undine said. “It’s probably not as good as a Garcia hologram, but, it’ll pass.”

“That’s why I promoted you!” Garcia said. A gray passed by. “How many?”

“Okuda, sent twelve to assist in repairs,” Undine said. “Come with me.”

Garcia went with her as she led him straight way to the torpedo bay. The door had to be opened ‘manually,’ which meant pushing a button which opened the circuit. All sensors were off line. The moment they were inside and the door was closed, Undine proceeded to kiss Garcia. He slowed her down.

“You wanted me to see the torpedo room so we could make out?” Garcia asked.

“Is that a problem?” Undine asked.

“Aren’t we like in a crisis mode?” Garcia asked.

“We don’t have five minutes?” Undine asked.

“Good point,” Garcia said, and kissed her back. Then stopped. “The ship is practically empty, we could do this anywhere.”

“I have a fantasy,” Undine said, and nodded to the torpedo launch tube.

Garcia considered the equation. “Okay,” he said.

They resumed their play, escalating, helping each other undress in a mad, urgent rush, as if there were a time limit to their play, or as if they were teenagers at risk of being caught by parents that could come home any moment. The only lights in the torpedo tube came from glow strips, which enable crew to work in total black out situations. The end of the torpedo tube was open, which was impressive in that you could see stars, but also affirmed the life support shields were functioning. It was actually a good sign know that all systems had access to power, even if they all weren’t working. Specific containment fields were designed to go up if all computers were down. Another good sign.

The floor of the torpedo tube was cold. Not freezing, but damn close, but Undine insisted they play on. The next problem was logistics. Between Undine’s belly, Garcia’s twin pack, and the confined space, missionary was vetoed, but not after giving it a go. Garcia’s belly back zapped him, and he bumped his head. Undine laughed. They awkwardly turned themselves together, and ended up in a spooning position. Undine pushed against her side of the tube, which pushed Garcia into his side of the tube, which was even colder than the floor, but arching away caused him to get shocked by the bag; the sound of his discomfort was lost in the total noise they were making. Undine made a

noise that was almost soft laughter when she arrived, but she didn't finish her grind until Garcia was equally relieved.

They lay there in a calmness, Garcia's arms around her. She turned back and kissed him. "Thank you."

"Thank you," Garcia echoed.

"What the devil?"

They awkwardly looked down to see McCoy in the torpedo tube, lifebelt activated, and a flashlight. Behind him, someone was asking what the hold up was.

Garcia and Undine scrambled to get out of the torpedo tube. Getting out of the tube was more awkward than getting in had been. Undine went first, basically tumbled out, and then helped Garcia. She then helped McCoy out, already having identified McKnight behind him by the sound of her voice. If McKnight had a comment, she contained much of it, but her eyes could not hide her amusement. Garcia was already dressing even as McKnight was finding her feet.

"Seriously, Tammas, how old are you?" McCoy said.

"Um," Garcia tried.

"Don't 'um' me," McCoy said. McCoy realized there was something on his hand and wiped it on his shirt. "We're in a crisis!"

"When are we not in a crisis?" Garcia asked.

"We don't have time for this," McCoy said.

"We don't have five minutes?" Garcia asked.

"Was it five minutes?" McKnight asked.

"Give or take," Undine said.

"Captain," McCoy said. "Tell me you didn't let him talk you into this."

"Please, in your history, you have never caught people in a situation on a ship, or treated someone for an injury from play in the wrong place, like cold burns on the back," Garcia said. "Surely Kirk..."

"Stop right there," McCoy said. He left his hand up in the stop gesture as he cleared his head. "I need a medical computer. Tell me you got one up and running."

"This way," Undine said.

McCoy followed her, passing Garcia with a grimace, but not full eye contact. Garcia found McKnight smiling unreasonably at him.

Chapter 13

As Bri and one of the Gray pieced together an independent computer system, McCoy activated a medical tricorder to determine if he could gather any intel before the device was cop-opted by the preserver god. As he scanned McKnight, he frowned, isolating the virus.

“Oh, that’s kind of cool,” Garcia said.

“It’s a deadly pathogen,” McCoy said.

“Yeah, but still kind of cool looking,” Garcia said. “It fluoresces…” He and McCoy said this last part at the same time: “Like a hologram.” “Oh!”

“Don’t do that,” McCoy said.

“It’s a holographic virus!” Garcia said, excited about the discovery.

“It turns people into zombies,” McKnight said.

“Oh, well, that’s not cool,” Garcia said.

“Really? I thought you would love a zombie apocalypse,” McKnight said.

“Oh, no, no, that’s a dead end game,” Garcia said. “I’ve not had one simulation scenario where it even modicum of existence was sustainable.”

“You brought a deadly pathogen up here?” Undine asked.

“I didn’t know anyone was up here,” McCoy said.

Garcia grimaced. “It was already up here,” he said, pointing at the distribution curve. “This is not attached to you or McKnight. It’s in the air.”

“The New Constitution,” Undine said, about to run back to the ship.

“Hold on a minute,” Garcia said, rubbing his eyes. “This is a holographic virus.”

“Its affects are still real enough,” McCoy said.

“Yeah, yeah, but it has to have a range,” Garcia said, he paced with his eyes closed, going around objects as if he had memorized the lay of the room. “Okay, Apollo grabbed the Enterprise with a hand. Why didn’t Mr. Sha Ka Ree do that?”

“He did do that…” McCoy said.

“Garcia,” Undine said. “You should see are other discovery.”

Bri led them to the Dolphin quarters and the scaled replica of the temple. Garcia was instantly absorbed into the pictures. McCoy pointed to an artifact on the table.

“That,” McCoy said, pointing at the monument before the temple. “Take that out, and no more holograms.”

“Phasers are off line,” Bri said. “But even if they were, without targeting, computers, and the fact you’d have to shoot through a hundred meters of ocean, and through a force field surrounding the temple…”

“Tam?” McCoy said.

“There’s a Preserver Cache here,” Garcia said.

“Yes,” McCoy said.

Garcia turned to McCoy. “You knew I was looking for these and you didn’t tell me,” he said.

“I had my orders,” McCoy said.

“Screw that! I could have prevented this,” Garcia snapped.

“Change your tone, son. I out rank you on many fronts,” McCoy snapped.

Garcia fumed.

“I have a question,” McKnight said. “If there is a Cache there, why hasn’t Sha Ka Re availed himself of the tech that’s there?”

“Maybe it’s empty,” Undine said.

“You have to have a manifestation orb to go there, through a series of tunnels and gates only an orb can navigate,” Garcia said. He frowned at McCoy. “You thought you would just beam in, didn’t you? You had them open the gateway thinking it would take them direct to the Cache.”

“I didn’t tell them to open the gate. I didn’t know anything about the gate,” McCoy said.

Garcia’s eyes flared, but he was so angry he didn’t notice that the expression on his team had changed to concern. He rubbed his eyes, trying to bring the anger down and brought his hands together, calming himself.

“Okay, so I need a modified shuttle,” Garcia said.

McKnight and Bri both reported having one. “Though I don’t think mine can handle another re-entry.”

“What are you thinking?” McCoy said.

“I am going to go turn off God’s holo-emitter,” Garcia said.

“You’re absolutely certifiable,” McCoy said. “Even if you landed directly above it, it’s a hundred meters below the ocean’s surface...”

“I can hit the target,” Garcia said.

“And if God shows up, then what?” McCoy said.

“I am going to make him an offer he can’t refuse,” Garcia said. “You will all need to be ready. If I fail, you’re going to have a very small window to rescue people and retreat.”

“Tam?” Undine asked.

“Don’t try to talk me out of this. This has to be done,” Garcia said.

“We know,” Undine said. “What do you need?”



Brel’s team were dividing up the demolitions to be carried from the truck when a horde of zombies came up over the rise. They orientated towards their group and their shuffling gate increased as they moved towards food. Brel and Micceal went right to work with swords. The others used the weapons they had acquired, saving phasers for the bigger job to come. Owens, probably the weakest fighter, was retreating while fighting the two zombies that had attached themselves to him, and when he stumbled, he fell over backwards. He thought for sure he was dead. The two zombies came at him even as he was scrambling backwards, and suddenly the two zombies turned, and walked away, heading towards Tower one. Owens scrambled back up and to test a theory went back and caught the attention of another zombie, and retreating again he confirmed there was an invisible threshold that once the zombie crossed, it turned and headed away.

“Fall back to me,” Owens yelled.

The team listened even as Owens engaged another zombie, leading it back. As they crossed the threshold, zombies aborted the fight in preference of a greater calling, the Tower. Brel dispatched several of them even as they fled. More zombies flowed around the truck, coming at the team, but then turned at the threshold.

“That’s fortuitous,” Micceal said.

“You’re thinking we’re just going to walk right up to Tower one?” Gaffney said.

“Not likely,” Brel said.

“Alright, well, let’s get the truck over here,” Owens said. “I’ll push.”

Another volunteered to push. Everyone else was on zombie duty. This went without being said. They went back into the stream of the horde, dispatching as they went. Once the truck was past the threshold, the zombies ignored them in favor of Tower duty. Still, Micceal kept ready to attack the first zombie that failed to answer the call.



The Little St. Nick pushed away from the Oriskany. Garcia was in the pilot seat, doing math in his head. Beside him was Duana, fully manifested in one of the Orbs. As usual, she was dressed in black.

“Synchronicity,” Duana said.

“Uh?” Garcia asked.

“We’re on a mission to deliver presents,” Duana said.

“What?” Garcia asked.

“You’re that distracted? Do I have to sing the song?” Duana asked. She ‘summoned’ a guitar, and suddenly she was holding a Martin D-28.

“Please don’t,” Garcia said. They had separated from the Oriskany and it was slipping slowly away. He was doing math, looking at the continent below. “We need to do a hard push in approximately 2 minutes, 31 seconds.”

Duana started playing. Garcia looked at her.

“Give it a second,” Duana said, starting over. She repeated again, getting it into sync with their needs.

Garcia flipped on a switch, and they were broadcasting live, old school, radio.

“I rode my bicycle past your window last night,” Duana sang.

Garcia nearly laughed, and relaxed into it as she continued to sing the old, Melanie song, even putting in a bit of Western twang. The Oriskany was now behind them, out of view. There was only the planet below, Earth in every way, provided that you had halted the technological progress at the 1930s, eliminated almost all the population, and slowly started over with a Federation colony with more benign, environmentally friendly tech. He made minor adjustments to position, tracking real world with the virtual world in his brain. Babies kicked with the song. He hated bringing them, but the truth was if he died at this time, they died, and so... He stopped himself from considering the most likely outcome. How many of his crew lived with this very existential threat everyday knowing if they died, so did their babies. Garcia reminded himself this was equity, not equality. He could have left the babies with McCoy, they would have suffered, but likely lived longer.

“I got a brand new pair of roller skates, you got a brand new key,” Duana arrived at the chorus and title of the song.

Garcia provided beat with nonsense words. Outside, the terminator line was approaching and they were heading into night. Stars began to appear. One of them might have been the New Constitution waiting to zip in. If they held their position for a day, they might even get to hear Garcia and Duana’s last song, an invisible light that was

blossoming in all directions, becoming its own faint star. At the conclusion of the song, precisely two minutes twenty eight seconds, Garcia fired thrusters. The shuttle began its decent. The trip down was fast, hurdling down through the atmosphere with their own flames. The guitar was gone and Duana reached out and took Garcia's hand.

"You know, you're never alone," Duana said.

Garcia gave her a reassuring smile. Ilona, Troi, and Lal were in his head, and if he allowed himself, he could go to them, visit them in a virtual space. A virtual space was not 'tech' per say, unless you consider the artifacts you create in your mind with thought to be a form of tech. It was an imagined space, but more substantive due to the amount of energy and time that went into constructing it, and it's continued use making it more and more real. It was an inner sanctuary, a modern, modular home on the side of a cliff on a world mostly of forests and oceans, because if you're going to go through the trouble of creating an inner space, it might as well be a big enough space to contain everything you love. There were islands, and some desert places, and winter wonderlands. In the home, in the living space, Ilona was in the library, but Lal was in the nursery. Two orbs of lights floating above a pedestal were the growing mental emanations of the twins he carried. The telepathic bond was inseparable, and so having a mental construct that allowed for them to exist without too much outer influence was necessary, and that was true of any adult mind, not just Garcia's adult mind. He had learned this the hard way, growing up connected to multiple people telepathically, adults doing adult things. The inner world was safe, a sunset in motion, Lal singing a sleep song to the babies.

In the real world, Miri's world, the Little St. Nick was splashing down into the ocean. At its angle of descent it was less splash and more 'ca-plunk.' Ca-plunk was a nice Klingon word that didn't mean what he was using it to mean. The shuttle speed dissipated greatly in the water, slowing the deeper it went. Had Garcia not blown the door and flooded the inner compartment, it would have definitely returned to the surface. The emergency lifebelt snapped on, allowing him to breathe. Duana didn't need one. Visibility in the water was good, but at 50 meters they lost most of their visibility as they continued to plunge into the darkness. At 115 meters they touched down on the ocean bottom. The window was almost black. A small light indicating an underwater archaeological site in the distance.

Garcia took up a pack pack with the explosives, enough weight that would allow him to walk on the bottom of the ocean. Duana followed. They came upon what appeared to be a light pole with and upside down bowl at the end of an arm. Garcia pushed off the surface and grabbed the bowl, pushing his head in, and Duana followed. There was air inside the bowl.

"What is this?" Duana asked. They could talk in the air. His life belt remained on.

"Dolphin scuba platform," Garcia said. So dolphins could work onsite without having to resurface as often. They simply pushed their bodies up into it making a seal, and breathed through their blow hole. "Star must be around here somewhere."

"They didn't hear crash?" Duana asked.

Garcia shrugged, but she couldn't see his shoulders. He disappeared underwater and she followed. They arrived at a giant bubble of air, its surface defined by the blue aura of a Star Fleet Force field. Passing in was as easy as crossing into a room. They came into the air, perfectly dry. His life belt shut off.

The temple was exposed, marked with crustaceans and corals that had built up into it. The artifact in the temple, the gateway had been swept clean with sand blasting. The equipment was still present. The monument that allowed Sha Ka Ri to manifest as a hologram, crush ships in orbit with a sweep of a hand, and make the virus was only partially exposed in the sand. Garcia took the explosives out of the back pack and placed the charges directly on top. They weren't the typical kind of explosive, but more like magnesium in water, they ignited, burning so hot that they would melt right through the artifact. He put a time on it, and implemented a dead man switch. If he died, it went. He had no clue if when the heating elements melted through the artifact it would simply cease working, or blow up. Kirk hit Apollo's manifestation monument with phasers from orbit, and it simply ceased to function. He wasn't even sure it would burn through.

Garcia went up the stairs to the gateway. There was a pedestal that held the coordinates back to Sha Ka Ri's prison planet. He opened the portal. Sha Ka Ree arrived almost immediately.

"You!" he said.

"Have we met?" Garcia asked.

"I know you!" Sha Ka Ree said. "You smell like them!"

"I assume you mean I smell like a human," Garcia said.

"Hybrid! Kelvan. Your kind disgust me," Sha Ka Ree said. He raised his hands and shot forth lightning.

Garcia was driven to his knees in sheer agony.

"Hold up," Duana said. "We came to negotiate."

"Give me a starship," Sha Ka Ree said. "And I will permit you to live."

"Or," Garcia said. "You can go back through the portal and I will give you a manifestation orb."

"You don't have one..."

Duana allowed herself to become transparent, all except the orb inside her. She returned to normal. The lightning attack against Garcia ended and he went completely limp to the ground.

"Kill Garcia, and you will lock this orb out, because he and I are telepathically linked," Duana said.

Sha Ka Ree did something with his hands and Garcia rose from the ground, being choked at the neck.

"Give me the orb or he dies now!" Sha Ka Ree said.

"Kill him, and I will drop this!" Duana said, revealing that she was holding a container of red matter.

Sha Ka Ree visibly paled. "Where did you get that?"

"Ahh, good, you know what it is," Duana said. "Put him down."

"It's not supposed to be in this universe," Sha Ka Ree said.

"If he dies, I will drop this, and this volatile tape guarantees this container will be shattered," Duana said. "The black hole falls through the earth, eating as it goes, and then, what 20, 30 minutes later, no more planet."

"You will not destroy this Earth," Sha Ka Ree said.

"Garcia has already destroyed several worlds to keep your kind from possessing them and I am one with Garcia," Duana said. "Would you survive the event horizon of a black hole? I am really curious."

Garcia was returned to his feet, but he was so winded, he went directly to his knees, then his hands.

“Surrender the manifestation orb,” Sha Ka Ree said.

Garcia staggered to his feet and joined Duana. He took the container of red matter from her. “I am willing to give you the orb, provided you go back to through the portal.”

“No!” Sha Ka Ree said.

“With a manifestation orb, you will enjoy sufficient enough corporality that you could build a ship capable of warp drive, and leave your confinement,” Garcia offered.

“By myself, it would take 150 million years,” Sha Ka Ree said.

“Yeah, well, consider it a very long game of Minecraft,” Garcia said. “At least you will have some hope of being relieved from confinement, and have some more control over your destiny.”

“Surrender the orb and I will go,” Sha Ka Ree said.

“Go and I will throw the orb through after you,” Garcia said.

“No,” Sha Ka Ree said.

Garcia held out his empty hand. Duana took it, kissed it, whispered ‘I love you,’ and then vanished, the orb landed in his hand. He waited just long enough that the fuses ignited and began their assault on the monument. Five hot spots flared into life so brilliant that it was impossible to look at. One disappeared through the center, the other lingered before dropping it. There was a trimmer through the ground. Sha Ka Ree roared and Garcia threw the manifestation orb through the portal. Sha Ka Ree descended on Garcia and picked him up by his shirt.

“Did you think I would fall for that trick?” Sha Ka Ree asked.

“I was rather hopeful,” Garcia said.

“Surrender the orb,” Sha Ka Ree said.

Garcia looked down at his empty hands. Sha Ka Ree followed Garcia’s gaze. On the ground was a broken container and a marble size hole in the ground where the drop of red matter had descended through the earth, falling even faster than one of the melting agents through the monument. As it fell, it would grow, devouring more and more of the earth, passing through the core, coming out the other side, and then falling back, most likely turning the planet into Swiss cheese before coming to a rest at the center. Either way, the clock was ticking on this earth.

Sha Ka Ree roared with fury, tossing Garcia and unleashing all of his lightening. Garcia fell back, his eyes flared, and he raised his hands. He blocked and returned lightening.

“So, you want to play god, too, do you!” Sha Ka Ree said.

Duana re-manifested herself. Her eyes were equally bright and she, too, unleashed a fury of lightening. Garcia and Duana together were driving Sha Ka Ree back towards the portal. The monument exploded. The force fields keeping out the oceans failed, fortunately not all at once, but fast enough it would have swept him away had he not been channeling a higher self. The dome pocket of air began to fill rapidly with water. The energy attacks continued. The water was well above his head, even above the temple when the other shields collapsed, making a horrendous noise under the water, and a small storm whipped away from the temple. Garcia’s belt failed. Duana ceased her attack to support him, holding him up, and her arms going about him.

Then everything seemed to stop. The portal was one source of illumination, the water fluorescing on the boundary, likely falling through with enough rate that there was a flow. Sha Ka Ree a holographic form was resistant to the flow, and he himself was a source of illumination. He was becoming less defined, more pixelated, suggesting he was using other resources to maintain his presence. He seemed confused, even angry, but it was difficult to make out as Garcia was still adjusting to the water directly in his eyes. There was evidence he was retreating back to the gate, but Garcia breathed ocean, and was quickly out of it. He did not lose consciousness, as he expected. He had done this before. He found himself looking up into Duana's face as she held him. There were dolphins arriving. And there was someone approaching, something indescribable, almost demonic, but almost appropriate for something oceanic, or other worldly. He was not able to commit to it being an insectoid, with an exoskeleton, or it was body armor that would cause even a Klingon to hesitate. There was an aura about it, and a heart of red, but it was all a bit blurry and he had other things to think of while he was dying.

Garcia felt strangely calm for someone who was dying.

The darkness around him became less dark, blue, green, then daylight. Dolphins surfaced, defining a circle around him. Transporter beams took hold and they were lifted.



Using the Kardashev scale, Federation is a type two civilization. The difficulty of arriving to this stage is that technology becomes so ubiquitous that any one citizen could hold in his hands weapons of mass destruction. It took too many wars before humanity had had enough of uncontrolled aggression that they finally agreed to higher form of civility, restraint. Most technology at this stage could be weaponized, even by kids. Just a single phaser in the wrong hands could take out a hundred thousand people. In the history of Star Fleet, only one man had ever demonstrated how effective phasers could be against an opponent on a battlefield. Captain Ronald Tracey, using only hand held phasers, took out over five hundred thousand yangs, 'hordes of them,' he described personally, descending upon him unendingly, and he was surprised by their tenacity, because no matter how many he killed, they just kept coming! And when his phasers were out, they took him. Captain Tracey example is still taught at the academy as example what Star Fleet doesn't want to be. Life, and therefore peace, is so precious that Fleet personnel must be willing to sacrifice their life to maintain that peace, if that is the only way out of a situation.

This was not this situation. This was weighed, and deemed necessary, and if it went to debate, there was likely to be people siding on the favor of zombies as a form of life, but that debate would come later.

A million zombies surrounded tower one. Using only phasers, Brel's team cleared a corridor straight to the Tower. They ran, carrying demolitions. The zombie horde closed in, but the phasers maintained the corridor. Whole swaths of zombies illuminated and disappeared in a vapping light, disintegrated. The doors were locked. Owens and a peer from the Oriskany immediately fell to either side of the door, trying to override the mechanisms.

The others held the space with phasers set to disintegrate, until there were no more phasers. Then they fought. One of them fell and was carried away, and his

demolitions went off. The resulting knocked everyone, including zombies, off their feet. Micceal and Brel were first back on their feet, killing zombies. But the horde one, from just sheer number.

The door to tower one opened just enough to slip Owens in.

The Oriskany crew member closed the door behind him and was overwhelmed.

Owens didn't see what happened to the man, just saw the remaining horde pushing up against the window. It took a moment to steal himself to go do his job. He turned to the inner doors and found a horde of zombies pressed in against the glass doors, scrambling to get at him. His heart sunk. There was no way to win. He was screwed. He began to weep. He went to his knees, crying at first, and then changed his mind.

"God, thank you for my life," Owens said. "Thank you for my ex-wife, for my daughter, for my career of service. Thank you for everything you have ever given me, even if I didn't recognize the gift. Forgive me for my failures."

While praying, he removed a charge and a detonator. He knew setting it off here would not destroy the tower. He armed the device. He flipped the cover guard up and off the trigger.

All the zombies, to a one, fell to the earth. Owens blinked. He waited a long moment before covering the trigger guard. He didn't see Micceal or Brel push up through a pile of zombies, wounded but alive. One Oriskany man rose from pile, badly wounded. Most of their injuries came from being trampled on. Owens nearly peed himself when he heard the knock behind him. The silence that fell was eerie, stranger than sound of a million shuffling dead bodies. None of them had anything to say. No comments. No inspiration. They simply planted their charges without further obstacles. An occasional noise would spook Owens, but they completed their task and retreated. A tremor rumbled beneath their feet. This preceded the Tower coming down. Transporter beams captured them and brought them up.

Chapter 14

Garcia awoke in Sickbay, New Constitution. He sat up. Duana was there, still present. He ignored Undine and Jurak her waiting for him to come full awake.

“You’re still active?” he asked Duana.

“Apparently, you didn’t lose full consciousness,” Jurak said. “You seemed to be in a trance. I have heard that there is Vulcan healing trance. Is that what you were doing?”

“I don’t know,” Garcia said. He wasn’t interested in himself enough to even sort it. “Report?”

Undine nodded. “Miri’s planet has been consumed by the artificial black whole, much quicker than we predicted. The change in center of mass has shifted all the orbits of the objects in this solar system. Within six months, Miri’s black hole will collide with the sun, and based on the observed consumption rates of the planet, the sun will be devoured in a week. The remaining planets will spiral into the enlarged black hole within the year, with the exception of Miri’s Pluto, which has a fifty eight percent likelihood of being expelled from the system.”

Garcia found he was at a loss of words. “Casualties?”

“We rescued one thousand, two hundred civilians by transporters,” Undine said. “Of the Oriskany crew, we rescued only thirty nine crew members. We lost two Away Team members. Brel and Micceal sustained injuries, but will recover. The Oriskany crew and the civilians are presently situated in the Hangar Bay, with one exception. The Dolphins were relocated to the Oriskany’s dolphin tank.”

“We salvaged the Oriskany?” Garcia asked.

“Bri and the grays got it out of the system in time. We delayed as long as we could,” Undine said.

“No signs of the virus?” Garcia asked.

“All traces of the virus vanished when you took out the monument,” Undine said. “We presume you were successful in getting Sha Ka Ree back through the gate.”

“I believe so,” Garcia said.

Undine stepped closer. “Did you experience anything odd?”

“Odd how?” Garcia asked.

“Star and the other dolphins reported seeing you with an angel,” Undine said.

“Seriously? I could use an angel. Even a second class angel,” Garcia said. He turned to Duana. “You?”

“I think I would have remember an angel,” Duana said. “It was pretty chaotic once the shields began to collapse.”

“Like the storm of a toilet bowl,” Garcia said. He shrugged. “Sorry, I was pretty out of it once I inhaled ocean.”

Garcia stood up. He was not off balance, but he moved guardedly, as if expecting to be hurting. The baby pack responded to his implants inquiry and he was satisfied, things were as normal.

“But, still standing. Undine, take the survivors to the nearest Starbase,” Garcia said.

“Including the Oriskany crew?” Undine asked.

“I think they need time to grieve, don’t you?” Garcia asked.

“I think I would rather not subject them to the demands of our mission after what they’ve been through,” Undine said.

“I agree. Have McCoy sign off on their need for time off. Also, make a public spectacle about how you saved them,” Garcia said. “There’s enough there Pressman shouldn’t give us grief.”

“He may be less inclined to help with our staffing issue if we continue to snub him,” Undine said.

“It’ll be alright,” Garcia said. He looked to Jurak. “Am I free to go?”

“You’re in charge of that,” Jurak said.

A door opened and a nurse entered. “Admiral, you’re needed, now.”

Garcia followed the nurse. Jurak and Undine followed Garcia. The room they entered was a clean room, held ready for the times when they needed more evasive medical procedures, such as surgeries. Rivan was leaning on a medical bed, but refusing to get on. Another nurse was present, holding Rivan’s arm, and Misan was in a state because the ‘patient’ wasn’t following instructions. Garcia went straight to Misan and relieved him of the injection he was about to administer.

“What the hell?” Garcia asked.

“She’s hallucinating, and non-compliant,” Misan said.

Garcia clenched his free fist. Even though Rivan wasn’t apparently complaining, it was clear she was in distress.

“People are allowed to hallucinate, Doctor. And they’re allowed to be uncooperative,” Garcia said.

“She is...”

“We don’t restrain, physically or pharmaceutically, unless a person is a danger to themselves or others, or did you forget that?” Garcia demanded.

“I think the baby is danger...” Misan said.

“Tam!” Rivan said.

“I got this, Misan. You’re dismissed,” Garcia said.

“You’re going to do the procedure?” Misan said.

“Not negotiating this,” Garcia said. “Dismissed.”

“This is not a negotiation. It is my duty to point out...”

“You’re now relieved of duty,” Garcia said. “Care for time in the Brig? Or should I sedate you for being non-compliant?”

Misan swallowed his anger and departed the room without further word.

“Rivan, would you sit on the table, please?” Garcia asked.

Rivan followed Garcia’s instruction, with the nurse helping her. The table helped her, too, lowering itself to accommodate her. As Rivan sat, the table reconfigured itself into a more suitable design to accommodate the procedure. Garcia disposed of the injection and had the other nurse help him prep, putting a gown over him, gloves, and then passing a device over his hands and arms. The gloves became continuous with the sleeves of the gown, and both gown and gloves gave off a cool, dark-light reflective glow in the presence of the activated device.

Garcia summoned a stool with a wave, and it came to him by means of tech. Once he was seated on it, he positioned himself appropriately.

“Well, you’re fully dilated,” Garcia said. “You’re ready to begin?”

Rivan didn't answer, she simply pushed, and the baby arrived without fuss, or complications. It was that fast. Rivan hardly seemed affected.

"Damn," the nurse said. "I hope mine comes this easy."

"Not everything is drama," Garcia said, in a tone more suitable for a baby. "Is it?" The baby responded to the gentle massages by taking its first breath and crying appropriately. "Ohhh, that's right..." Garcia was bringing the baby up to lay against Rivan's bare chest. The nurses cleaned baby where it was, even as Garcia had the table risings, and the legs stretching out so Rivan could be incline and he could stand closer to her, touching both mom and baby, the nurses working.

"Undine, record the time of our newest passenger," Garcia said. "2 kilograms. Rivan?"

"Edona," Rivan said.

"That's beautiful," the nurse said.

Rivan shed tears.

"You okay?" Garcia asked.

"I am so happy," Rivan said. "I never thought I could feel happier."

Garcia kissed her.

"God has called me home," Rivan said.

"I am sorry, what?" Garcia asked.

"Edona and I are returning to Edo," Rivan said.

"God told you this?" Garcia asked.

"Tam," Rivan said. "You knew I would have to return."

"Yeah, one day. Is this a directive? Do you have a choice?" Garcia asked.

"We always have a choice," Rivan said.

Garcia slowly came around his inner protests. "I'll take you..."

"No," Rivan said. "We're going now."

"Right now? God's here right now?" Garcia asked.

"We're never alone, Tam. You're never alone," Rivan said. "No one is ever given this much without help. I love you, Tammias. I love you so much. Thank you..."

Rivan and Edona dematerialized before them, right out from Garcia's touch.

Garcia stood tall and began to extract himself from the gown, even as he was exiting.

"Tam?" Undine said.

"I'll be on the Pathfinder," Garcia said. The wadded gown hit the bin for waste without him slowing to take aim. "Update the logs to show that Rivan and Edona have returned to Edo."

And then he was out. Behind him, his Counselor Troi appeared and caught up to him.

"Hold up!" Troi demanded.

"Not now," Garcia told her.

"Yes, now," Troi said. "You didn't even try to talk her out of it."

Garcia rounded on her. If crew saw him speaking to no one, he was to focus to see them or gauge their reactions. "Seriously? Talk her into staying in my chaos?"

"You didn't say goodbye. She didn't ask you to go with her. This is not closed," Troi said.

"I can't imagine better closure than God saying come home. She went home, I got work to do," Garcia said. "And that is sufficient closure for you to get off my back."

Garcia turned from Troi and walked away from her. He walked past Tamma, who was doing her best not to be seen.

Captain Kitara

CHAPTER 1

Kitara arrived on the Tempest via the Gateway, strolled down the ramp to meet her First Officer, Lt. Commander Tatiana Kletsova. She saluted, Klingon style, and waited till Kitara recognized her. Kitara paused, trying to discern the signs that the ship was traveling at Warp. Normally there was a pitch that could be heard, and a slight vibration in the deck plates, but she sensed none of that. Behind Kletsova, about a meter away, a young female Klingon stood by the door. Kitara made eye contact with the adolescent, noting she was carrying a travel pack. The kid seemed impatient to speak with her, a sign transmitted by the facial expressions and the shifting of weight from foot to foot.

“Why aren’t we at warp?” Kitara asked.

“I delayed. The Gateway at your estate isn’t up yet, and I wanted to know what you wanted to do about the situation, first,” Kletsova said.

The adolescent started to come forwards but Kitara motioned her to stay. She smartly stopped, but the frustration on her face clearly shone through.

“What’s with the kid,” Kitara said.

“The situation,” Kletsova said in a hushed voice. “She says she Garcia’s child.”

“Pfft,” Kitara said, scoffing. “Why am I not surprised? And you beamed her up?”

“She came up with Larys,” Kletsova said. “She says it’s legit.”

“You don’t have to whisper, I know you’re speaking about me,” the girl said in Klingon.

“Can you say that in English?” Kitara said back to her.

“May I approach?” the girl asked.

Kitara did not seem amused, which influenced Kletsova’s trying to hide her amusement. The girl came closer, adjusting her pack.

“Garcia and my grandfather were brothers. There are no surviving family, which makes Garcia my father,” the girl said. “I demand to see him immediately so that I may start my training.”

“Training?” Kitara said, with a smirk.

“Yes,” the girl said. “I intend to be a great warrior, so I may resume my grandfather’s legacy on becoming an adult.”

Kitara turned to Kletsova. “You should not have allowed her to beam up. Beam her back to Kronos and get us underway.”

“You cannot deny me the right to see my father!” the girl said.

Before the girl knew what was happening, she was on her back, on the floor, with a knife coming down towards her face. At the last second, Kitara pulled the knife to the left so that it tapped on the floor by the girl’s ear. She didn’t even flinch.

“You want training?” Kitara asked, one knee on the girl’s chest and her free hand gripping her neck.

“You are not my mother,” the girl said.

“If Garcia is your father, then I am the closest thing to a mother you have,” Kitara snapped. She sheathed her knife and picked the girl up, setting her on her feet.

“You can’t deny me my right to see Garcia,” she said. “And you can’t send me back home, unsupervised.”

“I can put you in a boarding school,” Kitara said,
 “Garcia made a pact with my grandfather!” she said.

Kitara was silent for a bit as she considered. “I know nothing of this,” Kitara said.
 “Numer One, get us underway, maximum warp. I am going to the Path Finder.”

Kletsova saluted and departed. Kitara opened the Gateway and signaled that she was crossing over. She took the girl by the arm and led her through. They arrived on the Path Finder, where Losira greeted them.

“Where’s Garcia?” Kitara asked.

“His office,” Losira said. “He has just concluded a meeting with Barona Shi. If you like, I can contact Tomoko and have his next appointment delayed.”

“Please,” Kitara said. “Tell her I will be there in five.”

“Of course, and welcome aboard, Captain,” Losira said.

“Captain,” Kitara said.

As they made their way to Garcia’s quarters slash office, the girl began to ask questions. Kitara ignored her.

“You will not ignore me,” the girl said.

Kitara put on the breaks. “You have a name?”

“An’Ko, daughter of the House of Moshe, holder of the Legacy Stone,” she said.

“Do you speak any English?” Kitara said.

“No,” she said.

“Do not speak another word until you do,” Kitara said, and resumed her fast pace, with the girl named An’Ko in tow.

Tomoko greeted Kitara outside Garcia’s door. She saw the seriousness in Kitara’s look and opened the door manually for her to pass in. Kitara told the girl to wait and marched in. An’Ko waited on the threshold, keeping the door open. Kitara’s boots resounded in the room, probably because the lack of carpet and the absence of an abundance of furniture. Garcia was reading a PADD from a chair. He looked up, nodded a friendly smile at the girl standing in the doorway, and then met Kitara with a smile, but remained sitting.

“You didn’t tell me about the daughter,” Kitara said.

“Daughter?” Garcia asked, looking past her to the girl and then back again.

“Did you or did you not make a pact with Moshe?” Kitara asked.

“Yeah, we shared blood and...” Garcia began.

“That is An’Ko, your daughter!” Kitara said, pointing.

“I don’t remember anything about a daughter,” Garcia said.

“Moshe didn’t inform you of the holder of the Legacy stone?” Kitara asked.

“I think he said something about a heir, but because it wasn’t male he needed me to take over the estate on his passing,” Garcia said.

“Are you a complete idiot?!”

“No, just an idiot savant,” Garcia said.

“Your job is to protect and carry the holder of the Legacy Stone until a male of the genetic line has proven himself worthy to resume the Legacy,” Kitara said. “It is your job to see to her education and training.”

“Really?” Garcia asked.

“What did you think he was asking of you?” Kitara asked.

“I thought it was just formalities so we could have a House,” Garcia said. “What’s a Legacy Stone?”

“A warrior or family member, on achieving a certain status, and whose body is available for the ceremony, may be crystalized through use of heat and pressure,” Kitara explained.

“You turn their carbon atoms into diamonds?” Garcia asked.

“Yes,” Kitara said. “It’s what I said. The variation in minerals concentration, plus token possessions and clothing, give each individual diamond its own particular hue, and each deceased can be added to it, fusing the crystals so that it is one solid stone.”

“That’s kind of cool, actually,” Garcia said.

“You have earned this ceremony,” Kitara said. “I will see to it you are the first in our Legacy.”

“I said it sounded cool; I would prefer to be returned to a biosphere so that my atoms can be recycled into life,” Garcia said.

“You are to be cremated with ceremony along the lines of my family tradition. I will wear you,” Kitara said. “For now, what do you intend to do with her?”

“Well, she can’t stay here,” Garcia said.

“And she can’t stay on the Tempest,” Kitara said.

“Send her back home,” Garcia said.

“No!” An’Ko said.

Kitara turned to her. “I said no speaking until you learned English.”

“I will not be sent home like some step-child with no favor,” An’Ko said.

Garcia forced himself to his feet and approached the girl.

“Wouldn’t you be more comfortable at home, in the environment you grew up in?” Garcia asked her.

“Warrior’s care not for their comfort,” An’Ko said. “It is your duty to train me.”

Garcia turned to Kitara. “Aren’t you more suited to teach her what she needs to know?”

“She cannot stay on the Tempest,” Kitara said.

“And she can’t stay here,” Garcia said.

“Send her to the New Constitution,” Kitara said.

“Like Undine needs another child on her ship,” Garcia said.

“I am not a child!” An’Ko said.

“English or silence!” Kitara said.

“But...”

“No, buts! Speaking English will demonstrate that you have advanced academically beyond your peers and are capable of becoming a warrior,” Kitara said.

“I’m a warrior! I don’t have to learn a foreign language!” An’Ko said.

“By learning a foreign language, you demonstrate that you can learn the mind of an enemy,” Kitara said.

“By learning the mind of an enemy, you risk becoming sympathetic to them,” An’Ko argued. “And sympathy has made the Empire weak.”

Kitara turned to Garcia. “She cannot stay on the Tempest.”

“Why not?” Garcia asked.

“Because it is a war ship, we are going into an unknown situation where one ship has already been lost, I am already understaffed,” Kitara said. “And I don’t have time to baby sit someone who is clearly not ready to learn.”

“I am ready to learn anything you can teach,” An’ko said.

“Demonstrate you’ve learned silence,” Kitara snapped. She returned her gaze to Garcia. “And you, Sir, are shirking your responsibilities. It’s not like you are doing anything at the moment.”

“Is that what you think?” Garcia asked. “I’m just sitting around here doing nothing?”

“Apparently,” Kitara said.

Garcia seemed to be fuming, but he contained it by waiting a moment, breathing deep. “You can return to your ship, now, Captain,” Garcia said.

“What about her?”

“Leave her with me,” Garcia said.

“Are you sure?” Kitara said.

“You dragged her all the way over here, with all this drama, only to waffle? Do you have another option you’re concealing behind your back?” Garcia asked.

“Send her home,” Kitara said,

“Regardless of whether I made the commitment in ignorance, if she is my responsibility, then technically she is our responsibility, and I expect you to participate,” Garcia said. “However, for now, I will take over.”

“Very well,” Kitara said, turning to leave.

“Oh, and Kitara, I want you to answer my emails,” Garcia said.

“We are not naming our child Taruk,” Kitara said, walking away.

“Last Shadow is a great name,” Garcia yelled after her.

“It’s fiction,” Kitara yelled back. The door closed behind her without her looking back.

Garcia turned to the girl. “Now, what do I do with you?”

Tomoko came from her office next door. “Losira says we have arrived,” she said.

“Tell her I will be there shortly. Have Tuer escort this young lady to the New Constitution and set up a training program, starting with English. I want Niki and Tama working with her,” Garcia said.

“Aye,” Tomoko said. “Come along.”

“No,” An’Ko said. “You are to train me.”

“Don’t worry,” Garcia told her. “I will fulfill my oath to your grandfather and make you a warrior. I will even train you personally, but you have to jump through some hurdles before I will work with you. And, I have an appointment. Now, you will go with Tomoko, and you will treat my officers as an extension of myself, is that clear?”

“This is not fair,” An’Ko said.

“Oh, good for you,” Garcia said. He drew very close to her, clearly pushing past her boundaries of comfort. “Prepare yourself. This sense you’re holding, well, it’s going to get worse before it gets better. Thanks, Tomoko.”

CHAPTER 2

Unauthorized excursions were practically impossible for an Admiral on a Starship, but when one considered the number of people looking out for Garcia, it was more challenging than ‘practically.’ Not impossible, just more challenging. He cleared it with Tomoko to spend a few days at Club Bliss, no meetings, just pure R and R. Not surprisingly, she agreed, and Losira personally delivered him, believing he was just going to relax, eliminate some stress. It helped that Cleo was willing to play along, at a small price. The price, he had to finally come even on his promises to spend time alone with her. Had anyone known that he had booked a flight on a Ferengi transport direct to Feringinar, not only would there have been a resounding ‘hell no,’ he would likely have been put under guard. His Alias, Jeremy Vale, paid sufficient funds to have the Ferengi Captain expedite him to the planet and so, within 24 hours of having been beamed up, with nothing but the manifestation orbs and Gold Press Latinum in a backpack, he was beamed down to a receiving alcove at the Sacred Market. His first sight from the alcove was the Tower of Commerce in the distant, shining through rain and mist, which surprisingly added to its glory. It probably lacked glory under a sun and blue sky. An attendant rushed him off the transporter pad, offered him a water proof map of the market, for one gold pressed Latinum slip.

“No, thank you,” Garcia said.

“Ahh,” he said. “You have been here before, hu-man?”

“Um, no, I just like traveling without a map,” Garcia said.

“Ahh. Good choice. No specific destination increases the likelihood of impulse shopping,” the attendant said. “Either you like your beer or you’re carrying a lot of GPLs in your belt-wallet,” pointing to the bulge of the portable womb.

“Does my habit really show?” Garcia played along, patting his ‘beer belly.’

“I love customers who drink,” the Ferengi said, pushing a sample towards him. “If you’re carrying gold pressed Latinum bars, it would be best to store it here in my vault. I could issue you a credit card for the value, plus extra credit, if you like.”

Garcia hesitated. There was value in looking like a simpleton. “Well, I do tend to get confused between the slip and the strip,” Garcia said, revealing the content of his money belt.

The attendant laughed. “Yeah, I don’t know who is worse, the merchant who take advantage of unsophisticated shoppers, or the Knuckle Draggers.”

“Knuckle Draggers?” Garcia asked.

“Oh dear, this is your first visit to our lovely planet, eh?” the attendant said. “The Knuckle Draggers is one of the toughest gangs this side of the planet. What would humans call it? Mafia? You will know them by their gait, and when they attack they swing their arms and beat their chest. If you see that, you best just run and hope you’re faster than a whip.”

“Oh, dear. They sound fierce,” Garcia said.

“They are. Scary fierce. It would be much safer to leave your GPLs here in the vault. The Knuckle Draggers won’t use credit cards, cause all transactions have to go through electronic security, which leaves a tax trail,” the attendant said. Garcia removed his poncho, took off his back pack, and removed two GPL Bars from the back pack. For

an initial investment of ten slips, Garcia bought a locker for his currency, closed it up, pocketed the key, and finalized the arrangement with the attendant.

“I can get you some no fattening beer if you like,” the attendant said, pointing to Garcia’s stomach.

“It’s not that bad, is it?” Garcia asked, patting his belly back, concealed beneath a Chinese styled shirt that hung loose down to his thighs. The portable womb was against his skin today, as it was easier to conceal.

“Yeah,” the attendant laughed. “If I didn’t know you were male, I would say you’re pregnant.”

“I will cut back on my drinking then,” Garcia said.

“Why do that when there is calorie free. Little pricier, but it does the trick. I guarantee you’ll have a buzz in half the time as regular, without the hangover.”

“I better learn my way around before I start getting drunk,” Garcia chuckled, putting his poncho back on, over his back pack making it harder to steal from his pack, and keeping it dry. He felt bad that he was even thinking that there might be thieves amongst the local population, looking to take advantage of an unsuspecting tourist, but capitalist markets encouraged thieves. Still, there were social experiments done in old New York to prove that New Yorkers were not as bad as rumors. A ‘tourist’ would leave a wallet with a large sum of money and each taxi driver that found it went out of his way to return the wallet. Interestingly, each one that returned it also warned the ‘tourist,’ “Better be more careful. There are a lot of thieves in New York.”

“Wise. May you find what you’re shopping for. It is a pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Vale,” the attendant said. He handed him a calling card. “Just call me if you need directions to any specialized services. Women, wine, lodgings.”

“You’re very kind,” Garcia. “Thank you.”

Garcia pulled the hood up and stepped out into the street and the rain. Orions weren’t the only one buying and selling females, but he was surprised to see a brothel so openly displayed. He struggled between judgment and non-judgment. It was their world, and comparatively, they did tend to treat their ‘female merchandise’ better than some races. After all, damaged merchandise was harder to sell. And then there was the little fact he was also running a fairly lucrative brother himself. He walked to the outskirts of the Sacred Market, hailed a taxi, and showed the credit card to the driver.

“I don’t take energy credits,” the driver said.

“But the transporter attendant said...”

“I don’t care what he said. It’s ten slips for every kilometer,” the driver said.

Garcia revealed that he was still carrying GPL’s, having held some back just for this sort of crisis.

“Ahh, hello friend. Come in the cab, where it’s dry and warm,” the driver said.

Garcia made himself comfortable. He took out a PADD, made a visible pretense of flipping through a tourist book, and then retrieved GPS coordinates. “I would like to go here.”

“That district is restricted,” the driver said.

“I have a friend that lives there. I want to surprise him,” Garcia said.

“What I’m saying is that I can’t take you there without buying clearance and that’s extra,” the driver said.

Garcia frowned. "That might ruin my surprise," Garcia said. "Umm, how much to deliver me within walking distance of this address?"

"You'd be fairly conspicuous in that neighborhood, you being so tall and all," the driver said.

"My problem. How much?" Garcia asked.

"Fifty slips," he said.

"Twenty Five," Garcia countered.

"Forty," the driver said.

"Thirty five or I get out and hail another cab," Garcia said.

"Deal," the driver said. He immediately kicked on the drive and the taxi rose into the air. "There is a compulsory ten dollar smoking tax."

"I don't smoke," Garcia said.

"That's why there's a tax," the driver said. "Everyone pays."

Garcia was torn between grumbling and laughing, as the Ferengi could charge you coming and going. He took in as much of the terrain as he could, lights bleeding through the pouring rain, and then they were in clouds. When they descended, they came straight down and parked at an intersection. Garcia checked his implant and verified he was indeed within walking distance of his destination, which wasn't the actual address he had shown the driver, paid the taxi, and stepped back out into the rain. From there it was a forty five minute walk, but only because he was trying to be inconspicuous. Stealth was easy enough in this weather.

He soon found himself at a service drive entering a gated community. He was able to slip in past the guards and took another thirty minutes making his way towards an estate home towards the back of community. On earth, this would probably have been farm land, but here, it was swamp land, which, for most Ferengi, was farm land. There were animals slithering through the mud, probably being mined the same as goats or cattle, but they left him well enough alone. Another gate separated the swampy pasture with the main estate. His target destination was behind the main house, separated by a small pond. It appeared to be a Mausoleum, walled and securely locked, but not impossible to breach. He retrieved his orbs and called forth Duana and Ilona.

"Finally, some action," Duana said.

"Couldn't you picked a dryer climate?" Ilona complained.

"I didn't choose the place," Garcia said.

"How do you know Paynays didn't lie?" Ilona said.

The salt vampire that had infiltrated his party to assassinate him had given him a possible entrance and entry code into Hades fortress, basically, an active Iconian Gateway, with a recall code. If he was right, he would do the code, the monitoring computer would acknowledge, and he would push into another world.

"Only one way to find out," Garcia said. "Help me up?"

Duana folded her hands together and gave Garcia boost up. He then helped his companions up and they all jumped down. Helping them up was easy, as they could hover, and they twirled over the gate like magic, showing off, and even curtsying. They proceeded to the back of the Mausoleum. He knocked on the wall, testing his solidness, and was about to give the words when he was struck by a stun beam. He went out like a light, as well as his companions. The guard knelt down and touch the face of Ilona and

then Duana. He took a collar out of his pocket and placed it around Garcia's neck. When the collar locked, it's edges glowed.

"One intruder, ready to beam up?" the guard said.

Garcia beamed up. Duana and Ilona disappeared, leaving only the orbs. Puzzled, he picked up the orbs and was about to pocket them when he, too, found himself transported up. He looked up to see the female staring down at him. She put out both hands. He silently surrendered the two orbs.

"I think you were trying to cheat me," she said.

He put his forehead to the transporter pad, and hands flat on the floor, prostrating himself. It became apparent that he, too, wore a collar, very much like the one he had placed on Garcia.

"No mistress," he said. "I thought they were females."

"I know what you thought," she snapped. "Am I not enough for you anymore?"

"I never saw a human female before. I was just... curious," he said.

"Still, you said only one intruder. Did you think I wasn't monitoring? That I saw all three?" she said.

"I just thought, you wouldn't want the females, and I thought..."

She smiled, set the orbs down on a floating tray, knelt and lifted his head with one finger to his chin, so that she could look in his eyes. "That is why you're not allowed to think. Do you want to go back to the dungeon?"

"No, mistress," he said.

"Good. The females were holograms. I was testing your loyalty," she said. "If you defy me again, I will kill you. Are we clear?"

"Yes, mistress," he said.

She stroked his ear lobe. "Poor pet. Continue circling the estate. Who knows? There might be more intruders," she said, standing. She turned to address the personal behind the transporter console who was concealed in darkness. "Beam him back."

One the estate guard was gone, she went to medical with the tray holding the orbs following her. She found her medic examining the human male. She directed the tray to the workbench, and proceeded to the medical table where the human lay. She confirmed that the male was securely bound to the gurney. Garcia was cuffed at ankles and wrists attached to the rails that were in the lower position, giving the medic more access to him. He had cut off all his clothes, but was still deciding whether it was safe to remove the portable womb. He was mumbling into a recorder. "Specimen's mouth was taped to prevent yelling should it awake during the procedure. He appears to be an unclassified hew-mon sex, a male female hybrid, carrying offspring with technical assist, obviously due to genetic mutations that blocked natural reproductive pathways..."

"Do you know why I sent you to medical school?" she interrupted

"No, Mistress," her medic said, looking up.

"Because, as a female, I couldn't attend classes," she said. "You're excused."

He bowed and departed quickly. She sighed. "It is so hard to get good help these days," speaking to no one particular.

She walked over to an illuminated table where the contents of Garcia's backpack had been unpacked. She was unimpressed. A bar and several strips of Gold Press Latinum, a half-eaten ration bar, which she smelled and gagged, a bottle of water, a free sample of highly addictive pleasure water, a PADD which seemed to only contain a

tourist guide of Ferenginar, a credit card bearing the name Jeremy Vale, and a ring. The ring appeared to contain no tech, and tasting it assured it was probably made of Tungsten. She paused on the symbol, a blue diamond over a triangle, inscribed not raised. She touched it to the table top and computer ran computations. A dot over a triangle. Nothing specific came up in the Earth data base she had acquired.

“Caliope!” she said, suddenly inspired by the symbol; she turned suddenly to the male. “You can stop feigning sleep. I’ve known you’ve been awake for some time.”

Garcia didn’t open his eyes.

“My name is Qitar,” she said. “On Earth, it means beautiful Recitation. Strangely enough, it means Epic Poem on Ferenginar, which is the symbol on your ring. The muse, Kalopia, or from earth Caliope. Don’t you just love serendipitous synchronicity? Anyway, what should I call you? Mr. Vale? Jeremy? Jer? I like Hew-mon. You are the first Hew-mon I’ve met. If you’re worried about your babies, they’re fine. My medic may be an idiot, but I’m not.”

Qitar approached the table, inspecting the portable womb. “Interesting technology, this is, Hew-mon. Vulcan, if I’m not mistaken. If you haven’t guessed, I love tech. You might call it a pre-occupation of mine. This, umm, baby pack? Does raise some questions. I can’t find any references to Hew-mon males carrying their young. What might this mean? Your mate died and you’re doing your due diligence? You’re definitely genetically mixed, multi-species. Perhaps you can’t have children the natural way and so you created it in a test tube? Or perhaps you’re homosexual? That would make sense.”

Qitar drew her fingernail across Garcia’s forehead. His reaction was subtle, but not a full flinch. He could feel her breath against his face. He could smell it from half way cross the room. “Shhh, easy. I’m not going to hurt you my pet. Not much,” she said, chuckling. She touched her teeth to his cheek then laughed. “But I think it fair for you to know the rules of the game. You are collared. I control you. If you try and hurt me, you will feel pain. I can control you physically, if I have to. And I can kill you with a word. It’s in your best interest to serve me.”

Qitar brushed his eyebrows. “Men are so stupid. If they even suspected what boredom might drive women to do, we would be given much more authority and responsibilities. Yes, pet, I’m bored. And I rarely get an audience, so if you don’t mind, I’m going to indulge, and you’re going to listen. When I remove this tape,” she tapped on the tape covering his mouth, “you are going to want to answer some questions for me. You’re going to want to answer them honestly. The collar is also a lie detector. Lies result in pain.”

Qitar walked back to her table and computer. She glanced back and saw Garcia’s eyes were open. She turned to face him, leaning into her desk. She became aware of evidence that caused her to re-evaluate her last assessment.

“Aww, maybe you’re not gay. Are you offended or aroused by my nakedness? Hew-mons are stupid. Males from all species are stupid. Hew-mon males, they’re the most moronic of any species, Ferengi and Pakled included. So easily manipulated. Maybe that’s why they put the man in MANipulated. You may think females equally stupid. Consider that we raise the children and yet, society continues to be bias in favor of males. Why is that, you suppose? Why support the existing social structure?” she asked, coming at Garcia quickly. She laid her head on his shoulder as her hands explored, apparently amused. She whispered in his ear: “Allow me to answer this for you: because it maintains

our authority and your illusion of being in control! Men like to be useful, and in the absence of utility, they're useless. While the men are playing their games, and finances is as much a game as war, we, females, are ruling the world."

A sound from her computer drew her back to her desk. "Hold on while I finalize this sale. Yeah! Online auctions are glorious. Anonymity, baby," she said, looking back to Garcia. "But the real money is in the acquisition of tech, and the trading of antiquities. I acquired the collars from a trade with bodiless brains, if you're curious."

Qitar frowned at Garcia. "You know; don't give me those sad eyes. You should be grateful I caught you. Had my brother caught you, you would be dead. He is a very powerful male, ruthless. The Grand Nagus himself seeks his counsel. You do know trying to break into a vault is a capital offense?"

Qitar pushed a button and overhead direct lamp illuminated him. It was so bright he wouldn't have been able to see his toes if he had been able to see over the baby pack. "Can you read our writing?" She held a table up to him. "This is a stone tablet, at least five thousand years old. Let me read this line for you: 'When you sound a soul, plumb the deep waters, for that is where the Drukhs Nagus waits to advise.' Isn't that beautiful? Now, let me read this passage from an Earth Master named Zoroaster. This is a line from the Avesta, religious books of the Parsees, or Parsi, I'm not sure how it is pronounced in Hew-mon tongue. Now, I'm quoting from the Earth text here. 'When the good water runs, where does the Drukhs Nagus go?' Isn't that interesting? Oh, it's so beautiful. Truth is beauty, and beauty transcends all boundaries."

Qitar inched closer, dramatically. "Do you believe in ghosts, Hew-mon?" she asked. She laughed, imagining his response, and clapped her hands. "Me neither! Still, the alarms at the estate vault have been triggered like 27 times in the last year. This has aggravated the crap out of me because there is never any evidence of trespasser or thievery. Not even a blink on the surveillance camera. Until today, that is. Today, something changed." She bounced closer. "You know what that is?" She danced. "I caught you." Suddenly serious, "Coincidence? Are you the illusive miscreant I've been hunting, or are you, perchance, chasing the same fortune? And if it's the same fortune, what drew you here, all the way to Ferenginar of all places? In fairness, thief may be the wrong word. Nothing has ever been stolen from the vault. Just annoying alarms telling me nothing. And it's frustrating because I have better security than even the Grand Nagus himself!" She was suddenly in his face, staring him straight in the eyes. "And I take security very seriously, you understand me?! I enjoy a greater sense of freedom and autonomy than most people in our society face, especially the males. If the males understood the nature of the game, they would understand that they were enslaved by the same system they cherish. Fools. Umm, I suppose an argument could be made for me being enslaved to my own passions. Still, I'm willing to kill to preserve what I have, what I have inherited, and what I will one day pass down to my own daughter. You understand that, right? You have the face of a killer. If nothing else, you would kill to protect your children, wouldn't you?" She patted his face. "Of course you would. And you should. Only right."

Qitar returned to the table and lifted the two manifestation orbs in her hands. "I told you I don't believe in ghosts, but I do believe in tech! I love love love tech. Old advanced tech and books. Especially books written on stone, clay tablets, or even diamonds! Do you know why ancient aliens and ancient civilizations left no evidence of

tools? Because they were all holographic tools, and holographic servants, and holographic spaceships, facilitated by telepathic interfaces. That's why your servants disappeared when you were stunned, right? If you want to get a message through deep time, put it on a diamond! Have you ever seen a message on a diamond? No, but shine a laser through it, and you have a hologram. Maybe I will show you mine. I have several. But for now, look at this." She set down the orbs and pushed a button. A portrait appeared on the screen at just the right height for him to barely see. It was a portrait of a female Ferengi, sitting on a throne, and holding a scepter. The top of the scepter looked like a Faberge egg from Russia. "That, my pet, is my great, great, great, great grandmother Abir. Beautiful, isn't she? I'm told I resemble her. I've got her hips, don't you think?" Hands akimbo, Qitar shook her hips.

"The stories say she consorted with ghosts," Qitar said. "Mental illness is possible explanation. When women are blocked from sharing authority or justice, there is an increase in mental illness. Of course, who knows how many women have been medicated under a fake diagnosis of mental illness just to shut them up. I don't think she was crazy, but I also don't think she consorted with ghosts." She was suddenly beside Garcia. "Want to know my thesis? She had access to tech!"

Qitar kissed his ear, twisting the lobe between thumb and finger.

"I know, I know, you probably think I'm ranting. You might think I prefer monologues," Qitar said. "I concede, I talk too much. But in my defense, I rarely have a captive audience, and I am so bored. Where was I? Oh, yeah. Ghosts. You appear to consort with ghosts, Mr. Vale. Or should we say, telepathic holograms?! The general public will tell you Abir, hell, my whole family, is flat rain drop crazy, but she created a secret legacy which was passed down to me. This Starship you are on, one of twelve in my fleet." She put a finger to her lips. "Shhh. Our secret, right? You understand secrets, don't you? How important secrets are. Why, without secrets, the economic system would crash. Could the market stand knowing that the value of GPL is based on belief? Why do I feel like I can trust you? Maybe because you are so attentive. I do so love a male who can be quiet and just listen. I may have to keep you around just so I can tell you about my days. Ha!" She kissed his cheek.

"My thesis," Qitar said. "I have already told you my thesis. You have alien tech! How did you arrive on Ferengar? Pocket Starships? Did you just pull out an orb, create a spaceship on the fly? I want one. I want to join your exploration of the Galaxy using ancient, telepathic tech. I want sophisticated holographic servants. Servants and tools so sophisticated that you could build temples to the Gods with such precision no one could duplicate the likes, even with the tech we have available today! And you, my dear pet, may have just given me the key to prove my theory."

Qitar sang and danced. She stopped. "Unfortunately, because I'm female, no one will listen to me."

Qitar hopped up on the table and pounced on Garcia, careful not to squash his babies. She hovered over his face. "I can't help but wonder who or what you are, Jeremy Vale. Do you consort with ghosts and cats? Does Isis light your way? Does the Seventh man open doorways through time and space? Are you the future or the past?" she said, grinding. She chuckled. "Oh, you like that, eh? Definitely not homosexual." She gave a little, high pitched squeal. "Oh, yeah. You found my gateway to bliss! I will definitely

need to keep you as a pet.” She closed her eyes and leaned her head back, ‘so filling,’ she cooed, arcing her back. “And my brother said our species wasn’t compatible. The fool.”

Qitar exhausted herself on Garcia and then squeezed against his side, precariously pushed against him and falling off the gurney. She spent a moment in silent contemplation, while running her fingers along his upper chest and neck. She then stroked his ear lobe, providing ‘Oomax,’ and spent the rest of her conversation whispering. “My grandmother told me they would return in my lifetime. That I would be the one to bring change, suffrage perhaps, but definitely change,” she said, sighing. “Part of me could care less about social change. I’d rather just read ancient tomes and explore and marvel at ancient architecture and look for treasure. In some way, you’re a bit of a treasure. An enigma. But if you are the one that the legend is built around, then I hold you to the promise of Abir. I caught you fair and square. I made you mine and took you. I am confident I pleased you. Seems all we women do is please men. Not that it was chore,” she chuckled. She was surprised that he appeared ready to perform again, and couldn’t help at taking advantage of him further. That’s the thing about advantage, once you have it, you tend to keep it going. She surprised even herself in how much she enjoyed it. She cooed and laughed. “Pleasing gods and men. I don’t think you’re a god. Alien, sure. But not a god. I suspect you’re just as mortal as I. Just a man with tech, and perhaps a fair bit of talent.” She said this with a bit of bounce and squealed. “For someone who is bound, you are cute. I would do just about anything for tech and talent, deal or no deal, but a deal is a deal, and a contract is forever. I fulfilled my end of the bargain. Now, if you are who I think you are, you are bound by the rules of personal acquisition, which you handed directly to Abir, passed down through my family to me. You will take me to your secret palace beyond the wall, teach me the ways of the ancient, and how to read the tablets I have yet to translate. You will do this or die. Not quickly. I will keep you tied up here as my pet till I tire of you if you fail in your promise. I might raise our kids or sell them depending on my personal whim. Depends on how well you serve me. So, tell me, Jeremy Vale, god or mortal, what will it be?”

“Before you answer, remember, I own you. Your life before me is over, and I will dispose of you as I wish.” Qitar ripped the tape off his mouth. One would think the first words from a hostage suddenly enabled to speak would be something disparaging, but Garcia kept it strictly professional:

“If you’re going with me, you will need to be dressed,” Garcia said.

Qitar kissed him on the mouth. It was what she wanted to hear.



They arrive in a space that resembles a trash heap, only every artifact was a treasure, as if someone had just given up trying to organize the bits of coin, jewelry, and gems and just allowed it to become mounds of sparkling bounty, in a cliché display of abundance that was so over the top that clearly the collector wasn’t even impressed with the collection, or better care would have been taken of the individual items. That, or this was a distraction. A trap. The walls containing the treasure trove appeared to be natural earth and stone, as if someone had hollowed out a space in a salt mine and polished the walls clean. The floor was perfectly flat, and the overall room was shaped like a dome.

Qitar screeched, "Heaven!" Touching a button on a bracelet froze Garcia in place before he could warn her or distract her. She was about to dive into a pile of gold pressed platinum when she hit a wall. An invisible wall. Not a force field. A wall. The treasure room was a hologram. "What is this?!" She circled the room, her hand against the wall, a wall that surrounded them perfectly. If there was a ceiling to the cylinder that contained them, they could not discern it given their perspective. There was no evidence of a door that allowed them entrance, and there was no discernable egress. "Explain..." Qitar began, but suddenly she found herself as frozen, and as speechless as her servant.

The illusion faded, replaced with a lab setting. The overall dome appearance of the room remained, minus the clutter; it was as if there had been an air bubble in the formation of a salt mine, and a metallic floor had been placed just below midpoint. Without the treasure, the true room had more of a spherical feel to it. Garcia and Qitar were contained in a cylinder like container, which was fixed dead center of the floor. A work bench/table wrapped around the cylinder, and a ramp extended down from the table to the floor. There was an active, wormhole portal, at the far side of the chamber, perhaps half the size of Garcia's intra-ship gates, but clearly recognizable. An ornate manifestation orb emerged from the turbulent surface, its points of interest glowing. The silhouette took shape over the orb and person became manifest. A dwarf dressed in an Armani tuxedo, drinking wine from an ornate, gold goblet, walked up the ramp to get a closer look at his specimens. The ramp did not make him eye level with Garcia, but he could he did meet Qitar's eyes. He seemed a bit put off by the fact she was dressed.

"Has suffrage happened? Oh well, nothing good last forever," the Dwarf said. He closed his eyes, as if sorting something and then returned with big smile and took a drink of wine.

"My manners. Sorry. Welcome to my infinity trap!" the Dwarf said. "It's been so long since it's been triggered, I almost forgot what the alarm was for. Oh! Ferengi, I think I recognize you, now. Could it be..." He closed his eyes. "Aww, yes, it could be, and it is. Qitar, I can't believe it. All these years of following you through the family implants, I'd almost given up hope that you would take it to the next level, but here you are, here you are... You are the spitting image of your great, great grandmother. Oh, I have such fond memories of her. She was such a joy to work with. Doesn't matter which multiverse she came from, she was just absolutely delectable."

The dwarf walked around the cylinder, admiring her from all angles. The floor beneath the captives was mirrored. His side of the cylinder allowed him to see his captives as they were, or naked. He was too interested in her to see the babies Garcia was carrying, or the 'invisible' manifestations orbs departing through the small exit at the top of the cylinder cage. At one point he reached out to touch the image of her, caressing her cheek and pulling her lip down to see her teeth. A holographic hand emerged from the inner cylinder duplicating his gesture, manipulating her but giving him tactile feedback of his procedure.

"Such perfect teeth," the dwarf cooed. He pulled his hand back and zoomed into the cellular level. "The biogenetic implants are all within tolerance. I could probably go several more generations before I have to tweak. Your genetic line amazes me, my dear. Your line more than any consistently displays the level of greed and manipulative personality traits necessary to trigger the trap. You have finally demonstrated sufficient worthiness that we can up your game. So, let's see what have you brought me?" The

Dwarf positively frowned in disgust at Garcia. “Human. Male. Qitar, my dear, if you are going to play with me, the first rule is that I only deal and trade in females. And never humans. I don’t like humans. Nasty, primitive, overly aggressive, feral beasts...” He frowned further at Garcia, and then sighed. “Well, let’s see if you’re tagged...” He closed his eyes. His eyes opened as if startled from a nightmare.

“Tammias Parkin Arblaster Garcia! An original, uncut, un-cloned, oh my dear Qitar, you have far exceeded anything I might have anticipated. This specimen’s value is priceless. I could bid him off to my siblings... Ahh, finally, the raise in esteem I deserve...” the Dwarf was practically dancing, but on spilling his wine he chose wine over a jig. “Oh, I got to narrow this down. Which universe are you from, Sir? Are you Ensign, Captain, or Admiral? Are you the one that knifes Picard in the back?” He waited. “Why aren’t you speaking?” He closed his eyes. He chuckled, and beamed a broad smile at Qitar. “You naughty Ferengi, you. But good for you. Way to take charge. Humans males are so stupid. Seriously, Garcia, how did you let her collar you? The rumors say you’re the smart one. Eh, no difference. Its kinds of funny when you think about it. Her tech mirrors my own. Primitive, but you have to start somewhere. You’re in my lab, an Infinity Trap. I follow my subjects through implants, and can even manipulate them remotely. I gave Qitar’s grandmother tech so she could do the same to the males of her species. Qitar’s family has been my servants for longer than I can recall without assist. But funny. I enslaved her, she enslaves you, infinite regression. It’s like having an endless supply of nested Matryoshka Dolls. Release his tongue, my dear.”

Qitar’s hand went to her bracelet. She touched a button. Garcia found he had limited control of his body. He nearly fell over, but caught himself against the glass. The Dwarf retreated. Garcia stood.

“You’re a dwarf,” Garcia said.

“Oh, how disappointing,” the Dwarf said. “I am your god, Sir.”

“You couldn’t make yourself a little taller?” Garcia said.

“Don’t make me smite you,” the Dwarf said.

“Seriously, how could I ever look up to you?” Garcia said. “You’re like what, one dragon princess shy of a game of thrones episode.”

“Oh, you’re from that Universe. You have been watching our family documentaries?” he asked.

“Seriously?” Garcia asked.

“Humans are so stupid. I don’t know what my people see in you, frankly, but, my sisters will pay good money for you,” he said.

“Perhaps we could negotiate,” Garcia said.

“Were you not listening? I don’t deal with humans. And I don’t work with males,” he said.

“Aren’t you a little short to be so gender picky,” Garcia asked.

The dwarf laughed. He laughed hard and then quit. “I have a cesspool of imps I could drop you in. They don’t have a gender preference,” he said.

“Listen, you Moradin want to be, you can work with me and profit, or you can take a loss like all the others who bet against me,” Garcia said.

The Dwarf god casually drank his wine. He tipped the cup to its extreme, finished the content, and then hit the goblet against the container wall... Inside the container, wine

went in Garcia's face. The Dwarf tossed the goblet back over his shoulder, and it evaporated before making a sound against the floor. "You, Sir, are in my trap."

"That is one way to look at it," Garcia said.

The Dwarf became aware of someone standing behind him, but only because a Gorn weapon was suddenly in his peripheral vision. He paled. Duana and Ilona were suddenly manifest.

"Fuck me," the dwarf said. He congealed into a ball of light, and then vacated the manifestation orb. The orb pulsed, and an energy sphere expanded like an emergency airbag, knocking Ilona off the platform. As she fell back, she fired the Gorn weapon at the departing orb. Duana, who had been on the floor, not the ramp, also began to fire. Garcia had taken Quitar to the floor simultaneously with Ilona falling, squashing her under him as he shielded her and the babies from potential retaliation strikes. Holes in the containment cylinder revealed the trajectory of one of the projectile, gold edgings around the holes, perfectly placed that had Garcia not taken Quitar down, her head would have also had a hole. The third shot scored a direct hit. The device fell to the floor, lifeless.

"Please tell me you found the gateway and the controls," Garcia said, standing up. Quitar was still unable to move. They were not wearing what they had been wearing when they had arrived at Ferenginar, but wearing old school Fleet miniskirts and boots, black and white versions so that standing together, they might resemble an esoteric metaphor.

"Pretty sure," Ilona said.

"Pretty sure?" Garcia asked.

"Did you want to banter with the Dwarf some more?" Ilona said.

"No," Garcia said. "Dialogue with gods is becoming rather mundane."

"This is technically not an Iconian Gateway," Duana said, studying her screen.

"The tech is similar, but limited range."

"Can you work this, or not?" Garcia asked.

"Yeah, well, not so fast," Ilona said. She tapped on the cage holding Garcia and Quitar. "The surface of this cylinder is crystalized in such a way to carry a quantum charge, activating the equivalent of a trillion micro black holes that allow for limited focus of local space-time continuum."

"Seriously?" Garcia asked.

"Pretty sure," Ilona said. "Stand her up, stay in the center, and don't touch the wall."

Garcia pointed to the holes in the wall.

"Yeah, sorry," Ilona said. The look on his face suggested he meant something else. "Oh. Yeah, a break in the continuity of the structure could impede functioning, since the crystalline structure allows you to direct the quantum singularities, like focusing a mirror to reflect sunlight to solar receiver... Then again, it's the only way in or out of this room."

"Well, there's the star gate," Duana said.

"It won't dial our gates," Ilona argued.

"It might dial the Iotian gate," Duana said.

"There's got to be another way in and out of this place," Garcia said.

"There's an airshaft large enough to allow a manifestation orb passage," Ilona said, pointing in the direction that the Dwarf orb had tried to escape. "I am not sure how far it goes, or where it leads, but I am absolutely certain, you're not going to fit."

“Definitely other chambers above the lab,” Duana said. “Security footage is cycling through a number of rooms.” Ilona joined her to see what she was seeing on her side of the station. “Cloning vats?”

“Oh,” Ilona pointed.

“Ferengis in stasis chambers,” Duana said. “Period clothing. Transporter clones?”

“I want to see. Lift us out of the cylinder?” Garcia asked.

“You’re not going to fit through that opening,” Ilona said.

“Alright, so what’s the delay?” Garcia asked.

“We’re learning to see,” Ilona said. “He was operating on a particular frequency... Oh, look!”

“How fun is that?!” Duana agreed. A shift in vision allowed for an increased amount of control, and revealed the room was nowhere near as Spartan lifeless as they had assumed.

“What?” Garcia demanded.

“There is a virtual interface in the ultraviolet range. This is really a nice lab,” Ilona said. “Oh! These must be the controls for Quitar. What a wonderful marionette she would make.”

“You can tap into all her senses, past or present,” Duana said. Duana and Ilona exchanged mischievous smiles. “Downloading now...”

“Hey! Can you operate the gateway or not?” Garcia asked.

“It’s really quite clever, if you think about,” Ilona went on, walking around the cylinder. “Using gateways to capture your specimens, confining them within the walls of very gateway structure, using holographic overlays to trick them. You can do any procedure you want while they’re contained, and when you’re done studying them, you just release them back into the wild. Heck, if you’re really clever with the holographic interface, you could capture a specimen and they never know that they were captured. It’s brilliant! So much more humane than say the old abduction scenario where they immobilized you in bed, sucked you up into the ship by means of a tractor beam, and then performed their medical exams.”

“Can you...”

“Oh, wow, he wasn’t joking about Quitar’s history,” Ilona said. “If this genetic map is accurate, he has been interfacing with this family line going back at least fifty thousand years. That’s serious dedication there. She has active implants that could allow a preserver god to virtually access her awareness, perhaps even hijack her from their space. Not as efficient as a manifestation orb utilizing this tech, but cheaper. I have access to her tech...”

“And if he lost his tech, he would have an alternative way back into the game,” Duana offered. She pointed to a panel and Ilona nodded.

The collar disappeared from Garcia’s neck and reappeared around Quitar’s neck. He now held the bracelet that controlled the collars.

“Quitar, and her servants will now be loyal to you, including her starship captains. Seven of them are female, kind of cute,” Ilona said.

“And you will have access to their senses in the same way the Dwarf had access to Quitar,” Duana offered.

“Stop right there,” Garcia said. “Take the collars off...”

“Oh, you don’t want to do that,” Ilona said. “Quitar will be okay if we do, but her servants have been enslaved so long that they would die. There is a telepathic component to the tech and you’re now primary source feed.”

“You knew that before you switched the interface?” Garcia asked.

“Yes. What you wanted me to leave her in charge of you?” Ilona asked.

“She was rather fond of you, actually,” Duana offered.

“In terms of pride in her acquisition,” Ilona corrected.

Garcia fumed, considering the question.

“Consider it another brain drain to slow down your transformation,” Ilona said.

Garcia closed his eyes and sorted. “I get the sense this tech came from Triskelion, but this is...”

“Advanced. They’ve been at it a hundred years,” Ilona said. “But I suspect the midget was working with a line of them, perhaps the same way he was working with Quitar’s family. Sorting this history matrix is difficult. It’s all there all at once like a hologram, and turning it just so reveals pieces of it before it goes back to full picture. I could be sorting this a while.”

“But every planet has genetic line of being directly influenced by the gods, then we have another means for trying to find them and their tech,” Duana offered.

Chamber doors on the far side of the cavern opened and lava began pouring thickly through gates.

“Or not,” Ilona said.

“I think you...”

“On it,” Ilona said. “Stay clear of the wall.”

Garcia’s view of Ilona disappeared as the holographic display along the cylinder walls returned. Two gaps in the cylinder allowed light from the outer room to shine through, and the edges fluoresced and sparked. Huge sparks that left welts. The images on the cylinder walls quickened.

“Quitar, I want to take your ship to K7, and wait for me at Club Bliss,” Garcia said, and then he shoved her through the cylinder.

Garcia had sufficient evidence that she had arrived safely before the image changed. His manifestations orb had just joined him, coming through the top of the cylinder, when the rain of sparks increased and the image went dead.

“Not good,” Garcia said, pushing his orbs through the holes the weapon had created.

Back on the other side, Duana and Ilona fully re-manifested themselves.

“Duana, go dial the gate,” Garcia said.

Duana did as instructed as Ilona studied the control panel.

“It won’t allow anything to be beamed out of the chamber,” Ilona said.

Lava spreading across the floor inched closer.

Garcia retrieved his Gorn weapon from his back.

“Stand back,” Garcia said.

Using the weapon, he shot the base of cylinder out, and when it fell, it took him to the floor and might have rolled into the lava had Ilona not stopped it. He crawled out, took her hand to get up and pulled her towards the gate. He would have to dive through the gate to fit, but it was doable. Duana stopped him.

“They won’t open the iris,” Duana said.

Garcia hit his badge. “Jay?”

“This is Colonel Hammond,” the voice said. “Identify yourself.”

“Can we sort this out on your side?” Garcia said. “I am about to have a serious mine craft fail, without the rebirth option.”

“That sounds like Garcia,” came the familiar voice of Jay.

“Where’s your transponder, son?” Hammond asked.

“I left it at home,” Garcia said.

“Well, what’s the password?” Jay asked.

“There’s a password?” Garcia asked.

“Say something clever, something on Garcia would say,” Jay said.

“Fuck, the birds are hungrier and I am all out of tuppence, now open the damn iris,” Garcia said.

“Good enough for me,” Jay said.

“You’re safe to come through,” Hammond said.

Garcia nodded for his girls to go through. They hesitated, he shoved, they went. He looked back to see how close the lava had come, thought, ‘ah, plenty of time to spare,’ even as the control console that had contained the cylinder began to fail in a dramatic, explosive sort of way, and he dived into the vertical pool of light... and rolled out on a downward ramp, coming to a stop on his ass. He found a twice a dozen weapons pointed at him and his girls, their hands up in the ‘I surrender phase.’ The Iris had closed as soon as Garcia had emerged.

Jay and Hammond approach.

“A Poppins reference?” Jay asked.

“I thought we pay too much homage to Oz references,” Garcia said.

“Never,” Jay said.

Jay gave him a hand and helped him up. They hugged.

“I am glad you’re here,” Jay said. “I found something interesting.”

“The plans for a temporal shield?” Garcia asked.

“Um, no,” Jay said.

“A pocket watch that stops time for sixty seconds a day?” Garcia asked.

“He’s definitely Garcia,” Hammond said, telling his men to lower their weapons.

“No,” Jay answered. “That would have been much more fun, but close. Cigar?”

“That would be lovely,” Garcia said. “Can I make a quick phone call?”

“To your ship?” Hammond asked.

“Oh, no, no,” Garcia said.

“They don’t know we went off on our own,” Ilona said.

“Yet,” Duana said.

“Why you didn’t bring your transponder,” Daniel said.

“Come on, I’ll show you a phone,” Sam said. “Then bring you to the conference room.”



Samantha left Garcia alone in the room so he could make his call. He wasn’t alone. Troi had made herself present. Duana and Ilona had gone on with the others to the conference room, both flirting with Jay. Troi was amused.

“You should probably tell them to not flirt with Jay,” Troi said. “He isn’t convince they aren’t just your personality pretending to be female, and it causes him to question is orientation...” She sat on the desk in front of him, her dress opening as she crossed her legs, deliberately enticing.

Garcia ignored her and dialed the number from memory. It was old style phone, land line, but not so old it was a rotary dial. The phone rang.

“That was unfortunate,” Troi said. “All that tech.”

Garcia grimaced at her.

“Made another enemy, likely,” Troi went on. “SHouldn’t assume he’s harmless because he’s a dwarf. Dwarfs are comical, though. Make sense he would like Ferengi... Do you think she can hear us?”

“Suzanne? She hasn’t answered yet,” Garcia said. It went to voice mail and he hung, dialed again.

“I meant, Quitar. Or the others,” Troi asked. “I can sense them. Do you realize, outside of our system mates, this is the first telepathic like experiences I have had since you made a copy of me?”

“I can sense them, too,” Garcia said.

“Oh, I wonder if we could jump minds,” Troi asked.

“Probably, but I would still be your source brain. I suppose if you download a copy of yourself into their minds, or if their minds make virtual copies of you through repetitive interactions, there would be more consistent information exchange... Don’t do that, though,” Garcia said. The ring went to voice mail. He redialed. “One of you is enough.”

“We could be tulpas,” Troi said.

“Tulpas are created thought-forms not downloaded thought-forms,” Garcia said.

“Do you want to kill her?” Troi asked.

“What?!” Garcia asked.

“Quitar. Do you want to kill her?” Troi asked

“No!” Garcia said.

“Then you need to be careful what you think,” Troi said. “Your thoughts will bleed through the tech.”

“Fuck,” Garcia said.

“What part of be careful with your thoughts did you not understand?” Troi said.

“I am trying not to think of her. Stop distracting me,” Garcia said. He hung up when it went to voice mail.

“She and her family line is a bit of a nuisance,” Troi pointed out.

“Yeah, but Fleet is not the nuisance police,” Garcia said.

“Since when?” Troi said. “Are you at least going to make her take the morning after pill?”

Garcia closed his eyes, suddenly very heavy. With eyes closed, he discovered he knew how to use the bracelet control without having been educated, which was nice, as if the instructions were simply embedded in the system. And he could make her go and take a pill. He could actually just tell her to not get pregnant or to have a natural abortion, and her body would do as he commanded. He then had to wonder about his earlier experience and how much arousal was his and how much was hers; there was possibility that there was a feedback loop between them that cause them both to escalate. He became heavier

when he realized how many servants were tied to the device. He found himself going into divergent thoughts, like curiosity about the tech's capacity, which likely varied per source user, and his thoughts of disgust about controlling others. He became aware that the linked were aware of the change in command structure... They didn't know the details per say, but they knew there was change of heart and disposition from source. It may take a moment before their habitualized fear dissipated and they became more assertive, but they were definitely aware of change.

"No," Garcia said.

"Seriously?!" Troi said. "Do you want another rug rat, with real rat teeth this time."

"I am not going to compel her to do anything," Garcia said.

"You told her to go to K7," Troi pointed out.

"I am not going to tell her what to do with her body," Garcia said.

"You told her to take her body to Club Bliss and wait for you," Troi said.

"She and I need to sort this thing out!" Garcia snapped.

"You think?! She forced..."

"Stop!" Garcia said.

"What, you want her to be pregnant because of your genetic agenda, or because you want her to have consequences... Wait a moment! You think because you experienced pleasure you can't be raped? You think you deserve to be raped because of what happened to your crew?" Troi asked.

"You are relentless!" Garcia snapped.

"You have every right to stop that pregnancy," Troi said. "And if you're going to block it, now is the time to do it."

"You're dismissed," Garcia said, dialing again.

"You will not dismiss me or this situation so easily," Troi said. "I am not on strings like Quitar. I am surprised she obeys so readily."

"You can't control others without setting yourself up to be controlled," Garcia said, rubbing his forehead. With a word, he could kill Quitar. With a word, he could immobilize her and do what he like to her, block the looming pregnancy that was highly likely given his genetically programed hyper-virility; it was not an absolute certainty. He could freeze her body or tell it to do his bidding, and it would, whether her brain consented or not. It was basically a 'sleep paralysis' hold that allowed him to hijack her body. The device was able to disengage the brain from the body through the same mechanism that sleep did, so that the person wouldn't act out their dreams. The brain was awake, and aware, but the body would move on someone else's commands, as if she were in a hypnotic trance.

Garcia found the line wasn't ringing, nor did it go to voicemail. He gave Troi a signed to be silent. "Suzanne?" he asked. There was silence. "Are you there? Is everything okay?"

"Tam," Suzanne spoke softly. "Please, don't call me again."

"I just wanted to know..."

"I don't care what you want..." Suzanne interrupted. "Don't call again. Don't come around. Don't spy on me from a distance. Stay out of my life."

The phone hung up. Garcia listened to the dialtone.

"Did I hear that right?" Troi asked.

Garcia hung up the phone.

“You have a right to see your child,” Troi said.

“Shut up, Troi,” Garcia said, and left the room.

Samantha was waiting for him and suddenly went to attention.

“Don’t do that,” Garcia said.

“Sorry. You’re still a big deal around here,” Samantha said.

“Yeah, don’t do that either,” Garcia said.

“Everything alright?” Samantha asked.

“Yep,” Garcia said. “Conference room still in the same place?”

“Yes...”

Garcia turned and headed that way. Samantha followed unaware that Troi was walking beside her, still fuming about being told to shut up.

Chapter 3

“So, how’s the Pathfinder?” Hammond asked, resuming his place at the head of the table. He held off sitting.

Duana and Ilona brought food and coffee to Garcia as he took a chair across from Jay.

“I’m thinking of changing the Path Finder’s name to Argo,” Garcia said.

Only Daniel laughed. Garcia was introduced to three new personnel, Cameron Mitchell, Jonas Quin, and Valla... who interrupted to introduce herself, drawing in intimately close.

“Boundaries,” Mitchell said.

“Oh, I am aware,” Valla said.

“I don’t understand. A new team?” Garcia asked. “What was wrong the old team?”

“That’s exactly what I was saying,” Mitchell said.

“Well, we’re busy with other stuff,” Jay said.

Garcia took his seat after Hammond insisted, and also sat. Everyone sat. Valla pulled her seat closer, preparing to help Garcia with his food.

“I got it,” Ilona said.

“Clearly he likes threesomes, can’t I join, too?”

“Oh, I like her,” Duana said. “Can we keep her?”

“No,” Garcia said.

Mitchell and Danielle together repositioned Valla’s chair.

“I’m just being friendly to the guest,” Valla said.

“We see,” Samantha said.

“It’s because he has a Starship, isn’t it,” Ilona said.

“Just one? I thought you had several, and in need of more crew,” Valla said. “I could serve under you. Directly under you.”

“We would actually pay you to take her,” Danielle said.

“Um, forgive me, but I am really distracted today,” Garcia said.

“More than usual?” Jay asked.

“A little. You said you acquired new tech?” Garcia asked.

Jay pulled up a sleeve and revealed he was wearing a fashionable bracelet with tech. “I call it the Groundhog Day Device. If I die, it returns me to a designated set point, and I start reliving from where I pushed save.”

“Seriously?” Garcia asked.

“Yeah,” Jay said.

“And you put it on willingly?” Garcia asked.

“Yeah,” Jay said.

“He does that,” Danielle said.

“We have three devices. We reserved one for you,” Jay said.

“Oh, fuck that,” Garcia said. “Once through life is enough and I already feel like I am repeating things...”

“How do you know you’re not?” Valla asked. “Maybe that’s why you’re so good at everything you’ve done it so much.”

“She has a point there,” Duana said.

“But, just in case you’re not, we should hook up so don’t miss out on anything,” Valla said.

“Subtle much?” Ilona asked.

“Subtle or sebtle?” Duana asked.

“OMG, if you two don’t stop, I will dematerialize you,” Garcia said. “Jay, where did you get it.”

“I can’t tell you,” Jay said. Garcia opened his mouth to say something. “And we’re still friends. Yes, it’s a typical sci-fi plot contrivance to keep you from asking further questions and just go with it with the illusion it was addressed even though it will never be addressed. Seriously, got it. Cliché. But every time I told you where to get it, something bad happens. Let it go.”

“If you want to wear the one reserved for you, I’ll fetch it for you,” Valla said.

“No you want,” Mitchell said.

“You said three, who’s wearing...”

Samantha smiled, and revealed she was wearing one.

“You both...”

“Have the same save point,” Jay said.

“And...” Garcia said. “Wait wait wait... You knew I was calling from the dwarf’s gate. You’ve already cycled!”

Jay and Samantha confirmed with a nod.

“You knew it was me, and still made me come up with a password?!” Garcia asked.

“Jay I knew it was you,” Samantha said. “We had to convince the others.”

“I really did like the Poppins reference,” Jay said. “Did you know, Marry Poppins was an assassin?”

“Oh, please, not that again, Sir,” Samantha said.

“I want to hear that?”

“Marry Poppins came to the Bank’s house and everything in motion in order to kill the bank president Dawes with capital humor. Once she completes her task, she flies away,” Jay said. “It’s such a genius plot, no one would ever expect she’s the grim reaper.”

“She’s not the grim reaper,” Samantha said.

“How many times have we watched it now?” Jay asked.

Samantha smiled at Garcia. “He has his theories, I have mine.”

“It’s a solid theory,” Garcia agreed.

“Hold up,” Duana said. “How is it possible you have already cycled when we haven’t arrived at the future yet?!”

“I asked that exact same question!” Jay said.

“Well, that’s rather an easy explanation if you’re willing to suspend with the normal linear progression of time perspective, which is actually an illusion...”

“No it’s not,” Valla said.

Garcia interrupted by raising both hands, squinting. “How many times have you...”

“Don’t ask,” Jay said.

“And do I...”

“Blow up our universe as we know it?” Jay asked.

“Yes,” Garcia said.

“Yes,” Jay said.

Garcia clenched his fist. “Can you stop me?!”

“Yes,” Jay and Samantha said.

“Well, do that,” Garcia said.

“The thing is, no matter what we do, this timeline implodes, blows up, gets derailed, however you want to look at it,” Jay said. “Whether you do it or not, it’s a done deal. We’ve not experienced a reality where the timeline doesn’t change.”

“I don’t understand,” Garcia said.

“Me, too,” Ilona said. “How can you have cycled when the future hasn’t happened yet.”

“It has, it is, it will,” Samantha said. “It’s not linear, and it’s not parallel tracks running simultaneously alongside each other, though that is probably the easiest method of understanding time from a western philosophical perspective. Even I don’t understand this, but I suspect that consciousness is much more important than anyone has every calculated. It might even be a primary binding force from which all other quantum forces arise.”

“You’re converting from science to metaphysics,” Ilona said.

“Well, it fits,” Danielle said. “When I ascended and became a part of the Q continuum...”

“You what?” Garcia asked.

“Oh, we didn’t tell you about that,” Jay said.

“Stop,” Garcia said, rubbing his forehead.

“Would you like an aspirin?” Samantha asked.

“Or I could rub your shoulders,” Valla said. “I know all the right pressure points for pain relief...”

“Really?” Danielle said. “Then how come you have only caused me pain?”

“Tam,” Jay interrupted. “There are two eventualities. The Romulous star goes Nova, and all sentient life in the Milky Way Galaxy is extinguished.”

“Save two,” Samantha said. She and Jay clearly hold their arms up to suggest they’re the two.

“Or, you cause the Nova, and the timeline simply changes,” Jay said.

“It’s a darker time,” Samantha said. “But, we have evidence that if that timeline plays itself out, it will right itself. In addition to returning us to save point, they allow us to maintain the integrity of our origin timeline regardless of where we end up. You will find and install temporal shielding technology, and your ships will carry the message of our origin, like messages in a bottle.”

“So, you’re telling me to blow up Romulous,” Garcia said.

“No,” Jay said. “I would never tell you that. If I could take that decision from your hands, I would. I can only tell you, if you don’t, it gets much worse than you imagined.”

Garcia rubbed his eyes, and left his hands hidden in his palm. “I can’t do it,” Garcia said. “I am not going to blow up a star and kill the hundreds of billions of people in that system just so the Universe doesn’t come unhinged!” He lowered his hands. “If life in this galaxy is going to end, then so be it. I will not become a butcher.”

“Good for you,” Jay said. “No matter what you decide, you will have our support.”

Garcia stared at the table.

“Colonel, can I have the room alone with Garcia?” Jay asked.

“We’re done here,” Hammond said.

Everyone got up but Garcia, Jay, Valla, Duana and Ilona.

“Valla?” Mitchell said.

“They’re staying,” Valla said.

“No they’re not,” Garcia said.

Duana got up to leave. Ilona protested. “We’re going to be privy to the conversation anyway,” she said.

“Out,” Garcia said.

“Come on, we’ll go play with Valla,” Duana said.

“Did you have to say that out loud?” Garcia asked.

“You know it’s going to happen,” Valla said.

“Jay?” Garcia asked.

Jay smiled. “Do you really want to know?”

Garcia shook his head. The room was cleared but for Jay and Garcia. They sat there silently. Jay took some cigars from a box at the end of the table, handing one to Garcia. They both sent smoke into the air before they resumed talking.

“There are some things I should probably tell you, but it does influence the future,” Jay said. “I recommend, you just keep doing what you’re doing and trust the end to work itself out.”

“What I am doing? I am failing,” Garcia said.

“I know it looks like that from your perspective,” Jay said.

“Maybe if I shoot myself, that will solve everyone’s problems,” Garcia said.

“It didn’t change what happened,” Jay said. “And, if you try and take your life again, I will shoot you.”

Garcia was solemn. “I took my life.”

“Tam, I don’t expect you to believe me, but you need to know, no matter what happens, you’re not alone,” Jay said.

“Did the people that gave you that tech tell you that?” Garcia asked.

“Yes, actually,” Jay said. He sucked on his cigar for a moment. “Imagine for a moment, you lived a full life time. Let’s say it wasn’t the greatest life. Maybe you suffered lots of injuries, illness, felt isolated, lost loved ones, but you met one person who was to have such a huge impact in the future world to come, that if you were forced to relive your life, changing one thing would change everything; that person would cease to exist. Would you live it again without changing a thing knowing you would have to suffer?”

“I don’t know,” Garcia said.

“I do, Son,” Jay said. “I will live my life a million times over, and not change a single thing, if it means I get to meet you again. Samantha would do the same for you. I dare say, most of your people would do the same. We’re not supposed to say these things, Tam. My culture is the worse about saying these things, but I am going to say it. I love you. When it’s all said and done, I’ll be there with you.”

Garcia smiled, wiped a tear. “I was hoping you wouldn’t join me in hell.”

“When God’s done with us, we’re not going to hell,” Jay said. “He invested too much in our redemption to let us fail permanently. Come on. I’ll walk you to the gate.”

Garcia got up, put the cigar in the tray, and zipped some wine. Jay pointed to his belly pack. “It’ll filter one sip...”

And they walked. They opened the gate direct to the Pathfinder and exchanged codes. They were given a green light. Duana and Ilona proceeded up the ramp. Garcia followed. The three stop when they heard Garcia’s name called. Suzanne was present, on the threshold, wearing an ankle length dress, and an army jacket. It was evidence she was still living in base housing. Duana hooked Ilona’s arm and they went on through. Garcia held, mid ramp. Suzanne rushed to him and hugged him.

“I am sorry,” Suzanne said.

“You have nothing to be sorry for,” Garcia said.

“You’re out there saving worlds and I am being selfish,” Suzanne said.

“No, you’re surviving,” Garcia said.

“Stop being so reasonable! It just makes me more the heel,” Suzanne said.

“I have two heels. I couldn’t stand without them,” Garcia said.

“What do you expect from me?” Suzanne asked.

“I expect you to live your life and be happy,” Garcia said.

“What does that mean?” Suzanne asked.

“What do you want?” Garcia said.

“You know what I want,” Suzanne said. “And I can’t have what I want. Can you do one of those mind things and remove yourself from my memory?”

“No,” Garcia said.

“But...”

“Yes, there are memory suppression techniques, and they work if you have no reminders. You have something that would unravel any suppression techniques,” Garcia said. “As for actual memory deletions, well, we can do that, but I would have to erase a full year of your life, and that’s wrong.”

Suzanne put her head in his neck and cried. “I don’t want to do this alone.”

“Come with me,” Garcia invited.

“I’d still be alone, in a new place. I’d see you more, but I’d have to share you?” Suzanne asked. “I am just not advanced enough. I can’t do that. I wish we’d never met!”

“Suzanne,” Garcia said gently. “I am sorry.”

“Don’t!” Suzanne said. “Just go.”

“It’s due next week. Do you want me to...”

“I want you to go and never come back. I don’t want to ever see you again,” Suzanne again.

Garcia nodded, almost pushed her hair out of her eyes, but she pushed his hands away. He turned and proceeded up the ramp. He paused, wondering what words or gestures, hoping to catch one last glimmer of her in the shimmering surface of the portal, and then he stepped through the gate. Suzanne took one step forwards, then turned and headed out. Jay and Samantha accompanied her.

Chapter 4

Tatiana Kletsova was not a Klingon, and she had no problem not hiding the fact. Pound per pound, she was as not as strong. Could she hold her own in a one on one fight, maybe. She was tactically smart, had a high pain threshold, was double jointed, and held black belts in some of the same martial arts as Garcia that utilized the strengths of the opponents against them while extricating themselves in order to flee, but she was not Klingon and she decided it would be unwise to bluff her way through second in command of the Tempest by puffing up and pretending. She would be herself, and allow her crew to make their assumptions. Her quarters were appropriate size for her station, and she had a mattress on the floor. She wasn't going to sleep on beam of steel and she wasn't going to sleep on a mat, but neither was she going to make a full bed. Her work station was something she pieced together, an egg chair with controls in the arm rest, and multiple screens on a desk. Each monitor held multiple windows of information and text, some of which displayed live feeds of different departments and status lights. Her primary object of study was the planet they were rushing towards, with copious notes she had made. She also had access to had viewed their assigned readings, which was everyone. Klingons were quite studious when it came to understanding their adversaries; they were also opinionated, and not shy of writing their own thoughts on the subject.

The enigma of Pyris VII had been overlooked for generations. It was the seventh planet of a dimly lit sun, existing just on the outer cusp of the 'goldilock' zone. It held a human compatible atmosphere, yet hosted no indigenous life forms. Though it was in the realms of possibility to have a planet evolve into being starting with an oxygen nitrogen atmosphere, it was highly unlikely to find oxygen without life as we know it after billions of years of evolution. Had the nebula that spawned this system been rich in oxygen, maybe one planet would have captured enough in its formation that four billion years later it might just have the right mix... but there was no evidence for this scenario in the rest of the system. The sun was a dwarf star, its makeup fairly common. None of the other planets in the system had oxygen atmospheres. Pyris VII didn't have any of the indicators on its surface that suggested oxygen had been present in abundance for the entirety of its life. The best explanation proposed was that the planet's atmosphere was terraformed to human specifications. It wasn't until the Kirk incident that anyone suspected it was a trap. (Someone on the crew held a survey, to a one, they agreed it was a trap.)

The Federation: it wasn't a trap. Based on the analysis of the Kirk incident, it was just an outpost for an alien species to study and understand the Federation. Not just humans, but 'the Federation,' and since the predominant members relied on oxygen nitrogen atmospheres, it simply made sense to terraform a planet for the majority. The first two representatives that took human form, (to our knowledge, Kletsova agreed,) didn't fair too well. Either they were not prepared for how a change in physical form would change how they think, or they did not believe it would change them to the degree it had. (A linked subscript, and seemingly random quote attributed to Garcia, but not confirmed: 'this appears to be a common theme among aliens who can technically transform, biological shape-shifters, and spies; empathy lies at the heart of imitation, you cannot see without becoming.) It didn't help them any that their method of ascertaining knowledge was to communicate with the unconscious mind of their subjects, which gave

insight into how alien they were; (at the same time, it illuminated the hidden archetypes that still lay within the ‘modern’ human. “Would they have chosen Klingons, there would have been a different story...”) This was definitely Garcia: “Imagine for a moment a human population, any population, and imagine further that instead of normal means of communication that this population only spoke through unconscious means, so that the whole of them operated as one, as if Jung’s treaty on the collective unconscious was describing a real thing, an entity greater than the sum of its parts.” That was one analogy proposed for this species strangeness, but it was a theory without confirmation, and without a live member to speak with, impossible to verify. It was not known if they were telepathic by nature or by tech, which was two very different things, but it was possible that it was both, as telepathic races have been known to enhance their abilities through tech. If they were telepathic by nature, their telepathy was clearly more substantial than say a Vulcan’s telepathy... Vulcan society allows for individuality, perhaps not as great as human societies, but it does allow for independent agency; they encourage self-suppression of emotions, not an external suppression. A species that communicated through subconscious channels would likely express less individuality, again, a theory, but which might explain Sylvia and Korob had such difficulty assimilating, beyond getting use to human sensation.

Saying these creatures were alien was an understatement. More alien than anything the Federation had ever experienced, but in some ways, were a great deal like the Kelvan, aliens of vast intellect with little experience in human like emotions, with tech capable of modifying their form on a whim, as well as their environment. The transmuter was likely thousands of years ahead of replicator technology. Biologically, they were ornithoid like, with the only information about their form coming from an autopsy performed by Doctor McCoy. Though they were alien, it was decided they were, at last and simply, explorers, from a distant galaxy, simply trying to understand and relate to the most established, sentient life forms. Humans were less likely to assign maliciousness to an alien than Klingons. Since there was no evidence of tech outside a broken transmuter, which could not be backward engineered, it was decided to establish a federation outpost of their own; in short, they brought in a welcoming party to try and communicate with them.

The Pyris VII complex was commissioned and was well established, and fully staffed by the year 2328. It was designed to be welcoming, and took the form of a university, and it held representatives from almost every Federation species. There was a main dome that housed parks with themes such as children’s playgrounds, nature walks, statues hopefully communicating peace, and communal buildings, with the most central tower ascending up and through the dome, and on the tower was a rotating structure that held a restaurant, and the very top, an enclosed dome where representatives would go periodically to read, sing, or do something artistic in an educational sort of way. It was believed they were being examined from afar, and if the aliens were truly hostile, they were so technologically advanced that there that there could be no secrets, so ‘just be real.’ Someone who could spy on you from another galaxy and then send representatives through, well, if they wanted you dead, you would be, and so this gesture of being open and willing to share became the central theme of community life.

Around the dome, connected by tunnels, were a dozen other, smaller domes, each representing a member state of the Federation, and the internal environment that matched

their home worlds, host to plant and animal life of the same. Every aspect of the complex represented a desire for peaceful interaction. Their mission was to contact a superior alien species. And consequently, a philosophy emerged on their campus that they were being observed all the time, whether it was true or not. There was initial debate about whether that was true or not, but the debates faded in favor of it didn't matter if they were or not, they would proceed as if they were, and life at the complex began to resemble life on a kibbutz run by '60's peace loving, hippy like' people. The complex was self-sufficient. There was insufficient light from the sun for optimum solar power, so horta were brought in to carry the complex deep into the earth, so heat and energy direct from the mantel could be utilized. Dilithium mines were established because of the horta, providing the community a modest trade resource.

Over time, with no apparent contact from distant aliens, colonist wanting to be a part of the community, began to settle coming either because of the 'loving' nature of the community, or coming to be close to family that had already settled. Individual family domes, private habitats, were erected over the landscape at further and further distances from the dome. From orbit there was a condensed scattering of light, while most of the planet remained untouched, minus the robotics seeding germs of life that would be compatible with the planet, making its future more hospitable outside of domes, as it was still, and mostly, a lifeless, sterile planet.

Star Fleet had received an innocuous report that there had been recent activity, unusual energy readings of some sort, and the community at Pyrus VII had some concerns. Garcia had been ordered to investigate, but he had sent the Pa Nun to do a quick survey and report back. The Pa Nun was lost. Not long after it was lost, the Pyrus VII complex went silent. The Tempest was due to arrive any moment. Kletsova slapped her last weapon into place, locking it onto her body armor, examined herself in a holographic mirror, complements of her personal computer. She admired the meshing of Klingon and Federation design which indicated its Path Finder origins. Some old school options, like the skirt, which was actually preferred by the Klingons, was her favorite. She had always favored her legs, reflecting beauty and strength. A quick survey of her life, going back to being a run-away teen joining performing arts circus, even learning to fly, wearing the most outrageous but fun outfits to present... Still wearing amazingly fun, but now functional clothing. There was no visible signs that she was pregnant. She patted the armor and spoke softly.

"This will keep you safe," Kletsova said. "I will keep you safe."

She pushed through her image heading for the door before the alert told her it was time. She arrived in the Klingon transporter room. It was safe enough, she told herself, though in truth, she hated how it operated on the bare minimum of computer controls, just enough sophisticated tech to make it functional, but nowhere near the amount of artificial intelligence to meet the minimum safety requirements demanded by Fleet. Her team was there. Four Klingon females, dressed as she was, and two Klingon males. She nodded approval, and they joined her on the platform. A change in pitch alerted them to the fact that the Tempest had dropped from warp. Kletsova began counting. In all of forty six seconds, the crash site of the Pa Nun was discovered, orbit was achieved, and the transporter tech was commencing with transport... without even as much as a 'good luck' from the tech or the Captain.

The Away Team arrived planet side, on a slight rise overlooking a debris field. The surface was dried dirt, with cracks, as if it had been sun baked, but not charred, as if there had been a warp coil breach. There would likely be less debris if that had happened. Without word, her team spread out. The females took up defensive posture around Kletsova and the two males, who were scanning for life signs. One of the males held the markings of a medic, as well as the tools of the trade.

Kletsova walked away from the males and joined the most forward guard.

“Not likely anyone survived this,” she said. Her chosen name was Misha. Chosen in the fact she had decided to adopt a human compatible name while in service of the tempest, partly to protect her family name and partly because she hated how the humans mispronounced her Klingon name.

“Probably not,” Kletsova said, watching as the medic moved off in an easterly direction. Kletsova nodded and they followed. “Funny, seeing the women in charge.”

“This was the way of it, in the ancient times,” Misha times. “Women were the warriors, and the men were kept, even though, they would still say they were in charge. I would say, we most resembled a pride of lions... The females did all the work, the hunting, the gathering, the child rearing, the warring, while the men simply played war games.”

“So, in truth, nothing has changed,” Kletsova said.

Misha nodded. “The men only think they are in charge because we permit it.”

Kletsova’s com badge was forced activated and the Captain’s voice was there. “Report.”

“No immediate life signs, no remains yet,” Kletsova said. “Stand by...”

The largest piece remaining was half buried in the soil. It was big enough that several people could have theoretically survived, as it was structurally designed to survive a reasonable crash. No life signs. Twisted metal and wires made entering the section unlikely. Misha secured her weapon, got down on the ground, on her back, and was pulling and pushing herself in before Kletsova could object. Once she was in, Kletsova joined her, not about to allow her team mate to get dirty and she stay clean. The shoulder pads of their uniforms illuminated allowing them to see. The shortened corridor ended abruptly at a bulkhead. The door was ajar enough they were able to pry it the rest of the way open and slip through, their shoulder pad lights turning shadows off each other and dangling conduits.

“This section should be better contained,” Misha said.

“They took the upper panels off?” Kletsova asked.

“Transmit your body cams,” Captain’s voice came over the comm. link.

Another voice was heard, which might have been filtered out on a Star Fleet vessel: “Captain.”

“Shields up...”

“They’re not registering on sensor...”

“They’re everywhere...”

“Kletsova,” Misha said.

The last part of the section had evidence of a fire. Gorn weapon marks pocked marked the walls with gold. There was whole in the floor that went into the earth. Shoulder lights were useless for peering in further. Kletsova retrieved a flare from the

side of her armor, lit it and dropped it in. It fell straight half a meter, then rolled along an incline. It came to a stop on the sole of boots.

“It would be a tight squeeze, but I can reach them if you pull me out...”

Kletsova was thinking it through, with Misha looking at her. She was staring at the boots when they suddenly disappeared... It startled her so that she hadn't seen Misha drawing her weapon, until she was discharging it over her head, simultaneously Misha was throwing herself into Kletsova to push her out of the way. From a certain perspective, it look like she was shielding herself from the creature, landing on top of Kletsova, and then rolling her so she was on top but only so she could keep firing. In the confusion, the only thing Kletsova saw was the creature's tail as it dived into the hole with an unearthly squeal slash hiss and disappeared.

“Sorry,” Misha said, looking awkwardly up into Kletsova's face.

“For saving my life?” Kletsova said.

“For missing my target,” Misha said.

Kletsova got up, and immediately drew her own Gorn weapon.

“Tell me this is an unscheduled training exercise,” Misha said.

Kletsova shook her head and braved herself to peer over the edge of hole, her Gorn weapon gripped in both hands. Nothing.

“Back against mine,” Kletsova said.

Misha put her back against Kletsova.

“Retreat back to the exit,” Kletsova said.

They went together. Misha went to the door first, and when Kletsova joined her, she pointed to the crawl space.

“I'll cover you, go,” Misha said.

“Let's try and get this door closed first,” Kletsova said.

“No, just go. I'll be right behind you, promise,” Misha said.

Kletsova knew this was protocol, both Federation and Klingon, as team lead, she would have to survive this. Without wasting time she dropped to her back and began to scoot and pull her way back to the outside. As soon as she was partially out, the remaining team pulled her the rest of the way. Misha, true to her word was right behind her, but as soon as Kletsova took her wrist to expedite her extraction, she would pulled back in. Kletsova almost went with her, but the Medic literally sat on her. The officer next to Kletsova drew her weapon and got on the ground, trying to see past Misha to target her opponent. One of the Away Team members behind Kletsova screamed. The officer on the ground rolled, discharging her weapon.

“Let go,” Misha said.

“No!” Kletsova said.

“Let go,” Misha said, nodding to the weapon in her hand.

Kletsova let go. Misha disappeared. There was the sound of screaming, not in fear or pain, but of determination. The sound of a Gorn weapon being discharged. Then there was silent.

“Circle,” Kletsova said. They all drew closer. “Where's Fora?”

“She's gone,” Par said.

Misha scrambled out of the ship remains and the medic grabbed her to accelerate the process. Kletsova immediately began to help her in removing her armor due to acid

eating away at it. As soon as it was free, the medic was spraying her with a substance that neutralized the acid and became temporary skin.

“I’m okay,” Misha said, pushing the medic away. “I lost my weapon.”

Kletsova handed her her own Gorn weapon and drew her Star Fleet issue phaser.

“That’s not going to work,” the medic said.

“It doesn’t work in the simulations,” Kletsova pointed out. “Which way did Fora go?”

Par pointed and Kletsova went. The team moved with her as one. She stopped when she came upon another hole. The brittle, dry ground gave way under her toes and she nearly went down. Misha pulled her back.

“Scan for more of these tunnels, and for any life signs. Echolocation starting now,” Kletsova directed. She hit her badge. “Tempest, emergency extraction, now!”

“They’re gone,” the medic said.

“What does that mean?” Par asked. She was standing next to Kletsova. “They left us?”

“They wouldn’t do that,” Kletsova said, reminding them they were Klingons.

“What did you mean?”

“They’re gone. Pinging doesn’t return an echo. They’re not there,” the medic said.

“You mean they were destroyed,” Par said.

“I mean they’re not there!” the medic snapped.

“Hey!” Kletsova said. “Contain this. We’re all on point. We need to move towards the complex. Now.”

The distant lights reflecting off the low clouds indicated how far they had to go. It seemed an impossibly long way to go, especially if the simulations they had had with this creature were anywhere near accurate.

Chapter 5

Garcia was in his office on the Path Finder, sitting in half dimmed lights. He had given up reading and the PADD sat beside him. He had not been able to maintain a meditation, and so he sat there, thought dwelling. The door open and Doctor Rossi entered.

“Well, that didn’t take long,” Garcia said. “I have already been read the riot act by the Captains. I don’t need your analysis of my behavior.”

“Good,” Rossi said. “That’s not why I am here.”

Garcia did the math. “We’re not scheduled today...”

“I read your reports concerning your extracurricular excursion,” Rossi said.

“I am adult. I have the rank of admiral. I can do what I want when I want,” Garcia said.

“Yep,” Rossi said. She detected a look and asked “You expected an argument?”

“That’s usually how our conversations go,” Garcia said.

“Yep,” Rossi said. “But I have questions.”

“Oh, bloody hell,” Garcia said. “Which one blabbed?”

“Blabbed, Sir?” Rossi asked.

“Don’t give me that...”

“No one told me anything. I simply suspect something happened by reading between the line,” Rossi said. “I was just going to ask you directly, but the fact you think someone told me something just gave me more evidence to pursue this further. So, let’s play the long version out...”

“I am fine,” Garcia said.

“Great, so you won’t mind filling me in on the item you so craftily covered up,” Rossi said.

Garcia was quiet. He got up, awkwardly, and began to pace. Rossi watched.

“I didn’t leave it out of the report,” Garcia said.

“Technically, but you also didn’t spell it out,” Rossi said. “Quite frankly, I am surprised no one else has confronted you on it. All personal who has experienced a violation of this nature must see a counselor on returning to their duty station.”

“And I will. Tomorrow. 15:00.”

“No, we will do this now,” Rossi said.

“There’s nothing to discuss,” Garcia said.

Rossi sat down, made herself comfortable in the only other chair in Garcia’s office, the one that opposed Garcia’s. She adjusted her skirt down, and then summoned water. It arrived on the table beside her chair, sparkling, clear. She sipped.

“You were assaulted,” Rossi stated.

“Happens,” Garcia said.

“You were held hostage,” Rossi said.

“Pff, for just a little an hour, no big deal,” Garcia said.

“No, you were held on a table for about an hour. You were collared for more than that. You obfuscated on precisely how long that was,” Rossi said. “And you do need to go into more depth on the device...”

“At no time was I probed for Star Fleet intelligence,” Garcia said. “She had other agendas.”

“You were raped,” Rossi said.

“I put myself in a bad situation, something unpleasant happened, that’s it,” Garcia said.

“Something unpleasant? Tam, this is the second instance of you being raped in the last six months,” Rossi said. “We still haven’t discussed the Phylosioan incident.”

“And not going to, if you haven’t figured it out,” Garcia said.

“So, you think the rape was your fault?” Rossi said.

“No, but she isn’t right in the head, doc,” Garcia said.

“Comical voice change for misdirection?” Rossi asked. “Was that an allusion you expect me to respond to? So, let’s back up. You were raped...”

“Her species wouldn’t see that...”

“That’s not accurate. The male that owns her, whether that is her father, brother, or husband, they would see you as the aggressor and she would be the victim,” Rossi said. “But I don’t care how other species socially qualify their interaction patterns. I care about how you qualify it. Do you think you deserved it?”

“I wasn’t harmed. I was actually curious...” Garcia said.

“You say as you pace,” Rossi said.

Garcia came and sat down in front of her, on the edge of his chair; he met her eyes. “I wasn’t harmed.”

“You like being dominated,” Rossi said.

“You don’t want to go here,” Garcia reminded her.

“It would explain why you’re so rebellious,” Rossi said.

“I am not rebellious...”

“I am an adult, I am an admiral, I can do what I want when I want,” Rossi quoted.

“Out of context...”

“Is it?” Rossi said. “You’re not treating your Captains like a team when you take off without telling them what you’re doing. You’re not treating us, your peers with respect. Do you like being scolded?”

“No...”

“You want me to dress as the dark teacher with a long yard stick?” Rossi said.

“No!”

“I actually expected you to say it depends,” Rossi said, sorting her expectation of his normal script and why it might have varied. “You’re operating from extreme philosophical positions...”

“And you aren’t? Either we are a team or we’re not?” Garcia asked.

“You were raped. You know it. And you know protocol and if it was anyone else, you would have pulled them off the roster till they complied,” Rossi said.

“In any other context, I would have fucked her anyway...” Garcia snapped.

“I believe that. This isn’t any other context,” Rossi said.

“Just let it go,” Garcia said.

“No! Was your Troi personality right? You think because you’re high on the promiscuous scale that you can’t be raped?” Rossi asked.

Garcia slid from the seat to the floor. There were tears in his eyes. Rossi slid to the floor to be at eye level.

“I deserve worse,” Garcia said.

“Based on who’s standards?” R said.

“What world are you from?!” Garcia asked. “Oh, counseling world; where no can do any wrong?”

“Interesting. Isn’t that the context you used to explain her behavior?” Rossi asked. “There is a right and wrong, Tam, but I am not looking to execute justice. You’re right. The event happened outside of Federation jurisdiction. Even if you filed a report on Ferenginar, it wouldn’t go anywhere. You would be ridiculed, literally laughed out of their courts, after paying an exuberant fees, and probably a penalty for admitting to having had sex with someone else’s property. Even if it were actionable, it happened on her ship and in orbit, meaning outside of her world’s jurisdiction... If it were actionable, would you pursue it?”

“No,” Garcia said. “I am guilty of the same thing. How many counts? How much forgiveness have I been shown?”

“You’re not guilty of the same thing,” Rossi said.

“It’s the same thing!” Garcia said, pounding the floor. “Sure, there was no physical touch, and we’re not calling it the same thing, but it’s the same thing... It’s...”

Garcia openly wept, turned into the chair and hid his face. Rossi slid closer, touched his shoulder with compassion, even pulled him to her. He turned into her. His forehead rested on her shoulder. He felt her hand tapping his back, the way a child might be comforted. The comforting stopped when he kissed her neck.

“No,” Rossi said, not harsh, but very clear.

Garcia got up from the floor and walked away.

“So, another extreme default setting? You can’t be comforted without it leading to intimacy?” Rossi said.

“I am sorry,” Garcia said.

“I am not asking for an apology,” Rossi said. “I am asking for an explanation. You’re either all detached or all intimate? No room for genuine affection and nurture without it leading to intimacy? No middle ground?”

“Everything is intimacy. You can’t escape intimacy. Fighting is intimate. Words exchange is intimate. Counseling is seriously intimate. This human proclivity for separating out sex and compartmentalizing it to specific relationships at specific times, that’s what leads to neuroticism!” Garcia said.

“You’re angry,” Rossi said.

“The next thing you’re going to do is blame it on a lack of nurture, or childhood molestation, or lack of boundaries due to undisciplined telepathic training...” Garcia said.

“You’re angry because you’re embarrassed that you have desire for me and I blocked,” Rossi said.

“You have the right to impose your boundaries...”

“Yep. And you respected it. You stopped,” Rossi said.

“If I respected your boundaries, I wouldn’t have kissed you at all. You had already drawn this line,” Garcia said.

“Yes, I have,” Rossi said. “But in context, since you haven’t actually practiced the kind of affection I was attempting to provide, there is room for error. It’s one of the reasons for touch being excluded from most therapy.”

“So why did you break protocol?!” Garcia said.

“Because touch is actually the most necessary for therapy. But you know that, which makes your statement interesting,” Rossi said. “Are you blaming me for your response?”

“You know I have this, why would you...?”

“But you won’t blame her for the rape?” Rossi interrupted.

“You’re fucking with me to teach me a lesson?” Garcia asked.

“No. I genially believed comforting you with touch in that moment was appropriate. Human touch is appropriate and underserved, and I dare say your life has a major deficit of this simple, but absolutely necessary, form of nurture,” Rossi said. Her thoughts shifted and she was going to track something out of her self-assessment, but found herself interrupted, cluing her into the fact Garcia was not paying attention to her, but was responding to his internal feelings... Still angry. If he was paying attention, he would have given her time to process.

“I get all the touch I need,” Garcia said.

“Your only touch is sex or aggression,” Rossi pointed out. “When’s the last time you hugged your daughter?”

“I’ve hugged her!”

“Not what I asked you,” Rossi said. “Look, Tam, your thoughts and boundaries about sex is something we need to explore. I am not saying you’re broken or wrong, I am just saying there is something here you haven’t come to terms with. You’re probably in alignment with most human males, as we tend to only allow them one form of nurture, sex. Hugs are limited to greetings and farewells. You can’t hold hands. You can’t kiss and just be kissed. Hell, one of the only reasons most men don’t like foreplay is because most affection reminds them of the one goal that they do alone, rushed to get it over with and not get caught. Klingon males are only a little different, as their touch is limited to fighting or sex, and usually the two go together. Add to that, you’re a low grade telepath and physical touch links you to a person and arouses you. And why wouldn’t it?! It’s like putting a spot light on someone and a multitude of senses are awakened, the same way REM sleep awakens a multitude of internal senses, which just increases your momentum in a sexual direction. From an external point of view, this likely reinforces your tendency towards isolation and non-touch interactions patterns. Hell, I imagine this best explains why Vulcans are so stand offish, but they’ll never admit that. And you’re actually more stand offish than Vulcans! The telepathic component makes it that much more imperative that we explore the rape because neural tech enslavement or no, she touched you with a particular eventuality set in mind and that influenced you, too.

“Nothing happens in a vacuum. You have your personal history which opened you up to sexual themes at early age, hell if we count your Kelvan conditioning, prenatal even. Mix in your interaction with females from species that would be considered highly promiscuous from a human point of view. All of this is the perfect storm where there is no way in hell you could come out of that rape and not have confusion. Most rapes are emotionally and intellectually charged and complicated, and even more so when it results in an unwanted orgasm, with your telepathy increasing the level of complexity because you’re experiencing your pleasures and her pleasures and conscious and subconscious motivators, and there was a part of you who didn’t want it and part of you that over-rode that and complied to increase your odds of survival, and then your erroneous socialized

belief that men can't be raped. Tam, all these threads have to be teased out and examined."

"Unless a person doesn't want to explore it," Garcia said.

"Yes. If you were civilian and you opted out of counseling, you'd be free to go. You're not just a civilian. You are Star Fleet. You have people depending on you. Your avoidance of this is sufficient evidence for me to take you out of the command chain because your judgment is clearly compromised," Rossi said.

"I was compromised before Pressman put me in charge of this hot mess," Garcia said.

"Oh, I agree with that," Rossi said.

"What?" Garcia asked.

"You're right. You were an amazing cadet, but I don't think there is a person in all of Star Fleet who would put you right in the command chair," Rossi said. "Your report reflects that. The first duty of every star fleet officer is to the truth. It's the guiding principle of who we are. You have some personal truths that need sorting and clarifying. My function is to help you arrive there."

"I am not going to be able to work with you..."

"Because of your attraction to me? Or because you kissed me?"

"Both," Garcia said.

"You're attracted to everyone, Tam. I am not offended, given the context. It is a boundary I will be more assertive over. And, I think that's why you need to work with me. You need to practice at intimacy that isn't intimate. And that scares you. Being vulnerable and known without that other part is foreign to you. You're missing out," Rossi said.

"Or maybe you are. Maybe we should have sex and get it out of the way..." Garcia said.

Rossi stood up. "No. I do not want sexual intimacy with you. You are limited to emotional and intellectual interactions with me."

"I want you," Garcia said.

Rossi was silent for a moment. "Good for you," Rossi said.

"What?" Garcia said.

"Saying that. Huge. Clearly you missed this phase of high school. Dig deeper. A wind blows on you and you get hard. You see donut holes, you get hard. A dog jumps on you and licks you, you get hard. That doesn't mean you have to act on that. You just lost Rivan. You survived a rape. You're vulnerable. Reaching out is good," Rossi said. "I am not Rivan. I am not going to accommodate this particular want. Ever."

From Rossi's point of view, Garcia was clearly processing information. She almost displayed anger when it was interrupted by tales of an intruder. Losira arrived in between Garcia and Rossi, with a turning of shadows and light. "Sorry to interrupt, Admiral. I have lost contact with the Tempest."

Garcia shifted into another box so fast it was as if he were another person. He turned and departed straight way from his office. Losira turned to Rossi.

"How much were you privy to?" Rossi asked.

"I witness everything said or done that happens on this ship," Losira said. "You have legitimate evidence for a sexual harassment complaint if you wish to pursue it."

"And you would testify against Garcia?" Rossi said.

“I am Star Fleet. In the context of an inquiry, I would speak the truth as I saw it,” Rossi said.

“And what did you see?” Rossi asked.

“Two humans trying to navigate a complicated world of thoughts and emotions,” Losira said. “That said, the rules and regulations are very clear. Your position has been very clear. Garcia overstepped his boundaries. He even persisted, howbeit verbally, in a direction you had already declared off limits.”

Rossi slowly assessed Losira’s words. “Yes. In the context of counseling Garcia, there are going to be boundary violations. That seems unavoidable. It is one of his defense mechanisms to avoid dealing with a deeper truth.”

“So, you intend to continue to be purposefully provocative,” Losira said.

“I was not...”

“You know he has a particular predisposition towards extreme intimacies, and drew him into a hug,” Losira said. “I agree there is a therapeutic value to exploring this with him, which deepens the layers of gray, but also increases the risk of you violating professional boundaries. You may not be able to intellectually and emotionally probe the nature of his relationships without it resulting in a physical tangent. You’re a psychiatrist, a counselor, and human being, and you can’t see this is muddy water?”

“I am maintaining therapeutic boundaries,” Rossi said.

“Again, there is no doubt about it, exploring Garcia’s sexuality is a therapeutic necessity. Technically, that’s true about all human beings, regardless of where they fall on the continuum of sexual expression,” Losira agreed.

“What are you getting at?” Rossi asked, cutting straight to the point.

“You and Garcia are on opposite ends of the libido scales. Each of you are so profoundly affected by an intellectual curiosity about the other’s nature that exploring this aspect of his personality is going to result in compare and contrast, intrigue and disgust, which puts you both on a direct tract towards becoming intimate, whether that is to better relate, or to prove each other wrong. He believe you’re more sexual than you let on, and wants to prove his theory. You want to prove he can be intimate without it leading to sex. In this contest, I would bet on Garcia winning,” Losira said.

“That will never happen,” Rossi said.

“The number one transgression of all therapists is becoming intimate with their clients. Society more than frowns on this, they make laws protecting clients from this,” Losira said. “My personal position about these statutes being unrealistic is irrelevant. Regardless of the complexity of the issues that result in professional client relationships, the professional will always be considered at fault. You and Garcia are both professionals, you are both Star Fleet, and still you will be held to a higher standard because of your role and ethical models. You and Garcia have the most complex relationship of all his relationships. You’re both playing with fire.”

The red alert klaxon began to blare.

“Ahh, synchronicity,” Losira said. “Do you love it as much as I do?”

And she disappeared like a jinn back into her bottle.

Chapter 6

Kitara found herself on an examination table, a light directed onto her bright enough the rest of the world seemed black. She was unable to move. There was no evidence of binding. Other than a heaviness to her chest, as if someone were laying on top of her, there seemed to be no reason she shouldn't be able to get up. She could see well enough that no one was holding her down. If she thought it about, it felt like a violation. She tracked that and realized she was aroused. That was sufficient connection for her to understand; she was experiencing sleep paralysis. She had experienced this before in life, but it wasn't until becoming involved with Garcia that she dared explore it, much less put forth effort to remember her dreams. Dreams were the realms of shamans. She was a warrior, not a shaman...

"She's awake," came a voice.

"Yes."

"But the trance..."

"Trance doesn't work as well with Klingons as it does humans."

A feathery face pushed into the light and hovered over. Her eyes adjusted quickly to the change in glare and she saw the face of her enemy. Humanoid face, not a spot of skin showing due to dark blue feathers tapering up to a tuft of elongated, violet feathers. It was the softest of down, which might call a human to want to pet it, but all she wanted was to slap it out of her face and pursue it was a knife. It had eyes in the appropriate place, and an odd, short beak that almost looked like lips straight on, but when it turned its head she could see it was more profoundly jutting from the face.

"She is okay," this one said.

A ball of blue light, approximately 22 CM in diameter, rose up and hovered next to the face of the other.

"She is angry," the ball observed.

The feathery one chuckled. "Yes. They don't like this condition."

"They understand us?"

"I am not sure how much they understand. Do not concern yourself with that," the feathery one said.

The feathery one stepped away from the table. The light hovered until it was called. The lights came down. A holographic display filled the room with stars.

"What do you see, son?"

"Stars. Galaxies. This is a representation of the Universe looking through our assigned northern hemisphere. This is our galaxy of origin. This is our colony galaxy. We are here."

A galaxy cluster became prominent.

"And this?"

"This is galaxy cluster 1413391."

A particular galaxy in the cluster became prominent.

"1413391A," the ball said without being asked.

"What do you see?"

"I don't understand. I have already spoken its label."

"Yes, yes, but what do you see?"

"Stars..."

“What do you see?”

“What are you wanting me to see?”

“This is the past, not the present.”

“I don’t understand. We’re interacting with them...”

“We are interacting with them in their present moment, our future.”

“Because when they see us, they see our past?”

“They do see our past when they look at us, but we are not in sync because time is not consistent across the universe. Why are we studying this galaxy?”

“It’s the most temporally active galaxy in our night sky. It’s in constant flux. These creatures are rewriting their histories.”

“Why would any sane species do that?”

No response. The holographic display went away. Three ceiling lights came up. A holographic display on the ceiling mirrored the floor. Three examination tables became visible to Kitara. One held herself, one held an unknown reptilian like species, and another held what appeared to be human.

“What do you see?” the feathery one asked.

“Three different species from...”

“Do a more thorough exploration.”

A long pause. “There technological devices seem to confirm their internal belief that they are all three Klingons. More specific, they each hold the same name. Kitara, Kitara, Kitara. But they were each extracted from a variant time stream. How is this possible?”

“Great question. Discover more.”

There was silent. “They are each with child, and based on the cell count, the offspring are of identical age.” There was silence. “They all three have the same paternal genes. How is that possible?!”

“I don’t know. In our studies of this galaxy, we have found one hundred forty two personalities of interests that are consistent between twelve temporal variants we have access to,” the feathery one said. “The first of the 142 was Kirk.”

“The ones that killed Korob and Sylvia?”

“Would you blame a lion for killing a deer?”

“No...”

“Then do not blame Kirk for the death of our peers. These are wild, feral animals. They are not civilized.”

“Can they be civilized?”

“I don’t know.”

“Father, are you breaking hierarchical protocols revealing this to me?”

“I am.”

“Why?”

“I have made an error. It may cost us our civilization.”

“I don’t understand. Can you correct the error?”

“I have not been given authority to do so. I do have authority over you and your immediate peers. I have made contingency plans for your survival. I need you to steel yourself for radical change. Come, let’s go enjoy the sun together one last time...”

“I am afraid.”

“Good for you. In this context, it means you are thinking appropriately.”



Garcia exited his office, saying: ‘Status report.’ A new Losira agent became visible beside him. It wasn’t necessary. She could just put her words directly in his ear with directional sound tech, or communicate through his implant, but she liked being ‘present.’ She liked seeing him focus on her.

“All I can speak to is I no longer have access to the Tempest via the preserver communication crystal. Also, the gateway is not connecting,” Losira said.

The lift door opened before they were even within proximity of the lift. It was waiting for him. They entered together. Garcia faced the lift doors, Losira faced him.

“I want a full battle crew on the Path Finder now,” Garcia said.

“They’re on their way,” Losira said.

“Prepare for a transwarp jump,” Garcia said.

“We’re ready to jump at your command,” Losira said.

Garcia continued to stare at the door.

“Human sexuality is more dynamically convoluted than social structure allow for,” Losira commented.

They arrived at the Bridge and he exited. “Red alert, battle stations.”

Chapter 7

“Stop.”

The Away Team stopped, looking for a threat. A lesser dome connected to the main complex dome via a tunnel was nearby. The landscape between them and the lesser dome was flat, except for a series of what looked like mounds of dirt, perhaps fifty.

“They’re just rocks,” the medic scan.

“Scan again,” Kletsova said. “They look Horta.”

“Confirmed...”

“I have never heard of Horta assembling on the surface like this.”

“They don’t,” Kletsova said.

“What could have scared them out of the earth?” the medic asked.

Kletsova looked at him, repressing the temptation to say something sarcastic. She advanced, slowly. “We’re Star Fleet. We are not going to harm you.”

The closest Horta was wearing a Star Fleet issues translation device. She became aware of other translators due to softly blinking diodes. The first voice that spoke was female. “Kill I.”

“What?” Kletsova asked.

Before it could answer, the medic hit it with a phaser set for disintegrate. It became an orange glowing mound that disappeared.

“What the hell?!” Kletsova asked.

“It asked for death, I provided it,” the medic said.

“We don’t know enough...” Kletsova said.

“We know...”

All the Hortas on the surface began chanting ‘kill I,’ their translation boxes LED’s sparking across the open space, suggesting more than fifty. And then they had confirmation. A creature emerged from a Horta, ripping it apart as it pushing up and out as easily as through a mushroom, issuing its hideous birth cry. A volumous amount of viscous liquid and parts exploded out with it. It pulled itself free and jumped towards the Away Team. Kletsova hit with a kill beam, which caused it to squeal and retreat, but didn’t kill it. It began to glow, dived into the earth, and disappeared. More creatures were emerging. Kletsova set her phaser to disintegrate even as her team were firing Gorn weapon. The medic, perhaps out of curiosity, took out his bat’leth and charged one of the mounds even as the creature was emerging. His swung intercepted the creature as it began to glow, and it melted through his blade, and then dived right through him, melting a hole through armor and chest and out the other side, through the earth. A hole opened up under one of the away team members and one of her legs went in. The remaining male Klingon, Ur’Ozo, pulled her out. Her leg gone to the knee, with the stump charred solid.

“To the dome, now!” Kletsova said.

They ran through a field of exploded Horta, across earth covered with Horta organs and blood, firing their weapons, covering Ur’Ozo as he carried the wounded member of their team. Kletsova but got up with a creature emerging from the ground in front of her. It’s head was blown off by a Gorn weapon... the one being carried was still shooting. She got up and joined them in their mad rush for the domes entrance. Once inside the smaller dome, they took time out to reassess. They had emptied several Gorn

clips of ammunition. Kletsova's phaser had enough charge for one kill and several discrete stuns, and was presently charging using the complex wireless supply.

"These wall and floors aren't going to stop them."

"No," Kletsova agreed.

"How many Hortas on this planet?"

Kletsova nearly did the math, assuming a breeding pair were brought in on establishing the complex, availability of food and no competition... "I don't know. Millions."

"We're screwed."

"We need to get off this planet, that's for sure," Kletsova said. "Any other life signs?"

"No."

"This way," Kletsova said.

"Wait." Hilkav stopped at a replicator terminal. She punched up a request for crutches and one materialized next to her.

"Can you access a transporter from this console?" Kletsova asked.

"No, but get me a computer terminal, or a PADD, yes," she said.

"Eyes alert," Kletsova said, and led the way.

The fastest way through the smallest dome was across the center garden/park. They were immediately given pause by giant spider webs strung between trees and jungle gyms and swings.

"This is not..."

"It is not," Kletsova interrupted. "They could have unleashed a thousand horrors..."

"Life signs," Misha said. She stepped forwards, spinning, looking. A geometric dome jungle gym, enmeshed with web, with a solitary figure hanging from it. She was wrapped up to her forearms, with her arms pinned at her side. "Not human," Misha was saying, even though they could see that for themselves. Her face was covered with the softest of down, and a tuft of bluish green feathers, with pink tips fluffed out at the top of her head.

The Away Team approached, cautiously.

"There should be more here. I see a dozen life signs..."

Kletsova stopped them. She looked up. Hanging from the top of the lesser complex dome, were maybe a hundred fully web encapsulated people, adult and children size. A noise from a nearby merry go round startled them. A spider, hitting its head, scrambling around blindly due to the fact it held a face-hugger alien gave them an explanation as to why this bird creature was left practically unfinished.

"Fuck," Kletsova said. Her phaser had built enough charge for one disintegrate shot, and she took out the spider.

On doing that, the ceiling shadows began to move, as spiders fled for safer terrain, and echo location was incompressible with pinging, except for three, that started down, falling while creating a web behind them. The away team fired Gorn weapons and two of the spiders retreated on being harmed. One fell, dead, detaching from the line it was making. It was big enough it would have killed them had it landed on them.

"Help me," said the avian.

"We got to get out of here," Ur'Ozo said.

“We’re going to help her,” Kletsova said.

“We can’t help everyone. What about them?!” he argued pointing to the ceiling.

“We’re helping her,” Kletsova said.

“Because she has a face?! She’s compromised,” he said.

“We’re helping,” Misha said, putting away her weapon and prepare to climb through the web.

“Wait,” Kletsova said.

It was too late. Misha had taken hold of a strand and found herself suddenly stuck.

“Don’t touch any other threads,” Kletsova said. The ground was covered with mulch, and she used this to find the threads that weren’t sticky. “Find something to neutralize this glue.”

“I am not a medic...” the remaining male, Ur’Ozo said. He removed his bat’leth and took one swing at the web. It was like hitting a steel wire. It took all his strength to pull it free.

“Cut my hand off,” Misha said.

“We’re not there yet,” Kletsova said. She took Misha’s phasers and using a fine beam cut either side of the web.

The lowest line of web around the base of the geodesic gym lacked the glue that would catch something, and so Kletsova dug out enough of the mulch that she could in order to pass under. Misha followed, mulch sticking to the spider web attached to her hand. She helped ease the captured creature down. Her cocoon web wasn’t sticky, and made it easier to work with, and fortunately, the strands were not as thick. While Kletsova used a laser scalpel to peel away the layers of webbing, Misha sorted through the medic bag for the ingredients to a cocktail that would free her hand.

“Thank you,” the creature said.

“You’re one of them, aren’t you?” Kletsova said.

“We are not invaders. We just want to understand,” it said.

“I thought you guys were much smaller,” Misha said.

“Your form was too volatile, too alien. We made this form to better relate and interact, but it may still be that we are too disparate to ever understand one another...”

Outside the jungle a gym, a toy art PADD was found, a crack in the glass, but otherwise functional. Hilkav put down her crutch and started working her way through firewalls, the first of which was a child lock on the wi-fi. Misha gave up on finding a solution, and using a cloth to hold one end of the strand, she jerked it off hard and fast, like ripping a band aid. Her palm was left bloody. She sprayed on new skin, and used the medic’s tissue generator to accelerate the cohesion.

“We would never have been able to do that,” the creature said.

Kletsova freed her an item near her hand and pulled out what appeared to be a witches wand.

“Is this...”

“A transmuter, yes,” the creature said.

Kletsova stood up and broke it in half.

“Why did you do that?!” the creature asked shock. “Now we’re stuck here.”

“When Kirk broke it, all the illusions went away,” Kletsova said.

“We corrected the design flaw of the previous system that led to Korob and Sylvia’s death. These creations are permanent,” the creature explained. “Even with Kirk, they were not illusions. They are as real as anything you replicate...”

“Fuck,” Misha said.

“Echo that,” Kletsova said. “This can’t be all the colonist. Do you know where the others are?”

“Different domes had different Thanos tangents. When we lost control of the situation, we took as many of your kind back to our galaxy as we could to preserve them while we tried to remedy the situation,” the creature said.

“When did you lose control?” Misha asked.

“When the Pa Nun brought the unseen,” it said.

“You didn’t have to make it real,” Kletsova said.

Echolocation went crazy again, as the spiders that had escaped to the periphery of the domes tops scurried back to the center, piling up on each other. Some fell. Few survived the fall, but the few who did, limped away.

“We should probably leave,” Ur’Ozo said, firing at a spider that was climbing the gym.

“Save your ammo,” Kletsova said.

The spiders weren’t interested in them, but only interested in fleeing a greater threat. An adolescent size creature emerged from the ground, almost comically, like a jack and the box, and might have grabbed Kletsova from the behind, except Misha sprang, tackling it and taking it back against the inner webbing that crisscrossed the geodesic gym. Kletsova fell and rolled going for a phaser. The creature’s interior teeth went through Misha’s neck. The creature dropped Misha’s dead body, squirming to break free of the sticky web, glowing, only making itself more entangled. Tatyana noted the greatest heat seemed concentrated to the creatures head and shoulders, not along its back and body, filing it in case the information would be useful later; it’s limbs remained dark, cold. A face hugger, outside the gym, jumped towards Kletsova, and was also caught by the web, it’s snake like implanted reaching for her, as versatile as an elephants trunk. Ur’Ozo was captured by a spider and carried upwards. The last thing Kletsova saw before she was transported was Hilkev surrendering to a face hugger, it’s tail securing her neck even as she raised her knife to cut at it.

The avian creature and Kletsova found themselves on a transporter pad, top of the tower. She cut the avian the rest of the way out the webbing and helped her up.

“You don’t mourn the loss of your peers?” it asked.

“I will morn later. My first duty is to get us off this world. I should be able to beam us to a shuttle from here. From there we will go into orbit and wait. My kind want to talk to your kind,” Kletsova said.

“You cannot leave this world,” the avian said.

“Why?” Kletsova asked.

“We erected a containment field around the planet,” the avian said.

“To keep anything from escaping,” Kletsova said more than asked. That made sense.

“No,” the Avian said. “To prevent any of your kind from adding more darkness. Out of all the galaxies we have touch, human are the substance of our worst nightmares.”



The Pathfinder arrived via transwarp jump. No human would likely have noticed the subtle nuance of micro-meteors fluorescing against a planet size shield, but Losira did. She over-rode the helm's input, and swung them around hard to port and away from the planet, faster than the best of their pilots could have responded. Once the ship's safety was secure, she returned the helm. And to help them understand why, she released a probe that exploded on impact with the near invisible shield, luminescing in waves that rippled out from impact point.

Garcia came out of the command chair and approached the science station. Sendak didn't look up.

"You will not beam through that with Fleet tech," Sendak was saying.

Garcia processed the conversation Losira was having with Tuer. "Life signs?" "Indeterminate, interference from the shield."

Garcia was headed back to the chair and the Kelvan tech option when Tuer announced. "Our Kelvan shielding has automatically engaged. Kelvan ship coming uncloaked."

"Onscreen," Losira said, making it so herself. A Kelvan ship, an older design, but sparkling white and new as if it had just come off the manufacturing line. It reminded Garcia of a mushroom that had mated with an old Earth orbiter, the dragon space x..

"We're being hailed," Trini announced. "It's Kelinda."

Losira looked to Garcia, a knowing look with information exchanged, and if any of the other crew members caught it, there were no tales. "Accept the call."

Kelinda was there, shimmering like a hologram. She wasn't a star fleet issue hologram, but she was being manifested and was as solid as any of them. Her manifestation orb made her more substantial, but she liked making herself brighter, and apparently, taller. Garcia and Losira were likely the only ones who noticed she had increased her size. For whatever reasons, the gods like being giants.

"Hello, Tam," Kelinda said.

"I don't have time for you, grandmother," Garcia said. "This is a rescue mission."

"I know. Lower you Kelvan shields and commence," Kelinda said. "You will have to use your Kelvan tech, want you. I want to watch you in action. How many female colonist do you suppose are down there?"

"What do you want?" Garcia asked.

"The same thing I've always wanted, to rule the galaxy," Kelinda said. "And, have a legacy. I promise not to interfere with your rescue." She laughed at the face he made. "You don't trust me. Tell you what, promise not to shoot at me, and I will lower my shields and rescue them for you."

"That's not going to happen," Garcia said.

"Then I guess, we're at an impasse," Kelinda said.

"If I agree to go with you, will you allow them to complete their objective?" Garcia asked.

Losira gave him a cross look that he ignored. Garcia stepped closer to screen.

"I no longer want you," Kelinda said. "You're much too disagreeable. Throw yourself on your sword, and have your crew float your carcass over and I will consider once I am satisfied you're dead."

“With me dead, you won’t have hope of more progeny,” Garcia said.

Kelinda laughed. “You don’t think we have your genome in store? I could fast clone a hundred of you, just to spread your seed.”

“If you could do that, you would have,” Garcia said.

“What makes you think I haven’t? You’re not special, son. I made you. I can make more like you. Improved versions,” Kelinda said. Kelinda’s eyes dipped down, as she became aware of an alert.

“Incoming torpedoes from planet,” Tuer announced.

Garcia waved a ‘kill’ the transmission sign to Trini.

“Brace for impact,” McKnight at helm said.

No impact came. The illuminated orbs that were as fast and bright as photon torpedoes shot by, swarming around both the Pathfinder and the Kelvan ship, and shot off around the planet.

“What was that?” McKnight asked.

“Foo fighters,” Garcia said.

“It’s World War Two all over again?” Losira asked.

As always, the crew seemed mystified by Losira and Garcia’s conversation.

Sendak looked up Foo Fighters and found a reference.

“They’re back on sensors,” Tuer announced.

They came around from the other side of the planet, having made a complete orbit. Some slowed. They passed through the shields of both ship as if they weren’t there. There was evidence that they passed through both ships.

“Probes?” McKnight asked.

An orb arrived on the Bridge. Tuer immediately drew his weapon.

“Take no action!” Garcia said. He stepped forwards the orb. “We come in peace.”

The orb manifested a voice, its illumination sparking with each syllable. “How is it you can harbor such darkness and speak those words without duplicity?”

“I don’t understand,” Garcia said.

A creature appeared on the Bridge, standing alongside the Orb. Garcia extended a hand, wanting to test if it was a hologram. It brought a hand up, a gesture that suggested ‘don’t touch me.’ The creature wore a simple tunic, white, outlined with gold trim. It was clearly feminine. Its eyes were huge, making it more endearing from a human standpoint, as if it were a child, except it had other tales that clearly suggested it was an adult.

“Does it have a natural predator to keep it in check?” its voice was crisper, human.

“I don’t understand,” Garcia said.

“You are the origin of this thought vector,” it said.

“That didn’t help,” Garcia said. “You’re the Korob and Sylvia species.”

It blinked. “Yes.”

“But your form...”

“Some of us agreed to live our lives in this form in order to better relate to the life forms in this galaxy,” it said. “I have been transcribed, and can return to my natural form. My offspring cannot. I have decided to maintain this form for the remainder of my life, even though it has been greatly shortened. I have limited time to explain sufficiently to secure your cooperation. We require a resolution set. It is imperative you assist us. Will you join with me?”

“I don’t understand what you’re wanting,” Garcia said.

“Place your hand on the orb, opposite mine,” it said, placing one of its hands on the orb.

“It’s a vehicle?” Garcia asked.

“It is mind,” the creature said.

Garcia looked to Losira.

“Maybe I should volunteer,” Sendak said, standing.

The creature raised a finger and everyone was suddenly immobilized, except Garcia and Losira.

“That wasn’t necessary,” Garcia said.

“They are unharmed. I cannot stay the Losira mind without harming the ship. Only you will be allowed access,” the creature said.

“Why?” Garcia asked.

“Because you are the vector of the present thought contagion. Also, you are minimally skilled in lucidity,” the creature said.

“Do you have a name?” Garcia asked.

“Vidi,” she spoke. “Join me, while there is still time.”

Garcia reached up and touched the orb. On the Pathfinder, he remained facing Vidi. The light pulsed with their heartbeats until they were synchronized. From Garcia’s perspective, he was now standing in empty space. This was not unlike the whitewashed room he sometimes found himself in with Amanda Q, but there was some differences. He and Vidi were there alone. He found himself aroused and then he was inspired.

“Lucid dreaming!” Garcia said.

“This is the medium. I created this room for our introduction so that we are not too distracted by the wonderlands to come,” Vidi said.

“I don’t understand,” Garcia said.

“You are like infants. You are too close to Source,” Vidi said.

“I don’t understand,” Garcia said.

“The Source mind, the One, the creator of all,” Vidi said. “You have not learned self-restraint. You enmesh yourselves with your creations and think it’s you. You fall in love with self and others. Even now, if not restrained by my influence, we would likely be entangled in romantic interludes, and a thousand dream tangents as you explore all the possibilities of me and you and us. Try to stay focus.” She waved her hand and a console came up. Multiple timers were in play, countdown clocks. An image of two worlds, one being Pyrus VII. A line intersecting it with another planet in another galaxy, and that galaxy to another galaxy. “We have access to this timeline for another 12 hours, ten minutes...”

“Wait...” Garcia asked. “Explain.”

“Your galaxy is in temporal flux. It is changing. We have explored four major threads...”

“I hear music,” Garcia said.

“Major, minor, augmented, diminished,” Vidi said. “It will find resolution.”

“You’re mixing metaphors,” Garcia said. “You have access to the other time lines?”

“I cannot show you these,” Vidi said.

“You have access to our entire time line?” Garcia asked.

“I need you to focus,” Vidi said. She changed an image to add a world. “This is the world we have linked to Pyrus VII. The red is the contagion. It is spreading much faster than anticipated, and we have not found a suitable restraint. When it reaches this point...” a designated blip on the globe. “The contagion will spread to other planets in our galaxy. We predict our civilization will fall within ten years.” The planet was reduced to its arm in a galaxy. The galaxy changed from blue to red accompanying an accelerated clock.

“Your civilization spans the entire Galaxy, you can jump galaxies in the blink of an eye, which means you have access to all space/time, and you can’t come up with a solutions set to a pathogen. What the hell did you create?!” Garcia asked.

An image of an alien appeared. It was familiar and real enough that Garcia took a step back.

“Oh, fuck me,” Garcia said. “Tell me this is the Cameron tangent.”

“Why do you give harbor to such darkness?” Vida asked.

“Me? It was contained,” Garcia said. “In my head, my crews head. You let it out.”

“They were seeking resolutions sets. We were intrigued and expanded the algorithms to expedite resolution,” Vidi said.

“There is no solution set! Blow your damn planet up,” Garcia said.

“We cannot,” Vidi said.

“Then maybe your species needs to fall. Either you learn this lesson here, or when you’ve lost half your galaxy, or you don’t,” Garcia said.

“Kitara echoes this,” Vidi said.

“Kitara’s alive?” Garcia asked.

“All of them,” Vidi said.

“All of them? You mean the crew?” Garcia asked.

“Tomentor, Taruk, Tempest.” Vidi said, showing three very different Klingon ships. They dwindled away. “Three Kitaras...” Garcia’s Kitara, an alien Klingon that was more reptilian than mammal, and a Klingon that on surface appeared to be entirely human, but was not; she was Klingon to the core. “Resolve this situation, I will permit them and their crews to live. Of the hundred thousand colonist, we have rescued 42 thousand. They, too, will live. We will give them an unoccupied world, severed from their timelines, and they will continue despite the flux. They will have a better future with us than if they return to their respective timelines.”

Garcia fumed. “You cowards. You’re negotiating. You want me to do what you won’t do for yourselves?!”

“We cannot kill,” Vidi said.

“Your first two representatives seemed capable,” Garcia pointed out.

“The system flaw that resulted in increased aggression was corrected,” Vidi said. “Unlike your species, it would take us a millennia to respond to a new thing. In truth, no new thing would not develop without a resulting change in supporting structures...”

“But you will kill your hostages if I don’t help?” Garcia asked.

“No. We will eventually free them, but if we lose this galaxy to your contagion, they will likely not fair better than we,” Vidi said.

“They may surprise you,” Garcia said. She nodded. “Oh, your back up plan!”

“Life must continue,” Vidi said.

“You have access to tech that would allow me to shield my ships or planets from temporal change,” Garcia asked.

“I will not be the one to provide the destroyer of worlds this technology,” Vidi said. “You will, however, be compensated for this injury.” He became aware of an idle manifestation orb. It was activated and ready to receive commands. He did not feel his eyes sparking with his higher self, but he felt part of his consciousness moving into it. He owned it. He became alive elsewhere, disoriented, but the smell of Kelinda was around him...

“Focus here... don’t follow the tangent, let it be what it will be,” Vidi said.

“How...”

“You see yourself as one entity, one personality, but there are scores of you. Jung said it best when he said there were two selves, the mundane and the mythical, but I tell you those are the two extremes and in between these gestalts lies a continuum, all of which must have play for total harmonic resolution,” Vidi said. “I will not give you tech beyond thoughts, words you already know but do not heed: know thyself.”

Garcia again didn’t hide the fact he was angry, and somewhat confused, but he understood her point. A less developed civilization may ask Fleet for shields or replicators, and the answer would be no. He sorted through their dialogue, looking for loopholes to pursue a greater dialogue that included more access. So that not giving him access to tech was very prime directive thing to do, but not allowing to see what he was doing elsewhere. Was he doing it? Was that him or something else from him? How many personalities can exist in a mind? How many dream characters could a person meet over a life time of dreams, and if those personalities were just as solidly written as his was... A whole universe inside?! His mind tried to compress the thing into something more manageable. Maybe it was another timeline, and he was just given a glimpse. It couldn’t be him.

“I need greater clarity. You said it takes a millennia to respond...”

“I will educate you, but I fear you will reject my truth,” Vidi said.

“Try me,” Garcia said.

“You have met our kind before,” Vidi said.

“I know,” Garcia said, thinking about the first time Kirk arrive at Pyrus VII

“No, you don’t,” Vidi said. “Stardate 5221.3, the one known as Kirk stranded a non-corporal entity on a dead star...”

“Wait, the malevolent entity that was trying to take over the ship...” Garcia was practically reliving it in his mind on fast play, the words of the report visuals in his head. An alien ship stuck in orbit about a star, all it’s pods burst opened, dead in space, no crew. The alien creature had killed and or stranded sentient creatures around that star millions of years prior, and soon as it captured the Enterprise, destroyed what was left of the ship before it could be better understood, leaving on the Away Teams impressions on who and what they were.

“It was a child, separated from its adults, lost, frightened, angry no one would respond correctly...” Vidi said.

“Wait wait wait,” Garcia said, trying to sort the images from Vidi, which clearly altered the landscape of perspective. He was fighting gods, non-corporal entities using tech to manifest, wanting starships... “Your parents are the ones I am fighting?”

“Yes, no, similar,” Vidi said. “You think life begins here, but it doesn’t. It begins in the Between. They come here, they possess stars, they possess the planets, and slowly, over time, they developed life. They become one with the life they create. You have a concept for this. The Gaia principle.”

“I met Gaia,” Garcia said. “She wasn’t so nice.”

“I wasn’t speaking about these gods you’re quarreling with who usurped archetypal nomenclatures; I was speaking about a principle. In my frame of reference, Gaia is the true entity, and you humans are the dreams of Gaia. They are the reflection of the children she wishes to call forth. You are a reflection of her, and through your dreams she explores reality, seeking the optimum manifestation of her light in this realm.”

“You’re saying I am a child of Gaia?” Garcia said.

“Mostly. You have outside influences. You are a hybrid. And, more recently, a higher power than even these bit players has put her spin on you,” Vida said. On the display, she highlighted the energy field around the Milky Way galaxy. “This one is older, wiser, it sees and remembers all the variations. The Guardian of Forever is one with this field. This being, or energy, guides you because you are prominent in multiple fields. Your galaxy is in flux because there are principalities disputing the direction. The children of gods are playing. The children of children are playing. There is no dispute in our galaxy. We are more mature. You, the tulpas of Gaia, are pawns in a game of self-discovery.”

“Tulpa,” Garcia said. “A thought form. You’re saying we’re not true life forms.”

“I did not say that. You are sentient. In the realms you will hold sovereignty, and you work with Source to become that which is needed for your personal growth and the growth of others,” Vida said. She pointed to a new clock, a clock that was nearest to zeroing out.

“What happens when that runs out?” Garcia said.

“You will no longer be able to return to your body,” Vida said. “If you are going to do this, you must decide soon.”

“I only know one way to end this,” Garcia said.

“We will not block you,” Vida said.

“May I say goodbye to Kitara,” Garcia asked.

“How can you say goodbye to that which is always with you?” Vida asked. “Even at this level of awareness, you believe yourself separate from all that is? Speak from your heart, she will always hear. Listen with your heart, you will always hear. Perhaps you should complete your task, while there is still time.”

As he studied his clock, he noticed the time slowed, increased in available time, decreased in time.

“Focus changes the rate of flow,” Vidi explain.

“May I see Kitara?” Garcia asked.

Vidi seemed concerned, but nodded. “See with your heart.”

Garcia was aware of Kitara. Three Kitaras. The other two were alien, but he felt he knew them. They were each with child, and if he allowed himself, he could see them as pure souls, and as the future adults they were to become. They were stars, radiating love. He panned back, and saw where they were being kept. The three ships were hovering around a space station, a modular ship. The nearest star was two light years out,

and still, it was huge and bright. A supergiant, blue. He suddenly had a name. Sanduleak -69 degrees, 202a... SN 1987A.

“I’ve already done this. I do this...” Garcia nearly cried. “How can I do this?!”

“All that you need is available within the realm,” Vida said.

Garcia was angry that she didn’t understand his lament. He blinked. He was uncertain if he had made a decision, or someone had made a decision for him, but he found himself ethereally in a world room. On a pedestal, prominently displayed, was one of his Starburst weapons. It was a solid object, sleek, attractive, and deadly. He also saw it as an exploded view of all the internal working parts. A modified genesis device, capable of rendering an entire life affirming solar system from a nebula in the manner of days, only this was more destructive, converting all molecules directly into energy. In order to simplify the procedure, this Starburst weapon came with an ‘easy’ button. A big red button, not protected by a trigger guard.

The planet it was on orbited Sanduleak. Though it was probably the distance of Mars from Sol, the planet was so close to the star that it never saw night. Even if you were standing on the surface at midnight position, the glow of the blue supergiant would overwhelm the night. The planet was shielded, containing an atmosphere, completely terraformed. The star’s immense gravity well churned space time like a taffy machine pulling clouds of candy. This provided power and the lensing affect they needed to view all of time. The sun’s heat and light also gave them power. And at the planet’s proximity to the star, when he detonated his Starburst weapon, it would take out the planet and the star... The whole system would erupt and flare and would ping the skies of Earth in 1987.

Garcia looked at Vidi. There were a billion sentient life forms that called this planet home. Evacuation was underway, but it was limited. Had to be limited.

“I know,” Vidi answered his look. “And you could not do this without authority. You may have sovereignty in the realm, but that does not mean you can do anything you want. There are others with greater authority that can override your decisions.”

“What happens if I choose not to do this?” Garcia asked.

“I am not authorized to show you that,” Vidi said. She looked up and to the right. Her eyes came back. “You would not recover in time to do what you need to do.”

Without further ado, Garcia pressed the big button and his hand went through it.

“I thought you weren’t going to block me,” Garcia said.

“I am not. We are not,” Vidi said. “You now have insight into the nature of the problem.”

“How do I become solid here?” Garcia asked.

“You must separate yourself from Source,” Vidi said.

“How do I do that?” Garcia asked.

“I cannot tell you that,” Vidi said.

“Can’t you just put me here?” Garcia said.

“At this level of awareness, you are equally sovereign,” Vidi explained. “I cannot make you do anything. You now have further insight...”

“You have abducted our people in Kirk’s day against their will, you have abducted my ship with my crew...”

“They agreed to their abduction on a subconscious level, or it wouldn’t have happened,” Vidi said. “All of those who have been abducted agreed to this and more, at this level of awareness, whether they remember it at normal levels of awareness or not.”

“More? What more...”

“Your decision time is running out,” Vidi said. “Everything you need to decide is available in the realm.”

“I...” He heard Troi’s voice, ‘buttons often don’t work in dreams. “Is this a dream?” The distant sound of aboriginal drums could be teased out of the background. Tangents great and small, a ‘to do list,’ a ‘wish list,’ a ‘bucket list...’ Kelinda. Schrodinger’s cat. No, it was the Ambassador. He heard Losira’s unspoken word on the Bridge earlier, “confirmation.” So many clocks... Same clocks, different rates of spin... He wanted to argue. A solar year would still be a solar year. But would a solar year expressed as a constant be the same year if orbiting a black hole? Would the constant change the closer they arrived at the black hole? When could a year not be a year? His mind turned to Janeway. There was a dream of her, somewhere in his mind, fleeting, gone. There was an answer there that needed exploring but he would have to remember to do it later. He told himself to remember. He brought himself back to his specified presence.

“The closer we get, the harder it will be to resolve this...” Vidi said, emphasizing time.

He heard Kletsova’s voice. “Mayday, mayday...”

“Tatyana,” Garcia spoke to her. He found her on Pyrus VII. She was in the upper most transporter room on the central tower of the complex. If he looked, he would be able to confirm that most of the civilians were compromised; people were struggling, fighting, crying, being lost... But he dare not look for wanting to join in the struggle.

“Tam?! Oh, thank God!” Kletsova said. “We need immediate extraction...”

“I am sorry, Tatyana,” Garcia said. “That isn’t going to happen.”

“Tam, I am here, with one of the aliens,” Kletsova said.

Garcia recognized the alien, as she looked like Vida.

“I know. You should see coordinates on the transporter console. I need you to go there,” Garcia said.

Kletsova studied the console. “That’s just twenty meters west of where I am now. I am in the tower. You want me to fall?”

“I need you to go there,” Garcia said. “It’s imperative.”

“What is this?! My Kobay Ashi Maru?” Kletsova said.

“No. It’s mine. Trust me. You’re about to travel further than you have ever traveled before,” Garcia said.

“And what about...”

“It doesn’t matter whether she stays or goes,” Garcia said. “But this window is closing fast. I need you to go now.”

“NO!” another voice said. “He’s going to kill us...” She became frozen in place.

Garcia looked to Vidi for an explanation.

“She agrees at a higher level of consciousness. The lower consciousness is afraid, but stilled,” Vidi said.

“Proceed,” Garcia ordered Tatyana.

Kletsova didn't questions further. She seemed resigned, a body moving mechanically as she energized the transporter coils and performed a site to site. She arrived in a small room. A very small artifact, glowing in brilliance, like a miniature version of their inter-dimensional portal was on the wall, surrounded by tech that reminded her of a super collider design, captured her attention. In fact, the more she stared, the more certain she became this was a particle accelerator. Had she beamed through that small portal? Sunlight entered through a window and she looked out. The world was full of light. Diamond trees with emerald leaves sparkling in the brightest light she had ever seen. The blue of the sky was like sustained lightening. There were lakes of sapphires. There were buildings of gold, silver, and marble. There were fires raging.

"What do you see?" Garcia asked.

"It's beautiful. Is this heaven?" Kletsova asked.

"No," Garcia said.

"It's beautiful, and awful," Kletsova said. "They're dying. They're not even trying to fight it. Did we do this?"

Kletsova turned, expecting to see Garcia just behind her. She wanted to hug him. What she saw was a bomb. With an easy button.

"I need you to do this," Garcia said.

"You suck," Kletsova said.

No argument came.

"I..."

"Don't say it."

"Don't say I love you?!" Kletsova demanded.

"Will it make it easier for you?" Garcia asked.

"Maybe," Kletsova said. It was hard to look away from the bomb. A train wreck would be easier to turn away from. "You forgot something."

"What's that?" Garcia asked.

"It doesn't have a saddle," Kletsova said.

Garcia laughed. He gave her a cowboy hat. She reached up and tweaked the rim.

"I don't think I have ever heard you laugh at one of my jokes," Kletsova said.

"I love you," Garcia said.

"Goodbye, Admiral," Kletsova said, and pushed the button.

Chapter 8

Garcia and Vida found themselves back on the bridge of the Pathfinder. Her orb went dead, fell to the floor. She and Garcia both went to their knees. Losira went to help him up, but he waved her off. He struggled not to be sick, but made it to the command chair, pulled himself up, his eyes closed.

“Arm a starburst weapon, target Kelinda’s ship,” Garcia said. “Open hailing frequencies.”

Kelinda appeared on screen. She seemed angry. “Do you know what you have done?”

“He knows,” Vida said. Garcia offered her a hand and she stood.

Garcia opened his eyes, revealing a steady of glow of something deeper emerging.

“How did you...” Kelinda began, but she heard his words and saw the determination in his face. She saw the light. “What is this...”

“Insight,” Garcia said. “Prepare to fire.”

“At this range, you will kill yourself and your crew,” Kelinda said.

“I know,” Garcia said. “And you will have one less manifestation orb at your disposal. How many did you have? Twelve? One on Vida’s world. Gone. Oh, the one with President Fos, I own that one now. She is no longer compromised. Well, technically, she is still compromised, but working for me, instead of you or Hades.”

“You’re going to ruin everything!” Kelinda said.

“It’s looking more and more like that, doesn’t it,” Garcia agreed. “You should surrender now.”

“Fuck you,” Kelinda said.

“That’s rather crass, don’t you think? So beneath the superior intellect that wants to rule the galaxy. Galaxies?! You are over reaching, mother. You have a manifestation orb in the Andromeda galaxy?” Garcia said more than asked. “Oh, and that begs the question. Why did you save your body? Sentimental reasons?”

“What have you done to it?” Kelinda asked.

Garcia laughed. The light in his eyes diminished as his laughter subsided. He turned away from the viewer to hide the fact he was a little confused. He was piecing together memory and present visual information to construct meaning. Losira was in his vision. So was Tuer, armed, pointing at him.

“You okay?” Losira asked. He had evidence that she had muted the sound.

“Did I go all shiny on you?” Garcia asked.

Losira nodded. He observed a light in the background and frowned. “There is a Starburst armed and ready to deploy?”

Losira nodded.

“Makes sense to me. You?” Garcia asked.

Losira nodded.

“I feel euphoric,” Garcia said.

“I feel like that all the time,” Losira said.

“Seriously?” Garcia asked.

“Shall we continue?” Losira asked.

Garcia nodded and turned back to the screen and grandmother screaming: “Tam, what did you do to my body?!”

“I am not sure I did anything, or maybe I did everything. You know how going all superior corrupts me absolutely. Did you know I have a higher power, guardian angel, daemon, doppelganger, something... Still trying to sort it all out, but, oh! Your body has been reconstituted. Hades is really pissed about being in a female body,” Garcia said. “You used Preserver tech to switch places with Hades. You know that didn’t work so well for Janice Lester. How long do you suppose it will take before you and Hades start flipping back and forth? Will it happen faster if you’re not in an orb? Let’s find out, shall we? Fire.”

Tuer didn’t balk. He launched the weapon with a sense of purpose, proud to be dying in combat. Even as the Starburst was launched, Kelinda’s ship went to warp.

“Preparing to disarm missile,” Tuer said.

“Belay that,” Garcia said. “Prepare to take us to warp...”

“Admiral?” Sendak said. “The Pyrus VII shields are down. I have life signs.”

“Nothing leaves that planet,” Garcia said. “Scan for potential ships. Helm prepare to take us quarter of a light year out, warp one... Engage...”

The Pathfinder departed even as the first spark of Starburst waves radiated from the planet’s surface. Sensors were already confirming the planet’s destruction. They would likely have departed for their next destination before the visual confirmation caught up to them.

“Maintain this position for now. Department head meeting, one hour. Sendak, assign quarters to Vida. Also, delete any scans you’ve made of her. Limit all reports of her to text files only. Losira, with me,”



Garcia said, and went straight way to the Lift. The doors closed, leaving the two alone and out of ear shot.

“Shuttle bay,” Garcia said.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Not yet,” Garcia said. “Activate the gate to Iotia. Inform Jay I want to see him.”

“Done,” Losira said. “You want company?”

“I will only be gone ten minutes tops. Close the portal as soon as you have confirmation I have arrived,” Garcia said.

“Aye, Admiral,” Losira said.

The lift open on deck and they proceeded to the bay where an open portal awaited; guards came to attention and saluted. Losira was with him to the edge of the gate. He looked at the shimmering surface of the portal, how less brilliant his seemed compared to Vida’s gate. Of course, his edge of the bubble held a greater width than theirs.

“Can it become more complicated?” Garcia asked.

“My personal point of view, at a certain level of complexity you get a compulsory perspective change where you become aware of a new level, and the fractals line up to resemble something fairly ordinary,” Losira said.

“And beautiful,” Garcia said. “And repetitious. Like waking from a dream to realize you’re still in a dream. How many false awakenings can there be?”

Losira said. "I don't know. There are things that even AI can't know, math formulas that are unsolvable at this level of being. It is why we need your kind, so we don't give up."

"When I stop falling, remind to breathe," Garcia said.

Garcia stepped through the gate and arrived on Iotia, not hearing her wish: 'may we never stop falling together.' The gate shut off as he walked down the ramp. Jay and Carter were there to greet him. Only the Colonel was in the control room above. He nodded. Jay handed him the temporal bracelet that would allow him to cycle. They knew why he was here.

"How many times now?" Garcia asked.

"Enough," Jay said.

Garcia took examine it. It reminded him of something from fiction, from thing called 'steam punk,' some obvious gears, and slightly domed crystal that was illuminated, and just a hint of tangent colors when tilted away from the eyes. He deliberated taking off the slave bracelet, a thing no wider than a fitbit, but he couldn't see taking that off his left arm. He adjusted it and fitted the new tech to his arm. It secured itself to his arm, fitting perfectly. It incorporated the slaver bit into itself. The seams disappeared. It became invisible.

"Yeah, spooky, isn't it," Carter said.

"We suspect AI tech; the device is likely sentient," Jay said. "Probably communicating with another device outside of space/time."

"We have a lot of speculative ideas about how it works," Carter said. "Some cross over into metaphysics."

Garcia went to shake Jay's hand. Their hands came together. Garcia's grip tightened automatically, and his left hand grabbed Jay's wrist. His eyes went wide, but his focus was distant. Jay's free hand came up to Garcia's arm, wanting to ease the transition.

"Fuck me..." Garcia was saying,

"Easy, easy," Jay was saying. "Give it a moment."

"What is that?" Garcia said.

"Downloads," Jay said.

"We've done this before?!" Garcia said.

"A couple times," Jay said. "Actually have a game going, guessing where you were based on the nuance change in 'fuck me.'"

"Seriously?" Garcia asked.

"The déjà vu sense will dissipate somewhat with acclimation," Jay said.

"Your experience is likely going to be very different to ours," Carter said. "The Kelvan mind can process much more information, and you're more in touch with your intuition. Jay and I have flashes of insight, like remembering dream fragments, but most of our memories are due to experiencing a linear progression through a looped time interval."

"Really?" Garcia asked

"Everyone, even the best physicist, forget that time is not linear. It is an ever present now, but we experience past, present, and future as separate events due to imposed limits on consciousness," Carter said. "All future events are being telegraphed back to this point where your brain is assimilating it in real time. No, more precisely, all

time, all information you have access to, past present and future, are available to you, but your mind assimilates what it needs to affirm the story of you from a perceived event horizon called the present. If you sit down and meditated, you might be able to track an individual timeline without having to physically walk the path. It's all there, all the time."

"So, why don't I suddenly have greater clarity?" Garcia asked.

"Maybe you do, subconsciously, but your fronting personality is ignoring it. Maybe you will experience it in spurts. At any one moment, our minds have access to upwards of twelve billion bits of information. Your mind, utilizing your personality filters, sorts the information into usable packets based on its evaluation of your personality's perceived needs and beliefs. All information is stored in your brain for archival confirmation. The medical model has always said the brain is us, but it's nothing more than a tenuous sand painting. We are more than our brains. Hell, we're more than the fronting personality. Erikson was accurate when he stated the subconscious is really the one in control and that our perceived control is an illusion," Carter said.

"Erikson? The hypnotist? You know of him?" Garcia asked.

"Yeah, why? You want to meet him?" Carter asked.

"No," Garcia said. "No," he affirmed. "I was just speaking about Jung with someone... There's a connection here. Synchronicity..."

"Tam, don't kill yourself," Jay said. "Your save point is here."

"Fuck me. Seriously?!" Garcia asked. "I thought I would cycle back to your start point."

"Yeah, sorry," Jay said.

"How many times have we done this?!" Garcia demanded.

"Enough," Jay said.

"Just enough," Carter agreed.

Garcia was distraught. "I really thought..."

"You were going to save them. Save her," Jay said. "Some things can't be undone, even with the save feature enabled."

"Will I ever be as wise as you?" Garcia asked.

"You will be as wise as you, friend," Jay said.

Garcia signaled that he wanted to return. The colonel sipped his coffee, set it down, and waved farewell. The Iotia gate began to spin. Jay took Garcia's arm and led him further down the ramp, outside of the initial event horizon flux zone.

"Thank you for being a part of my life," Garcia said. "Even if I unravel it all, I am grateful for you."

Jay and Carter took a turn to hug him.

"If you ever need to forget a cycle, hold a finger here for a five count," Carter said, touching an energetic point of the hand between thumb and finger; it was the pressure point for eliminating headaches. "It will delete the most immediate cycle."

"Kind of defeats the purpose, doesn't it?" Garcia said.

"There are tangents that are unbearable," Jay said.

"Like what?" Garcia asked.

"We all go crazy sometimes. Do things we wish we hadn't," Carter said. "Funny, when you think about it. Gods becoming human go crazy, humans becoming gods go crazy. It takes time to become appropriately civilized in either direction."

"Civilized?" Garcia said. "If I forget, then I am doomed to repeat..."

“Yes,” Carter said.

“Really?” Jay asked.

“Still, sometimes, even a temporary reprieve is helpful,” Carter said. “In the end, we bear it all. Everything we have ever done, witnessed, thought... There’s no way around that part. Maybe that’s why forgiveness and compassion has always been the way of the saints.”

Garcia turned and headed back up to the gate and home. He hesitated, looking at his wrist. The device was heavy. Much heavier than the Kelvan control interface band. Its heaviness was not in its mass.

“Can I take it off?” Garcia asked, not looking back.

“No,” Carter said.

“It’s heavy,” Garcia said.

“Yeah,” they agreed.

He chose to ignore it. He pushed through the gate and was gone.

“Was hoping he was going to take a time out, maybe go live a life with Susanne,” Jay said.

“He’s done that,” Carter said.

“Really. Why don’t I remember?”

Carter kissed him.

“That’s new,” Jay said.

“No, not really,” Carter said, taking his hand and leading him away from the gate.



The meeting room was full. Those who were sitting stood. He didn’t ask them to sit. He simply went to his chair and they sat after he had done so. He didn’t meet anyone’s eyes for a long time.

“The orb that accompanied Vida is a spaceship. A spaceship and a transmuter. Simone, I want you to take it and see what your scientist can make of it. If nothing else, there are holographic memory crystals which will give you sufficient information as to why I destroyed their world. At their request,” Garcia said. “If you want further information, reference SN 1987A, type II supernova in the Large Magellan Cloud.”

He met McCoy’s eyes. “I was unable to personally deploy it due to my enmeshment with the alien psyche.” He took time to meet the eyes of his senior officers around the table. He avoided Trini’s eyes. “First Lt Tatyana Kletsova, in compliance with my orders, detonated the device. She is no longer with us. Make sure her files reflect she was following my orders, and that it is my belief that not only did she save a foreign galactic civilization, but she saved ours as well.”

Trini left the room, the sounds of her sobbing could be heard before the door closed.

“42 thousand of the Pyrus VII colonist were transferred to the Magellan cloud, along with the Tempest and crew. There is evidence for three other Klingon vessels, from disparate time lines also pulled to that side, each commanded by Kitara, or version thereof. In exchange for saving their civilization, I have been promised that these survivors will be provided a colony world and shielded from any further temporal displacement affects that happens here when the time changes.”

Garcia was quiet. In his mind he asked Kitara if she were okay. He didn't hear words. He simply felt comfort. It is what it is.

"Regardless of what I do or don't do, this timeline, everything we know and love and hate, is coming to a close. I can't tell you what to do with that information. Fight it, accept it, hell- kill me, I am okay with that, but if you were to accept one more charge from me, not a command, simply a request, help me figure out what the best course of action is so that no matter what happens here, no matter what gets erased, we seed that next Universe with such an overwhelming preponderance of evidence that those great men and women who proceed us might know there is a better way. Let's give them the options that we don't seem to have. Let them know, if the Pathfinder didn't open the door to right, it illuminated the door so they could knock for themselves," Garcia said. He stood up.

"If you have questions, group email, I will answer to the best of my ability and copy everyone in," Garcia said. He looked to Undine. "I am retiring to planet Bliss for the time being. I will coordinate all future affairs with you from there. I will inform you if I decide to partake of any excursions. Simone, Losira, Undine, continue with your assigned mission sets. That's all."

McCoy stood and followed him out.

"That's not all," McCoy said. Garcia gave him a surprise look that reminded him of Spock. "That can't be all."

The door remained opened due to McCoy's presence within the sensor. It was clear people were listening.

"Rossi, would you please check on Trini," Garcia asked.

Rossi, who was standing near the door, squeezed by McCoy and headed in search of Trini. Garcia placed his hands in the small of his back.

"You were enmeshed in alien mind?" McCoy asked.

"This is one of those question that could be resolved via correspondence," Garcia said.

"You blew up their planet!" McCoy said.

"You were already aware that I blew it up," Garcia said, reminding him of the meeting where President Fos presented him with the evidence that SN 1987A was his fault."

"You told her you wouldn't do it!" McCoy reminded him. "You promised me you wouldn't do it."

"Well, maybe, had you killed me when Guinan first handed you over to me I wouldn't have done all of this! I wouldn't have become this Kelvan monster destroying everything we know," Garcia snapped.

McCoy raged, sorting it through, holding peace just long enough. "That's not our way."

"I know," Garcia said, equally calmed.

"There were survivors on Pyrus VII. We could have taken the time to save them," McCoy said.

"No. I could not risk lowering our shields. I could not risk Kelinda coming back and taking samples of those life forms. Just one of those things loosed on to a Federation world would be the end of that world, perhaps even our own civilization," Garcia said.

“Their world, I had no choice. Pyrus VII. I had more of a choice, I could have taken a greater risk. I chose not to. That, too, will be in my report to Star Fleet.”

“They’re more advance than us and they just let you blow up their planet?” McCoy said.

“Just as you and Guinan could not kill me as a child, they too can’t kill others. They get enmeshed. They anthropomorphize everything. Teddy bears. Thoughts of teddy bears. They see everything as alive and sacred, and they would have let it wipe out everything they know. They have gateways touching all of space and time. They didn’t ask me to destroy that world. They begged me to,” Garcia said. “Father. They’re time travelers. They don’t just see our galaxy as a point of light in their sky, they see the entirety of it from cradle to grave. They have access to it at multiple points throughout the time stream. If one of those creatures escaped either Pyras VII, or their other outpost, we would have lost both galaxies to something horrendously dark. Darker than the darkness we’re headed into. It would be better if no life forms evolved in the Milky Way at all than the eventuality they were confronted with. We were confronted with.”

“If they were so skilled at rewriting history, why couldn’t they rewrite it for themselves?” McCoy asked. “Why you.”

“Great question. A correspondence level question. Their history, from their point of view, is perfect. There is no disagreement or flux in their timelines. Yes, timelines. A tapestry of blended timelines comprised of the trillions of individual sentient beings operating as one. Not a hive mind, a collective group mind,” Garcia explained. “We are in flux because there is discord.”

“This is just the kind of bull shit, plot contrivance malarkey you always come up with to avoid...”

“I am not avoiding anything!” Garcia snapped. “I agree with you. This is exactly what you would find in a Garcia holographic novel. Maybe there are copy right issues and people squabbling over toy marketing right, I don’t know. I don’t care. All I want to do is make things right, as best I can. That’s all I ever wanted. Maybe there is a space where we can all meet and all eventualities exist simultaneously, and there is harmony between worlds and time streams. I don’t know. I do know there is a darkness coming that’s unavoidable. You tell me; what do you want to do? If I could send you, personally, back to the beginning of your life, knowing everything you know, what would you do differently?”

McCoy didn’t have an answer.

“Yeah. Let me know when you figure that out,” Garcia said, and walked away.

Chapter 9

Club Bliss on Sherman's planet was not to be confused with planet Bliss, the planet he had given to an alien species seeking refuge from the war with the gods. Club Bliss was a fortress, labeled a den of iniquity by some, an oasis of others. It was sex, drugs, and rock and roll most the time, a place where all sorts of people came for secret rendezvous, a place to conduct business and plot conspiracies, and sell merchandise, legal and illegal. The club was the center attraction to the city that spread out under its watch. Initially a fort built by a Klingon who carved his way into the solitary butte that jutted up from the plain and planted his flag, it had served a purpose for hundreds of years. Now, under Garcia's care, only one thing had changed. His private office lacked the furniture it once had, replaced with holographic overlays that essentially turned it into a holodeck. His office décor changed with his moods. In the air before him was the Milky Way. Stars were illuminated. Spread across a desk were maps and books of stars, both real and imaged through holographic technology, pieced together from photos or archived data files. Duana and Ilona, utilizing manifestations orbs, were also buried in the research.

Duana and Ilona looked up as Tomoko entered. Garcia did not look up, but he stopped reading the text he was leaning over.

"It's time," Tomoko said.

Garcia nodded. He accompanied Tomoko to the gateway, followed by Duana and Ilona, and they went to the New Constitution. They arrived on the hangar deck. The crew in total was gathered. Garcia approached the podium, as Duana, Ilona, and Tomoko took their spots amongst the crew. The gateway shimmered off. The silence was deafening.

"I have written scores of books, songs, plays, speeches... I trained with professional performers, rehearsed, been in productions. I hold the equivalent of doctorate of arts in communication, and none of that work has prepared me for today. I have trained in Star Fleet, done simulation after simulation, scores of training exercises and tests and I witness to you today that there is no level of training, no level of experiences that can ever prepare you for this duty... No, this confession, this personal failure in my obligation to protect and serve you the way you protect and serve each other daily. The way you protect me. Whether history will find us heroes or villains, whether history remembers us at all, whether I was right or wrong, misguided, or simply determine to hold that precarious, nebulous line, the line that I ask each and every one of you to hold daily, we will persevere. We will remember. Tatyana Kletsova, without fail, without hesitation, at my command, sacrificed her life, completing her last duty. In doing so, she took a great number of lives, but saved a galaxy of hundreds of trillions of sentient beings. She may not get the recognition she deserves, so I charge you with remembering her, honoring her, and carrying it as far as you can. I say as far as you can because you know as well as I, we are not done, we are still in harm's way, and I intend to take all the way to that abyss, into its very heart if that's what it takes... What I asked of her, I am still asking of you. You are skilled. You are brave. And you have all gotten off lucky. I have gotten off lucky. We are all one command, one request, one slip away from eternity.

"This decision I made today came with costs. Kletsova's life was a toll. She was my officer. She was my friend. She was the mother of our unborn child. The decision today also stranded my first officer, my first captain, my friend, my love, the crew

that served her, served with us, and their children to be, in the furthest reaches of a galaxy beyond the local group. I charge you to remember them as well, and keep them in your prayers. It is my firm belief that though we may be separated by unimaginable distance, their hearts hear our songs. Send love, send strength, send hope. I know they are sending us the same.

“God speed, my friends, and may I find you well in that far country where I, too, will one day go. Where we all will one day go. God speed. And always, travel light.”

Undine called the crew to attention. An illuminated orb, accompanying plaque, surrounded in artificial reef was taken to the outer edge of the shuttle bay, pushed through the force field, and set adrift. Honors, human and Klingon, were served, and then the crew dismissed. Garcia opened the gate and returned to Club Bliss.



Garcia was at his table at Club Bliss, alone. Duana and Ilona were on the dance floor, visible to him. He had a Romulan Ale set before him, untouched. An invisible sound curtain around his table kept the club music at a minimum. It was sufficiently loud enough he could tune into it if he chose, or ignore it in favor of reading. He wasn't reading, but he stared at the PADD as if reading, and no one challenged that. The sound level spiked and diminished as someone passed into his bubble. He looked up to see Tini. He remained neutral, neither smiling nor frowning. Even when she took off her communicator pin and dropped it to the table, he gave no clue to his inner world's reaction.

“I quit,” Trini said.

“Good for you,” Garcia said.

“What does that mean?!” Trini asked, clearly defensively.

“What do you think it means?” Garcia asked.

“I don't know, that's why I am asking...” Trini said.

“You wanted me to argue with you? Beg you not to quit?” Garcia asked.

“Yes,” Trini said.

“You're an adult. You're a Star Fleet officer. You're making a command decision. Good for you,” Garcia said. “I will make arrangements for you to stay here until transport can be obtained to return you to Earth. Your shipboard possession will be packed and delivered to you.”

“But...”

“Didn't think this all through?” Garcia said. “You are crew on the most advanced, secretive ship in Star Fleet, with the most sensitive mission directive in Star Fleet history, did you think you could quit and come and go as you please? Hell, you're lucky I don't throw you in the brig until you're delivered to Star Fleet command where you can be properly debriefed.” If he seemed concerned for the level of conflicting emotions she was holding, he didn't show it.

“You don't understand!” Trini said.

“I don't understand?” Garcia said. “That you're grieving the loss of your children. Yeah, I get it, but they're not dead,” he said patting the pouch he was holding. “But you're grieving them and the telepathic connection none the less. You're grieving the loss of the idea of motherhood and the expected birth experience. You're grieving the fact

they will be raised in an environment suitable for telepaths, definitely by a telepathic surrogate mother, which may or may not include you. You're having flashbacks to the assault, nightmares about the transference of the babies, which if I were performing an assessment would likely qualify you for a diagnosis of PTSD. The fact our ship is frequently targeted and the center of chaos probably fuels your preoccupation with loss and death. You're not sleeping well, having nightmares. And now, you're grieving the loss of your friend, who you ended on bad terms with. You're angry with me because I sent her to her death and blew up another star system. Seeing me carrying our children reminds you of the loss and the fact I keep putting myself and the children and everyone into mortal danger infuriates you. Tell me, Trini, what don't I understand?"

Trini sat down and cried. She folded her arms on the table and cried face down. Garcia let her. After a moment, he scooted over and sat by her. She eventually stopped crying. He put a hand on her back, touched her gently, patted gently. When she sat up, making her face available, he handed her a tissue to wipe her face. When she finished, he pulled her into him. She went to his embrace without struggle. He held her badge, flipping it.

"Getting as far from me as you can, yeah, that's just fight or flight, and probably the best thought you can think," Garcia said. "If that's what you want, you will have my support. Maybe when the time change occurs, you will have a pleasant life having never known me or any of this. Maybe you and Tatyana will be together again. Maybe you will never have been born."

Garcia put her comm badge back on her shirt. "Or, maybe you should go back to work, continue to see Rossi, and figure this thing out. The thing you're running from is inside you."

"I know," Trini said.

Trini took the badge back off, set it on the table, and got up.

"I'll await word for the transport at the hotel," Trini said.

Trini walked away.



Tomoko interrupted Garcia's studying to inform him Rossi was present and requesting to see him. She made no comment about the meal he hadn't touched.

"Show her in," Garcia said. He gave an indirect gesture to Duana and Ilona and they departed the room along with Tomoko.

Rossi entered and assessed the situation, noting the food and drink, the star charts. She touched one of the galaxies suspended in the office. "Large Magellanic Cloud I take it," Rossi said.

"Yeah," Garcia said.

"Do you know which planet they were given?" Rossi asked.

"No," Garcia said. "Several good candidates near the Tarantula Nebula, near enough to SN1987a..."

She took a seat near him, studied him indirectly while taking in the office. "I saw that you checked my schedule. Looking to see me?"

"This is after hours for you," Garcia said. "And, no doubt you've had your share of helping people process."

“It’s what we do,” Rossi said.

“I guess you want to talk about Trini,” Garcia said.

“Not particularly. You?” Rossi asked.

“No,” Garcia said.

They both were silent and then suddenly both said “I am sorry” at the same time. Garcia actually smiled, nodded, and asked, “You first, what are you sorry for?”

“Provoking you earlier. I was wrong,” Rossi said.

Garcia shrugged. “So was I...”

“This feel awkward,” Rossi said. “Unusually so for us.”

“I tired of being angry around you. I hope I am tired of being angry all together,” Garcia said.

“Acceptance?” Rossi asked.

Garcia shrugged.

“Let me affirm something. I suspect you know, but I don’t want to speculate. I am not against promiscuity. I don’t like the word because it fails to capture human interactions from culture to culture, and time to time. In the 20th century, America, your rate of partnering would likely have resulted in a diagnosis of Bipolar, because that is one of the measures of that illness,” Rossi said. “But that is not you. I do see boundary issues as a component of this. I suspect dominance as a part of this, but again, that could be my bias; I don’t understand the Kelvan mindset, their biological drives, or their cultural drives and how that has altered them over time. We clearly affected them, changing their direction since their Kirk incident. This thing you have was likely a necessary survival skill. You have an incredibly high empathic sense. No matter who you are with, you tune into them, and you absolutely care and love for them instantaneously at levels most people rarely achieve over a life time. When you are intimate, is not just you being self-serving. Lust is a component, but this is more. What I am trying to say, and perhaps badly, I don’t hate you because of your degree of sexual flexibility. I am not angry. I am not trying to extinguish or exasperate it or punish you. I personally don’t agree with the open lifestyle, but that is not me trying to make you conform to my expectation. I am sorry if I failed to communicate that previously. This is not your measure for brokenness.”

Garcia nodded, thinking it through. “Thank you for that,” Garcia said. “Empathy is something I struggle with. I hate meeting people because I don’t ever want to say goodbye.”

“Interesting,” Rossi said. “And yet, you entered Star Fleet, became the ultimate explorer, where ‘goodbyes’ are a part of the lifestyle.”

“Yeah,” Garcia said.

“Have you heard from Star Fleet Command?” Rossi asked.

A micro flash of anger was there. “Yeah,” he said, pointing to a PADD if she wanted to read it for herself. “A lot of meaningless words that ultimately spell out no change in mission status.”

“You disagree with them?” Rossi asked.

“I am compromised on several fronts. This whole becoming a god thing is just one of them,” Garcia said. “I became enmeshed with an alien psyche, more substantial than a mind meld, blown up two more planets, and still they don’t ask me to resign.”

“Do you want to resign?” Rossi asked.

“Yes,” Garcia said.

“What do you suppose will happen if you do?” Rossi asked.

“I know what will happen,” Garcia said.

“Oh?” Rossi said, interested.

“Being enmeshed changed me. Like I could be changed more! This is so complex...” Garcia said. He made a gesture with his hands and his desk and charts and galactic maps went away. He got up and moved his chair closer to Rossi. He returned and got the side table that held his food and drink. There were three cups, one of which he made available to her and poured tea. He poured himself a cup and sat down. “Ever heard of the Captain’s table?”

Rossi picked up her tea, watching him over the brim, through a light steam made manifest due to the cold, dry air of the office. The drink was just warm enough to drink without being scalding.

“You’ve never invited me to dine with you...”

“Not that. This is different. Ineffable, advised not to discuss it, fear of god and being pulled out command due to delusions... You’ve interviewed Captains and Admirals, done metrics on them to determine their mental health,” Garcia said. “No one’s ever mentioned the Captain’s table phenomenon?”

“Phenomenon?” Rossi said.

“Consider it a club no one is supposed to talk about,” Garcia said.

“Movie reference? You’re going to talk about it?” Rossi asked.

Garcia was looking into his tea. “There’s a supernatural feel to it. It’s not, I don’t think, but there is this ambiance... I felt that when I traveled with Vidi.”

“You didn’t leave the bridge,” Rossi pointed out.

“Oh, I went further than the bridge,” Garcia said. “I went to the Large Magellanic Cloud. I was taken to the very edge of their galaxy of origin, but informed if I crossed over, that was it, I would not be able to return. Also, if I tarried too long, I wouldn’t be able to return... It was like being in a dream, only not a dream. I remember being immersed in light, ineffable keeps popping in my head. The closest I have come to describing it is sustained lightening. This is not even my description, but it fits well enough. A blue light. There are scattering of references to it, in religious text, and lucid dreaming text.” Garcia sorted his eyes still distant, as if he were still there, seeing something she couldn’t. “They actually call it Blue. I thought they were discussing blue tooth technology. There’s a medium, a tech, an intelligence, something indescribable that pervades the entire Universe. They have access to it. They live simultaneously in that and in the physical universe. The closest analogy I have is like VR gamers plugged into their games and yet still being aware they have physical bodies in a bed, only they don’t zone out, they do both at the same time. Some operate multiple bodies and exist in the medium simultaneously. They see the physical galaxy as crystalized information sets, a subset of a higher functionality which we all originate from. They...”

“You’re saying ‘they’ see it,” Rossi said. “What did you see?”

“When I was there, I experienced consensus,” Garcia said. “It was not coerced. I was still me, I could sort how specifically differentiated I am, was, will be... My uniqueness was treasured, it had value. They wanted me to tell all I know about my life and experiences and feelings, which would be a study point for a thousands of years, but there was consensus at my level of understanding, that is the real world, and this

existence is just sand castles. And, there is even a greater world, more real than even theirs, waiting for us to evolve to point we can access it. They don't believe in death. Destroying that world didn't kill their people, it liberated them. Destroying that world didn't eliminate the darkness that was unleashed, it simply contained it by locking it into a situational metaphor that allowed it to be examined remotely."

Rossi was clearly listening, not drinking her tea. "Almost sounds like a Near Death Experience."

"Yes," Garcia agreed. "I experienced bifurcation. I was in multiple places at once. I also met Mr. Shiny."

"Mr. Shiny?" Rossi asked.

"The entity I am becoming," Garcia said. "My evolution has been retarded to coincide with the Event. I don't know if that means I will have intermittent flashes of insight, or if he is done with me until the event. He is me and not me. Carl Jung got this right. There are two people. There is the mundane me and there is this mythical me. There are more 'me's than I can count. Every age of me, every plank unit of space/time me, there are the me's that acclimated to different cultural and language sets. The me that is or was mostly aligned with the Klingon mindset seems less poignant somehow, as if Kitara's distance has profoundly affected me. Was it a mask I wore to interface with her?"

"Don't we all wear masks to interface?" Rossi asked.

Garcia nodded. "Yeah. Oh, nice, full circle. I said I was sorry. I was angry with you because interfacing without the intimacy is a mask, and I wanted to get rid of the masks and be closer to you, but I also see your point, intimacy is also a mask, one I use all too frequently that may not actually allow me to be closer to others. Can we ever see our true selves at this level of being?"

Rossi shrugged. It was almost imperceptible. If Garcia saw it, it was on an unconscious level. She had come to the edge of her seat.

Garcia put his tea down. He put his tea down. He put his hands in his lap. He stared at the floor. "I was raped." There was no emotion, it was just a statement. "I don't think it means what people think it means. It was so long ago and I don't trust the memories of it. Maybe I don't have to trust the memories of it. Maybe I just need to relate to my experience of the memory of it, regardless of the degree of accuracy. I witnessed my mother being raped. I witnessed her witnessing me being raped. I remember being told to make them believe I was enjoying it or they would kill her. I remember after that there was never a safe place to go. They always found us, no matter where we went. It became predictable. I took measures to minimize the physical harm that came. There were too many events of me being brutalized to give a count, or the specific designated age of the life cycle, but a range of four to sixteen seems about right. I lived thousands of lives before I was even born. I was a victim become victimizer. There are tangents where I conquered and enslaved Earth. There are tangents when I conquered the galaxy. And here I am, today, wondering is all of this because of that or because of who I am."

Chapter 10

Kitara woke on a hard bed that was not hers, not her quarters. She got up prepared to fight, but there was no one to fight. Daylight streamed through a window. She approached cautiously and peered out. A vast city sprawled out before, an ocean in the distance. She had to take a harder look. She gripped the window feeling a sense of vertigo. There was evidence that the city she was in was floating. Parts of the city were domed. There were places where the waters flowed from the city off the edge and to the earth below it. She suspected the water dissipated in the air before reaching the ground. A forest of giant trees greater than sequoias spread as far as she could see. There was movement, a tram went by below. People, humanoids, most likely humans, based on assumptions from their general looks and movement from her present perspective, came and went on catwalks and across enclosed bridges connecting domes. Opposite the window in her room was a door and when she took it, she found it led to a living area. There was a human male sitting in a chair as if waiting for her. He smile.

“Hello, Kitara,” he said, pleasantly. “May I call you Ki?”

“No,” she said.

“Okay,” he said, standing up.

He took a step towards her, bringing his hand up in a human gesture to shake hands. Kitara attacked, taking the wrist and pulling him in towards an elbow that should have struck his face. There a great deal of confusion when there was stillness and he had the superior position behind her, arm locked around her neck, her hands on his arm to prevent choking.

“I do not want to harm you, Kitara,” he said. “My name is Tackle. I am here to help facilitate your acclimation process.”

“I don’t intend to acclimate,” Kitara said. “I intend to kill you and escape.”

“You cannot kill me,” Tackle said. “And there’s no need. Once you have met minimum acclimation, you will be permitted to leave. Your starships awaits your command.”

Kitara pulled on his arm, executing a move that should free her, simultaneous with a move that should have caused him harm. She spun, no one was near her. She found him half way across the room, a dining table between them.

“What are you?” Kitara said.

“I am a human Klingon hybrid,” Tackle said. “My name, again, is Tackle.”

“You’re named after a pet?” Kitara said.

“Oh! I like my name,” Tackle said.

“You named yourself?” Kitara asked.

“It was agreed upon,” Tackle said.

“I think you’re lying,” Kitara said.

“About my name?” Tackle asked.

“About being a human Klingon hybrid,” Kitara said. “You move too fast. You’re a hologram.”

“I am actually a human Klingon hybrid,” Tackle said. “And I move this fast due to technological assists. That is why I say you cannot kill me. We, the children, are a thousand years more advanced from what you once knew. We are one with our tech. We can use force fields and gravity fields and instantaneous transport beams and hyper

positional awareness with augmented reality labels describing potential vector and threat arcs and... Oh, I think I have piqued your interest.”

He approached her, not by going around the table, but by going over it, like a cat. No, he became a literal cat. One moment he was human, then he was cat leaping to the table top. He walked across the table, proudly, and jumped down, and was human on the other side. Kitara took a step back. She pointed at him warningly.

“You are not human. You are not Klingon,” Kitara said.

“I am both,” Tackle said. “Imagine you could use your transporter to change forms. You could become a targ, if you wanted to. You could change genders. You could become an inanimate object if you wanted. Most people don’t. Rocks are fairly boring. This is the technology your children’s children will have access to. They will become one with their tech and tech will be one with them. There is no more aging. There is limited death.”

“Then you can still die,” Kitara said.

“Yes. Accidents happen. Murders still happen. Wars. Suicides,” Tackle said. “It’s not utopia, but perhaps closer than we have ever been. Every sentient species from the Milky Way galaxy is represented here, in actuality, or vicariously through an elected membership. Humanity was chosen as the bridge species because of their ability to adapt, but also because of their extreme behaviors on the continuum. They can be aggressive or peaceful. They are usually somewhere between the two extremes. Klingons tend to be on the more aggressive side of the spectrum. Humans tend to bring temperance. Without the humans, Klingons are more feral than honey badgers on steroids. We represent the ideal future, where we exist in peaceful exploration of all there is.”

“I don’t believe you,” Kitara said.

“Most people don’t. It’s hard to make the leap from where you were to where you will be, but where you were was necessary for this to be,” Tackle said. “There is presently a Consortium of five races. Humans are likely to be invited to be the sixth race to join the consortium. There is ongoing debate on that score. You have recently met one of the races, the ones humans refer to as Blue Avians. You also are familiar with Gray queen, the one Garcia gave refuge to in your timeline.”

“How long do you intend to hold me prisoner?” Kitara asked.

“You are not a prisoner,” Tackle said. “You may go where you like. And, when you have finished acclimating, you will have access to your starship.”

Kitara tested the theory by going for the next visible door. She found herself in a corridor. People at the end of the corridor, walking away from her, disappeared. She tried following them, but hit the wall. Tackle only smiled.

“It helps if you have a destination in mind,” Tackle said. “May I?”

Kitara stepped away from the wall. He walked into it and disappeared. She pushed forward, reaching out... Her hand passed through and she steeled herself to pass all the way through. They were in a small, domed park, human trees and birds. He pointed up.

“Your apartment’s up there,” he said. He walked to the edge of the dome and sat on the ledge that circled the dome. “Most people live in the floating cities. A few have obtained permits to live on the earth. There are colonies under the surface and in the oceans. The world has come along nicely. This world exist as covenant between Garcia and Avians. We gave this to you.”

“Tam? Is he here?” Kitara asked.

“Follow me,” Tackle said.

Kitara followed him to and through an arch. They arrived in another open park. Garcia was speaking to someone, one of the ‘other’ Klingons, the reptilian one. He was wearing the artificial womb, and holding a cat. The conversation between Garcia and the reptilian Klingon stopped.

“Hello, Kitara,” Garcia said. “Coping okay?”

“You are not Tammas,” Kitara said. “This is a trick.”

“I assure you, I am me,” Garcia said. “And not. You’re right.”

“You’re being deliberately confusing,” Kitara said.

“That’s exactly like him,” the reptilian Klingon said.

“Don’t speak to me! You are not a true being,” Kitara said.

“I told you she would not work with me,” the reptilian one said.

“None of you have to work together. I am the bridge that will unify the variations,” Garcia said.

“How did you get captured?” Kitara asked.

“I didn’t,” Garcia said. “I was on the other side when I directed Tatyana to blow up the Avian’s world.”

“Kletsova is dead?” Kitara asked.

“None of the Away Team survived,” Garcia said.

“You blew up...”

“I blew up both Pyrus VII and the Avian’s linked outpost,” Garcia said.

“Apparently, regardless of timeline, I am destined to blow up Pyrus VII. My Kelvan nature and training allows me the advantage necessary to navigate the darkness that gets manifested.”

“And you couldn’t save Kletsova?” Kitara demanded. “My Away Team?”

“I could not,” Garcia said. “I was allowed to save Kletsova’s child.” He patted the portable womb he was carrying.

“Where are the twins?!” Kitara asked.

“They’re with the original Garcia, still in our timeline,” Garcia said.

“So, you are not...”

“I am me, Kitara,” Garcia said. “We and our children are to be a part of something so big that no one sees it coming. It’s bigger than even those Avengers movies where every things comes together.”

“He has mentioned them before,” the other Kitara asked. “Do you understand him?”

“I ignore him much of the time,” Kitara said.

“Parrot gibberish,” the other Kitara said...

Kitara seemed shocked.

“Isn’t it amazing how similar you two are?” Tackle asked.

“We are not the same?!” Kitara said. “Are they advanced enough to have temporal shield generators?”

“Oh, way beyond that,” Garcia said.

“How do we keep from being erased when the time line changes?” Kitara asked.

“You want the child’s analogy or technical jargon?” Garcia asked.

“Start with the analogy,” Kitara said.

“Every single atom in your body has been replaced with atoms from this galaxy using transporter technology. Your original atomic shell was allowed to dissipate so that the constituent parts could follow their original trajectories uninterrupted,” Garcia said. “More technical, you are in essence energy. The energy of you was allowed to be transferred to another plank time manifold, easier than making a transporter clone. You will maintain your history and memory of the history, but in truth, today is your birthday. Time is crazier than anyone has ever imagined. Stop worrying about time, focus on consciousness. Consciousness, like gravity, changes time.”

“I want access to the Tempest, and I want my crew,” Kitara said.

“Okay,” Garcia said. “Tackle, make the arrangements.”

“She hasn’t fully acclimated,” Tackle said.

“Give her the Tempest and her crew,” Garcia said.

The cat he was holding did a slight growl, mew combination.

“Yes, Mam,” Tackle said.

Transporter beams took hold, and she and Tackle arrived on the transporter pad of the Tempest.

“The crew will start arriving shortly,” Tackle said. “Do you even know where you’re going?”

“No,” Kitara said. “I want you off my ship.”

“But, I really should explain some of the upgrades...”

“Off,” Kitara said.

“Good luck, Captain,” Tackle said.

He returned to the other Kitara and Garcia.

“I am sorry, I failed,” Tackle said.

“You didn’t fail. We need warriors at all levels,” Garcia said.

“She doesn’t believe you’re you,” reptilian Kitara said.

“Not fully,” Garcia said.

“But you do?” Tackle asked.

“I’ve seen the future. Whether he is my Garcia or not, I am will fight beside him,” Kitara said.

“May I call you Ki?” Tackle asked.

“Afraid of getting them confused?” Garcia asked.

“Actually,” Tackle said.

“You may call me Ki,” Kitara said. “Oh, here comes the human Klingon.”

“You made them too well. In some timelines, you can distinguish between them and the humans,” Tackle said.

“I would like to speak to her alone,” Garcia said. “Ki, go with Tackle. Of some of your grew are not acclimating well. We’ll speak again before you go.”

“I am not leaving your side,” Ki said.

“I am afraid you may have to. If your crew can’t adjust, you will have to take them out amongst the stars, let them cope with the change in their own way in their own time,” Garcia said.

“But, our children...”

“Will always be are children, and if they don’t return here, their children will,” Garcia said. “Go, I am with you.”

Ki touched his heart with her palm. She and Tackle disappeared in a blink. The cat Garcia was holding growled. "I didn't say this was going to be easy," Garcia said.

The facilitator attached to the human Kitara had delayed her all Kitara could stand. She finally arrived at Garcia.

"I am sorry, Admiral," the facilitator said.

"It's okay, Switch," Garcia said. "You and Clio run along. This may take a while longer."

Clio mewed and jumped down. She and Switch disappeared through a hoop that was there and then not there.

"Forgive them, they're a bit on the dramatic side," Garcia said.

"Clio, the Guardian of Forever muse you interfaced with?" Kitara asked.

"Indeed. Good recall," Garcia said. "How did we get off Pyrus VII?"

"We didn't," Garcia said. "You did. I am technically still there. I blew the planet up."

"And our colonist?" Kitara asked.

"Less than half were beamed to this side and transferred to this planet," Garcia said.

"We needed control over Pyrus VII to push the Federation back!" Kitara said.

"Had just one of those things gotten off that planet, we would have lost galaxy," Garcia said. "The Federation will fall, Kitara."

"But I won't be there by your side, when you seal the galaxy under one rule," Kitara said.

"You will not," Garcia said.

"You promised me..."

"I promised you the Klingon Empire would span the entire Milky Way," Garcia said. "You only assumed you would be the Empress."

Kitara struck at him, but he caught her wrist, then the other. He pulled her into him, embracing her while trapping her hand behind her. He kissed her and she bit his lip.

"If you want to see how this ends out, you need to submit to my authority," Garcia reminded her.

"So you can use me, replace me?" Kitara said.

"No," Garcia said. "So our descendants can have a place to call home."

Captain Losira

Chapter 1

The Admiral arrived on the Pathfinder and was greeted by Losira. He greeted her affectionately, like a long lost friend falling into rituals that were never forgotten.

“You seem to be in a chipper mood,” Losira said.

“I took some time off,” Garcia said.

“By my reckoning, you’ve been gone two days, three hours, six minutes,” Losira noted.

“My reckoning, a life time,” Garcia said. “Invite Sendak, Tuer, Undine, Simone, and McCoy to join us in the conference room. Walk with me.”

Losira found herself on unfamiliar ground and was reveling in it. A part of her sent out the request, the other part focused on where they were. He was not euphoric, nor was he sad. He seemed genuinely happy. “I am intrigued by this change. You have clarity?”

“No,” Garcia said. “Not even insight.”

“You have had an epiphany?” Losira asked.

“I have been inspired,” Garcia said.

“Have you been kissing muses again?” Losira asked.

“Jealous?” Garcia asked.

“Not in the least,” Losira said. “I highly encourage indulgence, with the understanding I get play, too.”

“Oh, you’re about to get lots of play,” Garcia said, taking her hand.

“Oh?” Losira asked.

They stopped by a window. It was full of stars. One blossomed into a nova, winked out, and then became an illuminated smoke ring expanding with a pin prick of light of what was once a planet. Pyrus VII was no more a long time ago. A little sadness crept over his face, nowhere near as poignantly despondent as he was that first moment back on the Bridge, but manageable.

“Time heals all wounds?” Losira asked.

“No,” Garcia said.

“The others have gathered,” Losira said.

“They can wait,” Garcia said.

“For what?” Losira said.

Garcia drew her into a kiss. She came off her feet as he pushed her into the window and she sat on the inner ledge. It was a gentle kiss that was an invitation for a long cuddle that would wind for hours into a deliberate exploration of quiet touch, perhaps by a fire, with no specific agenda to reach the conclusion of such passion. He ended the kiss, his eyes open, his forehead against hers. Her eyes were wide, pupils dilated.

“I..”

“Shhh,” Garcia said. “You don’t have to say you’re speechless.”

“I..”

“You’re not malfunctioning,” Garcia assured her.

“I am for you,” Losira said. That statement meant something. Long ago. Its meaning was now convoluted, but executed with just as much urgency. With love and kindness.

“And I am for you,” Garcia said.

They lingered, just being close, and then Garcia offered her his hand again. Losira took it and found her feet, adjusted her skirt down. They arrived at the impromptu meeting. Losira found herself measuring the other’s looks, wondering if they detected the heat in her cheeks. Her body was a real body, the Kelandan holographic projection created real matter, and this particular body had a continuity of one month, two week, two days, and six hours of running time because it was with child. She calculated how much of her being flustered was due to the length of operating time. No Kelandan program had ever been fun this long and she had worries how far she could go, and the reaction to the kiss concerned her, even with Garcia’s assurance she was okay. There was her body mind and the computer mind, and though she saw them as one thing, there was suddenly the possibility of divergence. Could she stay in the body permanently? Was this avatar just a character in a game she had grown attached to? Within the confinement of that kiss, she had forgotten she was more. The operational needs of the ship fell to autonomous functioning, her location in space/time dwindled, she was merely a point of interest in someone’s hands. Was it because she wanted it, allowed it, or because Garcia had discovered a way to move her?

“You okay?” McCoy asked her.

“Yes,” Losira said. “Thank you.”

“I am going to propose something crazy,” Garcia said, getting right to business.

“And that’s new how?” McCoy said.

Garcia smiled at father; he looked wildly different than he remembered. Had his new youth changed him? He ignored it in favor of Tomoko, as on schedule she arrived with a tray of hot tea, cups, and a bowl of biscuits. She hesitated, but Garcia waved her to come in. She set the tray down at a clear spot, poured tea distributed the cups. Garcia was to receive the first cup and as she poured it to his preference, milk fist tea over, he asked for a second. She poured a second cup without question. While she poured, small cookie plates were passed, and then the plate of cookies. Garcia was the first one who helped himself; all peanut butter cookies. Tuer and McCoy had passed on the cookies. Losira took a snicker doodle. Undine a sugar cookie with ball bearing shinies. When everyone was served, was about to leave, but Garcia waved her back and invited her to sit in the seat behind him. When Tomoko was finished passing out tea, she turned to leave but Garcia called her to a chair just behind him. He handed her the second cup of tea he had asked for.

“Cookies?” he asked her.

“No, thank you,” Tomoko said.

“You called us for tea?” McCoy said. “You’re suddenly British?”

“Don’t we all want to be British?” Garcia asked.

“No,” Tuer said.

“Okay, so, this is a French tea. The rest of the meeting will be conducted in French,” Garcia said.

“No,” McCoy said.

Garcia sipped his tea and then announced: “We are going to capture a time traveler,” Garcia announced.

McCoy nearly spilt his tea. He was amazed at the silence. “Have you lost your ever-loving mind?”

“They are rewriting our timeline and there is nothing I know that will stop them,” Garcia said.

“They? It’s a ‘they’ now, not a ‘you?’” McCoy asked.

“Whether I am their instrument or not, it has happened, it is happening, it will happen,” Garcia said. “In order to preserve the highest order of continuity, we need temporal shielding. It does exist. It’s not theoretical. We need access to superior temporal technology.”

“And how do you propose to capture a time traveler?” McCoy asked.

“I just happen to know where one is, or will be,” Garcia said.

“And how did you come about this information?” Simone said.

“Oh, no,” McCoy said. “No! Don’t even think about it.”

“Tell me I am wrong,” Garcia said.

“You’re wrong! Wrong as hell,” McCoy snapped.

“We were on course for a utopian future. Now we’re swinging back to a dystopian future. I want to reverse the pendulum back the other way,” Garcia said.

“By going back in time to capture Gary Seven?!” McCoy said.

“I know precisely where and when he will be, and I can recreate the conditions that caused him to land on the Enterprise by accident, only instead of landing on the Enterprise, he will land on the Pathfinder,” Garcia said.

“No one is going to give you permission to time travel,” Undine said.

“I don’t intend to ask for permission,” Garcia said.

“You don’t have that kind of authority! Hell, even when Kirk was given permission it took several acts of congress to green light it, and months of deliberations defining all the operational protocols and...” McCoy said.

“Hence the reason we’re not asking permission,” Garcia said. “Come on, own it. You and Kirk weren’t sent back to understand why we didn’t blow ourselves up in the sixties. It was a secret mission to capture Gary Seven.”

“Gary Seven was a fluke,” McCoy said.

“But you had evidence of temporal tampering with the time line, and that’s what you were looking for. You just didn’t expect it to beam right on to your ship,” Garcia said.

McCoy was looking at the table, suddenly not want to speech.

“I knew it?!” Garcia said. “We’ve been struggling with time issues since our first days of warp...”

“You cannot travel the stars without temporal issues,” Simone said. “That’s what we have been trying to teach you since we made first contact.”

“We’ve discussed this before?” Undine asked.

“Déjà vu?” Garcia asked.

“Yes...” Undine said.

“Just hang on and push through. It gets easier,” Garcia said.

“Even if you had permission, time travel is still risky,” McCoy said.

“I have the math figured out,” Garcia said.

“Tam,” McCoy said, leaning forward. “Have you been dipping into Kelvan tech? You seem fairly deluded with grandeur.”

Garcia chuckled. “When you first met the Kelvan, they were overwhelmed by the human experience, and they took the seven deadly sins to its extremes. Maybe that explains my greed, my lust, my aggressiveness. But this is not that. I apologize for suggesting you and Guinan should have killed me. If I blow something up, it’s my fault, no one else’s. I am not blaming you or anyone else for my thoughts and actions, but I am going to start thinking and acting. I am going to chances. I am going to get things wrong. We’re here now. There’s no un-writing this moment, well, there is, but there isn’t. I really wish I could explain this better, but I can’t. All I can say is, we’re going to do this. If you want the President’s okay, I will secure it. I have her in my pocket. She’s compromised. She is compromised in ways that makes Pressman’s paranoia legitimate. Hold onto your socks and pull out your tie dye skirts, because we are going to time travel back in time and visit Earth, 1968.”

There was silence. Losira smiled. “Should I insert a movie quote here?”

“So many to choose from,” Garcia said.

“I do not think you have thought this all the way through,” Sendak said.

“You think?” McCoy echoed. “What about the Enterprise, Tam? Do you intend to interfere with their mission? If you capture Gary Seven, won’t you also be changing the time line?!”

“The time line is already change. The Enterprise will not be given an assignment to go back to Earth, 1968,” Garcia said.

“What?”

“It’s confusing, I get it, but what I did, or will do, has already changed the past,” Garcia said. “That wave front simply hasn’t caught up with us.”

“And yet, you propose going back in time, which means passing through that wave front, which means, we won’t arrive at our destination?” Tuer asked.

“You would think that, right, but that’s not how it works. You can’t really graph this on a flow chart, like Doc and Marty McFly did, and if you actually take the time to examine their flow chart, there’s paradox anomaly they failed to account for... Seriously, if you’re graphing it out in two dimensions, you’re going to get it wrong. You have to graph this out through seven dimensions minimum to get the math even close to right... Clearly I have lost you. Close your mouth, McCoy, you’re not a codfish. The wave front thing is an analogy, not an absolute function of how temporal alterations flow,” Garcia said. “And that why, once we have access to temporal shielding we continue to exist even after a temporal wave front has washed over us, because the shielding allows the energetic momentum of the present particle formations to continue oscillating at their present space/time frequencies.”

“But you don’t know that for sure!” McCoy said. “Just because you’re speaking some high falutin temporal jargon doesn’t mean you’re right.”

“You’re right,” Garcia said. “I could be wrong. But this is the fun part. If I am wrong, and we cease to exist, if I cease to exist, then I can’t blow up Romulus, and so, there shouldn’t be a temporal divergence and so we should be okay.”

“Excepting for the alternate temporal divergence which occurs because you don’t blow up Romulus?” Sendak pointed out.

“That would happen after I don’t, so we still have a little time to play,” Garcia said.

“This is giving me a headache,” Tuer said.

“It’s not a head ache, and temporal tumor,” McCoy said.

“I have a good idea of where the time diverges. Your Enterprise doesn’t exist anymore,” Garcia said. “Your history has been completely rewritten.”

“You’re getting that from mind meld with Spock?” Simone asked.

“Some of it. I don’t have full clarity,” Garcia said.

“Maybe we should wait till you do,” McCoy said.

“We could. I would like to say we don’t have time to waste. We do. We could wait till the last moment. We could wait till the situation is so dire that we simply react and respond in a fight or flight moment. Or we can act now, seize the day, take our chances,” Garcia said.

“Come what may?” Losira asked.

“Something dark is this way coming. I want to act before the lights go out,” Garcia said.

“Metaphor?” McCoy asked.

“Maybe,” Garcia said.

“You’re going to do this whether we approve or not?” Undine asked.

“Nope. You lot vote no, we put this aside,” Garcia said. “Tomoko? What do you say?”

“Me, Sir?” Tomoko asked.

“You are crew. You work intimately with me, which I hope is more than duty, so, what say you?”

“I don’t know enough,” Tomoko said.

“That’s why I am asking you to vote,” Garcia said.

“I will do what you say...”

“Vote,” Garcia said. “That’s an order.”

“Yes,” Tomoko said.

“Seriously?” McCoy asked. “She just said she doesn’t know...”

“She is a seriously good organizer and event scheduler, and more intuitive than she admits to. Cultural thing?” Garcia asked. He bowed an apology for having put her on the spot. “Your turn, McCoy.”

“Why?” McCoy asked.

“No why,” Garcia asked. “Father, vote.”

“No, hell no,” McCoy said.

“Tuer?” Garcia said.

“I find the notion of voluntarily messing with time disturbing. No,” Tuer said.

“Sendak?”

“Yes,” Sendak said.

“Oh my god, you’re just like Spock,” McCoy snapped.

“Yes,” Simone said.

“Seriously?” McCoy said.

“Undine?”

“Yes,” she said.

“Can we have more people voting who have not slept with you?!” McCoy asked.

“No,” Garcia looked to Losira.

“You own my pink slip,” she said. “I go where you lead.”

“I am going to be sick,” McCoy said.

“Sickness bag under the table. Simone, Undine, return to your ships and continue with your mission objectives. Undine, when you finished dropping off the survivors. Would you check out the Troyius situation? I have forgotten all about that,” Garcia said. “Anything else I might have forgotten that ya’ll can think up? No? Okay, well, let’s do this. McCoy, I would like to join us, back in time again?”

“Oh my god, son, of course I am going. You need someone sane to keep you straight,” McCoy said.

Chapter 2

The coordinates Garcia provided was not to Earth, but to a place outside the galactic arm. Until Garcia had found it, it wasn't named. It didn't even have a reference number. It was obscured by its own feature, just outside the galactic arm holding Earth. They would have had to pass the Galactic Barrier to arrive here, another visual barrier to see it from inside the galaxy, but with transwarp jump, it wasn't even noticeable as air turbulence. They simply arrived.

The Elemartay star system was not unique, but it was something that almost had to be seen to believe. El, Mar, and Tay were three relatively young, G-type stars, in a close, stable orbit. Looking down on them, you might think they were chasing each other, and corona ejections frequently shook ephemeral hands; their pursuit could be discerned in real time and clocks could be calibrated to their spinning. There was a proto cloud, or ring of dust, gas, and primordial debris from which the planets would eventually form from. This prominent feature was peculiar in that it was perpendicular to, or at a right angle of the triple star's rotation. The inner space of the stars was relatively clean of all dust and debris, with the disk beginning at approximately 1.5 AUs, or 228 million KM from the stars. The most inwardly part of the disk glowed with intense white, tapering to yellow, oranges, and then pink, and from there the disk bulged like ominous thunder clouds, with frequent lightening being observed across the surface of either side. The outer edges of the planetary ring were crisp and thin, as if cut by a tool. That tool happened to be the remains of a dead star, a planet size diamond.

The ancient, dead star was once a g-type star that had become a red giant and dwindled into a white dwarf. This particular dead star was almost as old as the Universe itself. It was approximately the size of earth, and had a solid surface, tens of thousands of kilometers thick, of solid carbon crystals. Star diamonds! The thickness of the diamond dimmed the inner light to the point it was like looking at a swimming pool at night. The flaws along the surface added to that pool like illusion, causing ripple like shadows to fall over the Pathfinder. If one could acquire a piece of that diamond, a hand held shard, they would find it glowed with a pulse that mirrored the inner light, as the molecules were entrained with the star. It was florescent spooky action at a distance. There were rumors such shards existed, but outside of Garcia who knew there was the splinter of one contained with his temporal loop wristband, no one in the Federation knew of one existing outside it's of the stellar remains. It was the size of the Earth, but had a gravitational well twice that of Jupiter. No one would be beaming in and taking samples.

"The bones of stars," McCoy said. "I have read of them, seen photos of them, but in all my travels, this is my first time seeing one up close in person."

"It's absolutely lovely. The most amazingly beautiful thing I have ever seen," Losira said. And that included her entire civilizations data base of discoveries.

"You really like it?" Garcia asked.

"What girl doesn't like diamonds?" Losira said.

"Pff," McKnight said. "Right?!"

"With this ring, I de wed..." Garcia said.

"Seriously?" Losira asked.

"OMG, I am going to cry," McKnight said.

"It's big enough to share," Losira said.

“It took me a life time of study to find this place,” Garcia said. He had everyone’s attention. He seemed happy with the blue light playing across his face. “Athena and Clio helped. The harmonic characteristics of the inner stars as it stirs the space/time continuum, juxtaposed to this dead star, makes this an idea position for a temporal base.”

“You’re serious?” McCoy asked.

“I was charged with finding a working Iconian Gateway, or making one,” Garcia said. “This is where humanity will seriously start to understand space-time. Before now, we were children playing in the sand. We grow up here, now, or not at all. Tesla was right. It’s about energy and frequency, and we will learn more about our true nature doing this than we have learned in all the years we have been a species combined. What we will do here affects everyone in the Milky Way, from cradle to grave. This is no small task. This is why the Icoanian disappeared. This is why the Mayans disappeared. This why... So many volunteered to go away. They’re bettering everything on us. There betting everything on the best of us, the ideals established and promoted by a Federation of beings come together to coexist in peace. This is our first lunar landing, our first giant step, with no other steps to follow because we learn to fly.”

“Impromptu speech?” Losira asked.

“Yeah, what do you think?” Garcia asked, suddenly more grounded.

“You’re having a bipolar moment is what I think,” McCoy said.

“Admiral,” Sendak said. “There’s life inside the proto-disk.”

“Giant tardigrade like space bears eating spores? Ignore them. Harmless,” Garcia said. “They’ll be migrating soon. On the far side you’ll also find Junior like creatures. Space herd. The disk also holds several other species, baby jelly fish like things, the ones Picard encountered at Far Point. Fortunately, no space amoebas. Really think they must have leaked in from another time line...”

Garcia closed his eyes, sorting. “You should have the vectors and recommended volcities coming up on your screen, McKnight. Let’s thread the needle.”

“Wait a minute,” McCoy said. “You’re not just planning to slingshot around a sun, you plan...”

“Go right through the eye of Elemartay,” Garcia said.

“The gravitational forces alone could tear us apart!” McCoy said.

Garcia turned to Sendak. “How’s the math look to you?”

“It will take me weeks to go through this...”

“Did the computer flag anything?” Garcia said.

“No,” Sendak said. “But...”

“McKnight, can you thread that, or do you want Captain Losira to pilot?” Garcia asked.

“I can do it,” McKnight said, still studying the planned trajectory. Under her breath was “I think I can...”

“You can’t have accounted for all the frame shifts we’ll encounter...” Sendak said, disapprovingly.

“Probably not,” Garcia agreed. “But, if not this time, then maybe next time. McKnight, punch it.”

“What do you mean...” McCoy was saying, even as he grabbed the back of the command chair. “What was that?”

“Passed through a frame shift from Starheart,” Garcia said.

“You named the dead star Starheart?” Losira asked.

“Yeah, why not?” Garcia asked. “Little space music?”

“Hewey Lewis and the News?” Losira asked.

“We’re going back further than the 80s. How about Blues Image, Ride, Captain Ride,” Garcia said.

“That’s 1970. You could jinx us and miss your mark,” Losira said.

“Close enough. Blues Image, Ride Captain Ride, full orchestra accompaniment, through an ELO filter,” Garcia said.

“You’re really messing with things, aren’t you,” McCoy said.

“Oh, I am just getting warmed up,” Garcia said. Musical prelude filled the bridge. “Brilliant lead in for this Starheart montage moment. MicKnight, takes us there.”

McKnight began the acceleration, around the diamond then downwards into the Elemartay system, heading towards the center of mass of the three stars. Had these stars been three neutron stars, the frame dragging would have been severe enough to see space/time torn into whirlpool, like water going down a drain, but since they were ordinary stars, the effect was subtler. A LaGrange point marked the dead center of three stars; a spherical asteroid fifty kilometers in diameter would sit perfectly still there, where as anything greater than fifty one kilometers would start to spin due to the stars’ gravity pulling at space/time itself. Garcia relaxed into the command chair, undaunted by turbulence, or uncharacteristic vibration through the hull plating. McCoy on the other hand...

“You want a chair, Admiral?” Losira asked.

“No,” McCoy said.

McCoy was tapping her foot. The transwarp was tripped just as they pushed through breakaway speed. They arrived back in space normal time with engines spooling down just outside the Sol system.

“Finally!” Garcia said. “I knew it would work.”

“Are you not telling us something?” McCoy said.

“It’s better you don’t know,” Garcia said. “McKnight?”

“Based on radio signals from Earth, I would say we have arrived 1968,” McKnight said.

“I’m recording all frequencies,” Losira said, having taken over Trini’s function.

“Based on other astronomical measure, I concur with McKnight’s reckoning,” Sendak said.

“Cloak us, take us to Earth,” Garcia said. “McCoy, do you remember how far out you were?”

“You don’t have that in the records?!” McCoy asked.

“Of course, just messing with you,” Garcia said.

“Stop it,” McCoy said.



Garcia, a Losira agent, McCoy, Tuer, and several other Klingons, armed and weapons at ready, stared into an empty transporter alcove.

“What now, we just wait and hope...”

Losira noticed Garcia was subvocalizing and understood he was counting. Gary Seven, holding a cat, materialized on a transporter pad. The Gorn weapons spooled up to active status and Tuer brought his weapon to bear, taking front point. Gary frowned, his eyes seeking authority and stopped on Garcia.

“You!” Gary said. “You shouldn’t be here.”

McCoy looked at Garcia. “You’ve met him before.”

“Yes,” Gary said as Garcia was saying “No.”

“Okay, yes, but, technically no,” Garcia said. “It’s complicated. This is our first time, but I gather he has met another me, a transporter clone... Don’t you temporal guys sort that stuff?” Garcia asked. He raised a warning finger. “Eh, eh eh... Keep your hands away from her collar or you will have a dead cat.”

The cat let out a complaint that went through several octaves.

“Seriously, Isis, I would rather not shoot you, but I will,” Garcia said. “Tuer, take the collar first, and then, Seven’s right front pocket, empty it.”

“You don’t know what you’re doing,” Seven said.

“Not yet,” Garcia agreed. “Not fully. If you would, please surrender the cat to Losira.”

“I will not,” Seven said.

“I promise, she will not be harmed,” Garcia said. “You, I, and McCoy are beaming down.”

“We are?” McCoy asked.

“You are?” asked Tuer. “Without me?”

“You really need to stay here,” Garcia said.

“Tam, you’re being weirder than normal. What’s up?” McCoy said.

Isis mewed, and Gary reluctantly consented to the exchange. “Isis wants to know how long you’ve been cycling through time,” Seven said.

“Actual forays into the future or virtual inclusive?” Garcia asked.

Isis mewed something from Losira’s hand.

“Seriously? If you don’t discern between the two, how do you tease out the difference between daydreaming arcs and actual deja-vu downloads?” Garcia asked.

“We don’t,” Seven said. “You understand her?”

“I speak cat, yes,” Garcia said, taking a spot up next to Seven on the pad. “Father?”

“What have you done?” McCoy demanded.

“Nothing,” Garcia said. “Honest. Losira, if we’re not back, make sure you take out that orbiting nuclear missile thing the US intends to launch.”

“Aye,” Losira said. “Have fun storming the castle.”

“Oh, believe me, it’s going to take a miracle,” Garcia said.

“Would two you stop that?!” McCoy said. “Where are we going?”

“Seriously?” Garcia asked. “Earth?”

“You’re not dressed for this time period,” Seven said.

“Yeah, well, we’re not staying that long, either,” Garcia said. “Losira, you have the coordinates. Energize.”

“Wait, at least...” Seven was saying on the platform... and trailed off on arrival. “Let me have my tech.”

“Yeah, no,” Garcia said, patting his shoulder. “If I can’t have a sonic screwdriver, you can’t.”

“It’s not a sonic screwdriver,” Seven said.

“Servo, potahto,” Garcia said, proceeding through the room as if he had been here before, moving quickly, even as McCoy was still orientating, complaining about transporters. They appeared to be in a city morgue. The basic storage equipment hadn’t changed much from McCoy’s time.

“Quickly, father. I need you to tell me the cause of death,” Garcia said, tossing him a medical tricorder. He opened a cold closet and rolled out tray. On it lay a human female, Asian in appearance. The injuries that had killed her were challenging to look away from. McCoy didn’t hide his sadness.

“Was she assaulted?” were the first words out of McCoy’s mouth.

“Autopsy suggests a car accident,” Garcia said, opening up a second closet.

“If you know the cause of death, why are we...”

“Agent 201,” Seven said, sadly, identifying the body. He read her toe tag, “Jane Doe.”

Garcia rolled out a second slab. ‘John Doe’ was a cadaver of a Caucasian male, approximately fifty years in age. He began scanning.

“And 347,” Seven said. “I sent them here...”

“I detect no drugs or alcohol in his system,” Garcia said.

“Tam, sometimes a car accident is just an...” McCoy said. He blinked. “That’s odd. There’s no evidence of Gyrification...”

Garcia moved his scanned to the head. “Same here.”

“That’s impossible,” Seven said, coming closer to McCoy to read over his shoulder. “What could explain this?”

“Nothing explains this. At this level of malformation, neither of these individuals would have held the cognitive ability to drool, much less be driving a car...” McCoy said.

“Something has to explain this...”

“Rapid cycle clones, with no cerebral stimulus would explain...” Garcia said.

“Meat bags to hide an alien abduction!” Seven said.

“Tam, are you counting?”

“We come in peace...” Garcia said, loudly.

Two individuals entered, the entry doors swinging suddenly wide, phasers drawn and firing. Seven, McCoy, and Garcia fell to the ground. One of the two pulled out an old style communicator.

“Vengeance, five to beam up.”

Chapter 3

Admiral Alexander Marcus puzzled over the medical tricorders which were non responsive.

“It’s definitely Star Fleet issue,” one of the tech was saying. “Maybe a thirty years ahead of us?”

“Thirty?” Carol asked. “This is more than that.”

“What’s up with the front pack the bald one is wearing?” Alexander asked.

“It’s a portable womb,” Carol said. “He’s carrying twins.”

“Why?” Alexander asked.

“I don’t know,” Carol said. “His mate died?”

“But he’s definitely human?” Alexander asked.

“Well, mostly. He is a Human Vulcan hybrid for sure, but there some other resonant signatures I can’t identify. He’s been genetically altered beyond just his hybrid status,” Carol said. “Scans put a probability of him being the parent of the twins he is carrying at 99.9 plus percent.”

“The portable womb is Vulcan technology,” the tech said. “It shielded the occupants from the stun setting.”

“Fortunately,” Carol said. “The report says he stated ‘we come in peace’ before your extraction team took them out.”

“How did he even know we were there?” the security officer who had led the Away Team asked.

“He heard you sneaking up on him?” Carol said.

“Not likely,” the security officer said, his feelings hurt by her suggestion.

“Star Fleet sent us back in time to see if we could determine how we lucked out of having a nuclear war at this particular moment in our history, and the first thing we detect is transporter activity on the surface. That can’t be a coincidence,” Alexander said.

“They must have a ship here. So they have cloaking tech,” the tech said.

“Our ship is cloaked,” Carol pointed out. “If they’re Star Fleet, from our the future, then it seems reasonable that all our ships use cloaking technology. Or there was a change in the treaty banning cloaking development...”

“Or we lost the war and they work for the Klingons,” the tech said. “There are traces of Klingon DNA on the Fleet uniforms, suggesting they work or interact with Klingons.”

“I saw the scans you’re referring to,” Carol said. “That’s not Klingon DNA. At least, that’s not the Klingon’s we’re familiar with.”

“Maybe they evolved on one of their colony worlds,” the tech said. “Maybe they are engineered like the bald one. Maybe they’re the offspring of Klingon human mating. Maybe they’re still making Klingon human hybrids to infiltrate our society in the past. That would explain why Fleet sent us back in time.”

“This ship is way too paranoid,” Carol said.

“You have seen the evidence that Klingons have been working on manipulating the human genome for their own purposes,” Alexander said.

“You mean the Discovery evidence?” Carol asked. “This is not that. Unless you can bring me a body of this new species of Klingon, then we have insufficient

information to draw any conclusion except that there is a genetic deviation from what we know.”

“The bald one is awake,” the tech said, pointing to the screen.



Garcia woke up first. He came to, rubbing the back of his head, then touching his belly pack to make certain the twins were okay, and then suddenly, full alert, standing, trying to work out a leg cramp. “Every bloody time.”

“How often do we end up here?” Seven asked, recovering quieter. He was in the cell to Garcia’s right, and though he could see McCoy recovering in the opposing cell, he couldn’t see Garcia.

“Enough,” Garcia answered. “Father, you okay?”

“I am,” McCoy said. He knew enough not to touch the force field, but he still accidentally touched it as he drew closer to the edge, trying to take everything in. He spied a time stamp on a screen saver. “23rd century. How can this ship be 23rd century?”

“The time line has changed,” Garcia said. “I need you to both help me think. Who would have abducted your agents?”

“No one but Isis and I knew they were here,” Seven said.

“Someone knew they were here. Come on, think,” Garcia said.

“You assume it was purposeful,” McCoy said. “What if it were random.”

“There was hint of ion signature on your scanner. There are only two races I know of in the Milky Way using quantum transporters,” Seven said.

“The Gamesters of Triskelion,” Garcia said. “They would have tracked your original transport beam, sending your agents to earth, abducted them, and sent back meat bags to obfuscate the trail.”

“That’s highly speculative. They’re good guys,” McCoy said.

“No, they’re bad guys until Kirk makes them good guys, and this is before their Kirk incident, and they may not even ever get a Kirk incident, because the whole time line has changed!” Garcia said. “They kidnap people from all over the galaxy for their games.”

“If they kidnapped temporal agents, they could theoretically learn how to kidnap anyone from all of time,” McCoy said.

“They won’t gain that sort of technological advantage from 201 or 347,” Seven assured them.

McCoy seemed doubtful and was likely going to ask how he could be so certain, except Admiral Alexander Marcus entered and before he could introduce himself, Garcia introduced him. “Admiral Alexander Marcus, this is Gary Seven to my right, and...”

“Lt. McCoy. I know you,” Marcus interrupted.

“We’ve met. At your daughter’s wedding,” McCoy said.

“I don’t remember my daughter getting married,” Marcus said.

“Not this timeline,” Garcia reminded him.

Marcus came front and center to Garcia. “I didn’t realize you had a son old enough to be in Star Fleet. And in my life, I would have never guessed you would have mated with a Vulcan...”

“I...” McCoy stopped himself from arguing. “Why would you guess that?”

“Your Star Fleet profile suggest you prefer humans, and still grieving your past relationship. Oh, wait, did infidelity cause the divorce” Alexander said.

“I would never...” McCoy said.

“So if you didn’t willingly, does that mean the Vulcans are doing experiments on our genome?” Alexander asked. He looked to Garcia. “What’s your name, Son?”

“Admiral Tammias Parkin Arblaster Garcia,” said.

Marcus laughed. Even Seven mouthed the word ‘Admiral’ in shared disbelief. “Pretty young to be an admiral, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, well, you know, my time line is all screwed up and they’re scraping the barrels. I still haven’t learned how your ship became the Vengeance. We’re still the good guys, right? Jedi don’t seek revenge and all that?” Garcia said.

“You clearly come from the wrong universe,” Marcus said. “Your tech was disabled when we stunned you. Would you be so kind as to unlock it?”

“So, you can have access to 24th century tech?” McCoy asked. “Isn’t that...”

“Against the Prime Directive? Are you kidding? Star Fleet exist because of technological scraps we have been recovering from aliens since well before the mid-evil period,” Marcus said. “Yes, believe it or not, aliens built the great pyramids. Section 31 exist just to sort this sort nonsense out and give us the advantage over those who would enslave us.”

“I will help you with tech and tell you whatever you would like to know if you let my friends go,” Garcia said.

“Tam!” McCoy protested.

“McCoy is right,” Seven said. “Just because you’re cycling doesn’t mean this won’t have happened, or that something meaningful doesn’t result in a new divergent time line.”

“Maybe we need new divergence,” Garcia said. “Please, let them return to Earth. I will be cooperative.”

Marcus seemed to consider. “Or, I keep them and you still give me what I want,” he said. “You have a neural implant. I suspect we can download your personality and unlock memory artifacts whether you’re cooperative or not. What do you want to bet?”

Two armed security men came to retrieve him. Garcia recognized the one who had stunned them. He asked his name and got no response. They didn’t ask him to come quietly. They lowered the shields and stunned him, then carried him to where they wanted him.

“There’s time limit to re-stunning someone,” McCoy said. “And he’s pregnant. Kill him and you kill the twins.”

“Gives him more incentive to cooperate, don’t you think? Relax. We’re reasonably in margins. Besides, he’s engineered to be more resilient,” Marcus said, crossing his arms. “Isn’t bioengineering humans also against the Prime Directive? Let’s talk about kettle calling, old country Doc.”

“That was not because of us,” McCoy said.

“He’s clearly modified and in a position of authority, which means what? We’re more relaxed on genetically modified humans, or the general moral flexibility has improved to appreciate situational context,” Marcus said. “I think I am fairly flexible. Make sense to me.”

“We are still opposed to eugenics,” McCoy said.

“Why? A simple genetic tweak and cancer is eradicated. That’s okay, but if I make my daughter’s brown eyes blue, I am violating ethics?” Alexander asked. “If I increase her IQ, I am suddenly the bad guy?”

“There’s a difference between removing disease potential, and improving...” McCoy said.

“No! There’s not,” Alexander said. “Once the tech became so readily available that the average citizen could splice genes in their garage, designer babies became a permanent fixture of society. People want their children to have advantages. There are the elite, with all the advantages, and then there is everyone else. Seriously, Fleet couldn’t have such high standards if it weren’t for improved adaptation! You think the Chinese stopped their experiments at just increasing food production? Do you really think eugenics programs stopped in the 22nd century? Do you know how diffused some of the augmentations have become? Whether it occurs naturally over a million years, or instantly in a lab, we were designed to evolve. We should have a say in how and where we go. And when you know absolutely that your enemy is genetically tweaking their people to make advanced soldiers, you adapt or die. Tell me, why have you joined with the enemy?”

“I don’t understand your question?” McCoy said.

“Of course you don’t,” Marcus asked. “Where is your ship? Is it cloaked? Is it Federation or Klingon design?”

“What is yours?” McCoy asked.

“Top secret. Tell me why you’re here,” Marcus said. “Why are you messing with our history?!”

McCoy was suddenly silent. Seven seemed calm, almost compassionate. “It’s okay, Leonard.”

“We are from another timeline. I am not your McCoy. We are from the 24th century of a timeline that may have inadvertently erased itself,” McCoy said.

“That doesn’t make sense. You’re from the 24th century, and yet, you don’t look a day older than your Star Fleet profile says you would be,” Alexander said.

“It’s complicated,” McCoy said.

“Apparently. Every answer I get a million new questions arise. Your presence here bothers me, on a fundamental level...” Alexander began.

“Yeah, and yours bothers me. Don’t ask me to explain paradoxes. Maybe my future from your perspective hasn’t happened yet, even with me standing here to argue it has. Maybe it has happened but because of this interaction that home is now forever out of my reach. Like you said, I am just a simple country doctor, not a seasoned time traveler,” McCoy said. He looked to Seven who added nothing. He looked back to Alexander. “I don’t know you, I have never heard of the Vengeance, but I know that you shouldn’t be. If we fix things, you won’t be.”

“Now, see, Doctor. That is honest. And it’s a real problem. I like who I am,” Marcus said. “Why would I allow you to fix things? I have the right to exist. Even if you are a hundred percent morally and ethically right, trying to change something that happened by design or accident, I, my daughter, and all the beings that came after that event have the right to their continued existence. If you want a temporal war, I will give you one.”

“In your timeline, the Federation will cease to exist when Earth becomes part of the Klingon Empire,” Seven said. “You can’t stop that eventuality. Allow me to go and I will find the fault and I will repair it. You will be what you were meant to be.”

“Umm, no,” Marcus said. “If you have anything useful to say, just say it out loud. We’re listening. Any disclosures of important dates or milestones that might prove readily useful would result in an increase comfort level for you. For example, where is this Triskelion?”

“Oh, you don’t want to go there,” McCoy said.

“You really don’t,” Seven agreed.



“Carol?”

Doctor Carol Marcus came around to see what was delaying her tech from pushing an old style IV.

“There’s something on his wrist. Tech,” she said.

Carol felt the wrist. Her hands felt something foreign, defined edges of what might be a blending of leather and tech. She held the wrist, moving the arm through articulation points without actually ‘touching’ the wrist. Scans revealed nothing. Looking at the wrist in different wavelengths revealed nothing. She went to a replicator and produced child glitter. Sprinkling glitter over the arm gave the device more definition.

“Isolate sickbay, activate all quarantine procedures. Computer, recommend yellow alert,” Carol said. “Tom, help me secure him to this table.”

“All that for this?” Jenny asked.

“We don’t know what it does,” Carol said. “It could be a weapon. Strap him down. Use frequency modulators to block signals within the room, just in case he has wireless abilities between his implant the device.”

Carol went and found a surgical tool.

“Please, don’t amputate my arm,” Garcia said, struggling to wake.

“How long have you been conscious?” Marcus asked, checking the tech to see why she hadn’t been alerted to a change in brainwaves that would indicate a change in consciousness.

“How is he able to speak with that much theta?” the tech asked.

“Even unconscious people can hear the conversations of surgeons,” Carol said.

“And we hear in our dreams,” Garcia said.

“You’re dreaming?” Carol asked. “How long have you been consciously aware?”

“Not long enough,” Garcia said. “If you cut my hand off, the device on my wrist will interpret that as a hostile act and detonate an internal explosive, which will cause your warp core to breach. Not good for us, not good for the Earth.”

“You’re carrying around an explosive device on your wrist the equivalent of a nuclear bomb?” the tech asked.

“Better than cyanide if you want to get rid of temporal evidence,” Tom said. The tech met his eyes, swallowed hard. He suddenly did not want to be here. “Or your enemies.”

“Show me the device,” Carol said.

“Can you give me a moment to fully recover?” Garcia asked.

“Prepare to stun him,” Carol said.

“If I die, it detonates. If you cut my arm off, it detonates. If the device is damaged, it will detonate,” Garcia said. “Please, let me transition to full awake, no more stun, no more drugs. I will give your father something valuable. I promised.”

“Why should I believe you?”

“Because I need your help,” Garcia said.

Carol withdrew and spoke to her father from her office. While Tom and the tech sat uncomfortably in silence, not sure what else to do. When Carol returned, she made the bed Garcia was strapped to become a chair. She directed her support staff to leave the room. Before Alexander entered the room, the lights were subdued, except around Garcia, which were intensified dramatically, with lights hitting him from multiple angles that illuminated almost all shadows. Alexander pulled up a medical stool and sat down in front of Garcia. Garcia couldn't see Carol, but knew intuitively that she was standing in the shadows. He didn't hear anyone else breathing, but that didn't mean there weren't weapons on him.

“You're recording this?” Carol asked him.

“Of course,” Alexander said.

“If he reveals time sensitive information to the crew...” Carol said.

“I am not stupid, Carol. No one is privy to this but you and me,” Alexander said. “Inject him.”

“I advise against it...” Carol said.

“Do it,” Alexander said.

“Please, don't...” But the hypospray touched his arm. His eyelids became heavy, and he smiled. “Not necessary. I was so going to- sing... Where is the love, where is the love, where is the loveee... you said you'd give to me...”

“Wow, that was fast,” Alexander said.

“I suspect he is having pharmaceutical reaction to multiple substances in his blood stream. He's prescribed medication,” Carol said. “There's subcutaneous monitor/injection module in his abdomen that tracks and maintains the blood levels of what appears to be a psychotropic-antihistamine.”

“What?” Alexander said.

“I am guessing. It could just be an antidepressant and antihistamine combo. Never seen the molecule before,” Carol said.

“What are you taking, Sir?” Alexander said.

“Please,” Garcia said, seriously disturbed. “I am singing here.”

“Yeah, well,” Alexander said. He hit him hard in the face.

“Father,” Carol said.

“I want to see how fast he heals for myself,” Alexander said. “I like the fact that you do bleed, Sir. That's hopeful. Did you place a radioactive isotope in the serum so we can see how fast he metabolizes it?”

“Yes, father,” Carol said.

“How do you feel, Sir?” Alexander yelled at Garcia, startling him back awake.

Garcia smiled up at Carol and then bit his lips. “Disclosure would likely be inappropriate...”

Carol nearly revealed a smile, but her father hit Garcia again.

“Let's stay focused on me,” Alexander said.

“You’re not my type,” Garcia said.

Alexander hit him again.

“Growing on me, though,” Garcia said. “That hurt. This setup is so cliché?”

Alexander hit him again.

“Cliché enough?” Alexander asked. “Give me something useful.”

“The Mammals and the Pappas?” Garcia asked. “Monday Monday...”

Garcia was hit again.

“You drugged me, Sir!” Garcia said. “And I was so in the mood to cooperate.”

“Why are you here?” Alexander asked.

“You abducted me?” Garcia asked.

Alexander smiled, then hit him. “Why are you in the sixties...”

“I wanted to join ‘Up With People,’” Garcia said.

Alexander laughed. Garcia laughed with him, until Marcus hit him.

“Give me the code to unlock your tech,” Alexander said.

Garcia closed his eyes, not fading to sleep, but trying to right his thoughts. “You don’t need tech; you need a new philosophy. You’re wanting something to counter the peaceniks of your time, which is ironic, because you came to 1960’s to acquire your edge,” Garcia said. “Oh, I do so love the miniskirt phase... Do you wear skirts, Carol?” Another punch centered him. “The Vulcan philosophy holds the predominant attitude towards the general popular discourse. In our timeline, the humans agree, and it is the right path. In your timeline, it will get you killed, just assuredly as if Ghandi had gone up against Hitter with nonviolent protocols.”

“How is it you know so much about my timeline?” Alexander asked.

Garcia’s eyes flashed his voice changed: “I created it.”

Alexander actually scooted his chair back.

“What the fuck was that?” Alexander asked.

“I don’t know,” Carol said, scanning him. “The serum has been removed his body.”

“You created our timeline?” Alexander asked. “How? Why?”

“What? What did I tell you?” Garcia asked. He was struggling against something internally, but he didn’t know what

“Another dose,” Alexander said.

“Seriously?!” Carol asked. “He can barely keep his eyes open now.”

“Then hit him with adrenaline, too,” Alexander said. He hit Garcia again. “Or I could just beat him till he tells me something I want to hear.”

Carol hit Garcia with another round of the serum, along with an adrenaline.

Garcia spat out information as if experiencing a mental health phenomena known has ‘pressured speech.’ “There was a bifurcation event that caused there to be two Garcias. Transporter clone is the best analogy. I, and several others, arrived back on Earth during the days of the dinosaurs. There were intelligent dinosaurs. I talked them out of diverting the asteroid that ends their reign in favor of migrating. They departed to the far side of the Milky Way, promising never to return.”

“Seriously?” Alexander said. “You expect me to believe there are intelligent dinosaurs?”

“Raptors. I love raptors. Sleestaks have nothing on raptors. OMG, all the answers can be found in Hollywood,” Garcia said. “Trollenberg. Beware of the eye...”

“You gave him too much,” Alexander said.

“You think?” Carol asked.

“Every culture contains a reptilian, in some form or fashion in their folklore of origin, either helping or harming us,” Garcia said. “Maybe there is something to the conspiracy theories of this age. Maybe we can’t tell fiction without unlocking the truth hidden in our psyche. Our brains are reptilian first, monkey brains second... We are the gestalt of giants...”

“So, the reptilians are mad and want to reclaim the earth?” Alexander asked.

“Earth is one of many players in a larger game...” Garcia said. “The reptilians are our ancestors...”

“Go on,” Alexander said.

“Everyone gets a chance to rule the galaxy. Vulcans. Romulans. Humans. This is the age of the Reptiles,” Garcia said. “The Gorn are related to them. A tangent ship that decided to not follow the others. But, specifically, in your time line, the dinosaurs that fled the destruction of their Earth interfered with the evolution on Kronos. A rag tag fleet looking for... Galactica? They’re us. Design or happenstance irrelevant. Your Klingons are very different than our Klingons. They are predominantly reptilian. They will own this galaxy. Earth will be a member state within the Empire, a population enslaved and traded out for their pleasure. You think Orion slaves are popular, wait till the Klingons start selling humans to Ferengi...”

“Who are the Ferengi?” Alexander asked.

“You don’t actually put a face on them until Picard’s day,” Garcia said. “There may be a reference to them with Archer. His whole timeline is a mess and hard to track, even for me.”

“I’d rather you give us tech,” Alexander said. “Like transwarp.”

“You assume transwarp...” Garcia said.

“No, the Discovery has it,” Alexander said.

“The Discovery...” Garcia repeated.

“You know of the Discovery?” Alexander asked. “It’s black ops. Are you black ops?”

“Discovery... Oh, fuck me, is that now? Not now! Please. I thought we avoided that...”

Alexander hit Garcia.

“What?” Garcia asked.

“Who’s we?” Carol asked.

“We?” Garcia asked.

“You said ‘I thought we avoided that’...” Carol said.

Garcia bit on his lip, resisting. Alexander hit him. “I am a plural. Primaries are Duana, Ilona, Troi, Lal... How many of us now...”

“Plural?” Alexander asked.

“You have DID?” Carol asked.

“What’s that?” Alexander asked.

“The lay still call it multiple personality disorder,” Carol said.

“Would you like to talk to them?” Garcia asked.

“Can we?” Alexander asked.

Garcia's eyes flashed. "I am the Guardian of forever. I am my own beginning and my own ending. You may speak to anyone in history..." Garcia's eyes reverted to normal.

"Oh, that is Legion spooky," Alexander said.

"Don't metaphysicalize this," Carol said, her medical science training taking over. "Tammias. You're genetically modified. Who made you?"

"I don't understand... what happened?" Garcia asked. "Transcripts... You're recording. Can I get your transcripts?"

"You seem stronger and more resilient than the average human, but still sufficiently human. Could you give us access to that tech?" Alexander asked.

Garcia nodded. "I am a Kelvan, Human, Vulcan hybrid. You have not met the Kelvan, yet. May not. The disruption in the time line seems fairly severe," Garcia said. "Kirk was destined to meet them. He saves the galaxy. How many times does he save the galaxy? The amoeba. The Doomsday Devices. I don't know who screwed him up, but he is a key player in maintaining the time line. If the Klingons discover the Kelvan. There will be Kelvan Klingon hybrids in your future. I guarantee you, I am the only one qualified to handle that tangent."

"Who is Kirk?" Carol asked.

"Captain James Tiberius Kirk," Garcia said. "Husband. Father. Son, David..."

"He's your father or your husband?" Carol asked.

"I know a Kirk.," Alexander said. "George Samuel Kirk? He served with Pike on the Kelvin. You're a descendent of the Kelvin?"

"Save Vulcan," Garcia said, a voice change that sounded like Spock.

"Another personality?" Carol asked.

"That sounded like Spock," Alexander said.

"Please, help me," Garcia said. "I will help you..."

"Alright. Give me something. Prove to me you're an ally," Alexander said.

Garcia surrendered coordinates.

"Not familiar with that," the Admiral said. He touched an earpiece and repeated the coordinates. A moment later his suspicion was confirmed by crew. "That's just open space..."

"You will find the Botany Bay adrift there. Well, close enough to that you will find it with sensors," Garcia said. "And, with that, Khan Noonien Singh. I told you I would Singh!" He laughed. "Refugees from the Eugenic wars. Without tech, they're like me on steroids. With tech, they're virtually unbeatable. They can hold against your reptilian based Klingons. They could save Earth. At a cost. The cost... Free them in this century, give them Earth, or give them Vulcan, and you will have an army capable of the conquering Kronos and ending the war. They are Spartan. 300 of them, they take Kronos."

"I don't trust you. Give me quantum transporters."

Garcia gave him more coordinates. Alexander confirmed with his crew there was a star there.

"What will we find there?" Alexander said.

"The crawling eye. Psychic spies. Quantum transporters, ion trails tying the entire galaxy together. Brains. Lots of brains. Disembodied. Spock's brain. Save Vulcan," Garcia said.

Garcia passed out.
“Wake him up,” Alexander said.
“No,” Carol said. “He’s done. We’re done.”
Alexander hit him, yelling at him to wake up. He didn’t. Alexander stood up.
“Make sure he doesn’t die,” he said. “I’ll be on the Bridge.”
“You’re not really thinking of going to Triskelion, are you?” Carol asked.
“Yeah, why not?” Alexander asked.
“He’s clearly mentally ill,” Carol said.
“He’s Star Fleet. How ill can he be?” Alexander said.
“DID is usually trauma related, but that eye light thing. We’ve never seen that,”
Carols said.
“So, he’s possessed?” Alexander asked. “I mean it looks like that, but maybe he’s
just alien. We’re going.”

Chapter 4

Carol produced a hot towel to clean Garcia's face. He giggled.

Carol stopped, again surprised he was awake, but curious why he was laughing. "What's funny?"

"I am alive," Garcia said.

Carol seemed sad. "Contrary to popular belief, my father isn't evil. The Federation's situation is much more precarious than most people realize," she said. "We lost several colonies to the Klingons, including K7, and so they're very strategically placed. And sufficiently aggressive to be concerned."

Carol resumed cleaning his face. He turned his head away, saying 'stop,' but she took his face in her hand and redirected it towards her. She scrutinized his eyes. The hand with the towel trembled.

"I feel like we've met before..."

"Stop..."

Carol dropped the towel and pushed both hands against his face, bringing her lips close to his, her eyes staring into his. Her breathing synced with his. If she had been tracking her heart rate, she would have found hearts in sync.

"Please," they both said, simultaneously, breathlessly.

Garcia's eyes flashed. Carol gasped, sucking in air. She didn't question his hands being free, suddenly drawing her on top of him. She didn't question any of his restraints being free, or the sudden direction they were going in as he stood up, taking her up, turned her, and then put her back in the chair, pushing it into a reclining position, pinning her hands above her head. She kissed him as eagerly as he kissed her. She pushed her body into him. He closed his eyes, started to retreat, but she pulled him back, arms and legs going around them. He surrendered.



Agent 347 and agent 201 arrived safely, having taken a journey that encompassed hundreds of trillions of miles in less than a heartbeat. Faster than light. For many the arrival would have been incredibly disorienting, enough to make people sick. It was jarring, but for the seasoned travelers it was taken in stride. 201 edged a little closer to 347, took his hand. Her ancestors came from Japan, but she was a little taller, with a hint of Caucasian influence. Her hair was shoulder length, straight, square, a shaped waterfall, shiny black; her face was visible with the hairline right at eyebrow level. She was dressed in a white blouse, plaid skirt, a thin black tie, and had a coat with unrecognized insignia; the school uniform feel to her dress made her seem younger than 20. She had a matching purse, folded thin, suggesting it was relatively empty. 347 was a Caucasian male, dressed in jeans and a long sleeve, earth colored, turtleneck shirt, and a military styled, olive green army jacket. His beard was new for him, fighting gray, and a prominent bald spot. At fifty one, standing next to 201, he might have been thought her father. He had a discernable, but quiet shading of dandruff. He had 1950's MASH mail bag. It seemed empty. He did not look like the sort of person who might be called an 'agent,' much less a time traveling agent. His 'orientation' moment was observably longer than 201's with

full recovery coinciding when he realized she had his hand. He squeezed back. They stood before a pedestal, topped with a transparent dome that allowed them to see three, illuminated, disembodied brains. Their colors were primary: red, yellow, and blue.

He mumbled, "So, this is now..." You would think most people would be in a panic, demanding explanation. He took it all in stride.

"Yeah," 201 agreed.

"Identify yourselves," the brains demanded.

"Took you guys long enough to find us," 347 said. "Here's the deal. Isis sent us here to negotiate the release of the hostages."

"You were not sent. We brought you here," Red said. "Your quantum signature does not align with this domain. Define your origin point." Another asked: "Explain your purpose..."

"To negotiate the release of the hostages. As for origin point, well that's really difficult to explain," Garcia said.

A multitude of questions and demands were issues simultaneously, with quarreling about which question required the most immediate answer. 347 raised his hand. "Hold up, let's just work this out. We have time..."

201 grimaced but didn't disagree.

"The other interlopers do not align with your quantum signature," Blue said. "Two different quantum signatures. Explain your connection."

"Other interlopers," 201 said. "Oh, you mean the hostages. Yeah, but they're closer to this time line than we are..."

"How come you sound like a Dalek but Red sounds like Alexa?" 347 asked.

"Explain this reference," the three brains demanded.

"Maybe we should stick to the script," 201 suggested.

"We're reasonably on track," 347 said.

"The two of you display an inappropriate level of nonchalance given the gravity of your situation," Yellow said. "You will supply us with the answers we need..."

"Yeah yeah, or you will kill us, been there, done that..." 347 said.

"Death is not an option," Red said. "Your brains will be removed from your vessels and placed within supporting triadic structures for optimum information retrieval."

"Oh, well that would be different," 347 said. "But, still won't get you what you want. It would likely take you a millennia to unpack my brain, and even then it wouldn't be helpful. In fact, you'd probably not believe what you found."

"It's why they sent us," 201 said. "We're unbelievably different."

"In a good way," 347 said.

"We're not trained in tech," 201 said. "We can use tech. It feels a lot like magic. But the only thing we were really trained in was philosophy. We are happy to share that with you. But the big tech, the kind you're really asking about, well, that's in the hands of the Isis. She sent us to facilitate communication in the most nondestructive fashion possible. We're very peaceful people."

"Besides, we are wearing symbiotic biological tech that should we be killed, we would cycle back to origin point with full memory of the end event in order to disclose our failure so the next time we arrive here, we will be armed for this level of interaction,"

347 said. "It would save a lot of time and effort just to negotiate with us without harming us."

"It really would," 201 said. "Because Isis keeps sending us back," and said the last part looking at 347 "without any script changes."

"The inherit message hasn't changed," 347 said.

"You can't force this," 201 said.

"I am not forcing anything..."

The brains deliberated over top of the agents deliberation, calculating the odds of that the information disclosed was valid. Outside systems began chiming in and values were assigned.

347 thought that odd. "How can you bet on something you can't verify?" he asked.

"You will identify yourselves," Blue said.

"I am Jon Harister..."

"No," 201 said. "You're 347."

"I hate that designation," 347 said.

"You would prefer double oh seven?" 201 asked.

"No. Well, sometimes. Depends on the leading actress. 42 would be nice, though," 347 said.

"It's taken," 201 said. "Besides, you're neither a robot nor a hitman."

"Explain how you can be so cavalier?" Yellow said.

"You want me to be afraid? Well, honestly, I am terrified. I've died a few times and come back and it's not pleasant. It's survivable, but I prefer to avoid it," 347 said. "There are worse things than death. Oh, by the way. Those worse things, they're coming here. We're in a position we can help you, if you let us."

Another round of deliberation was under taken.

"It is decided. You will fight in the games," Yellow said.

"I am not a fighter," 347 said.

"He really isn't," 201 said.

"Then you will die," Blue said. "And in this way, we will discover vicariously whether or not you speak truth about cycling through time."

"I bet a thousand quatloos marginal endurance will be maintained for five minutes," Red said.

Betting erupted with any survival time over five minutes being evidence that 347 had cycled a minimum of a thousand deaths before learning to avoid death.

"Oh, come on," 347 said. "Mortal Kombat is so 90s. You need an update to your entertainment."

Silence ensued. 201 frowned at 347.

"Expound," Red said.

"Ever read the Hunger Games?" 347 asked.

"Jon!" 201 said.

"Seriously, look, I am a lover not a fighter. You will be bored betting on me in that arena," 347 said. "However, if..."

"You're really not going there, are you?" 201 asked.

"We made it this far, let's go all the way," 347 said.

"Seriously?" 201 asked. "Just because we came back to the sixties..."

“It’s what I do,” Jon said.

“I don’t want be in the room with you when the life review begins,” 201 said.

“It will be alright. Follow my lead,” 347 said.

“Just because you’re the senior lead doesn’t mean...”

“Not trying to force this. But it’s war or love. War has not worked out so well for us,” 347 said.

“Alright, but just this once,” 201 said. She smiled at the brains. “We have an alternative entertainment venue which would likely surpass all your present revenue streams.”

“Like, triple the Ferengi GDP,” 347 said.

“We are interested in new entertainment opportunities,” the brain triad in front them said. “Disclose.”

“I propose you hook me up with aliens and bet on my ability to produce viable offspring,” 347 said. “You can place micro bets on whether I successfully pleasure agreeable partners... and put some spin on it like, they have to pretend to like it, with independent arbitrator that will verify degrees of success...”

“The Eros function doesn’t interest us,” Blue said.

“That’s a socialized belief that if you allow me to demonstrate, you may find yourselves sufficiently surprised. Your competitions and betting is just a vicarious release of the same energy, and the aggression in the arenas is exasperated because you don’t have the bodies to do it for yourselves. I promise, a spoon full of testosterone will help this medicine go down, and you will suddenly find new ways of getting your gambling need met...”

The brains began betting.

“I can’t believe they’re actually deliberating,” 201 said.

“We just have to buy time, right?” 347 asked. “How far into this tangent did we have to go?”

“A week,” 201 lamented.

“Has anything prior got us past a day?” 347 asked.

“No,” 201 said.

“If we can get them to bet on my stamina and refractory period, they’ll lose,” 347 said. “You have quatloos on you, throw your two cents in.”

“I bet 50,000 quatloos 347 can satisfy 30 partners in a 12 hour period,” 201 said, taking a solid bar of diamond speckled gold out of her bag and placing it on the dias.

347 frowned at her.

“What?” 201 asked. “You’re capable.”

“You don’t start betting at the high end,” 347 said. “You low ball them so have margin to surprise.”

“If we’re going to play ball, come big or not at all,” 201 said.

The agents looked to the brains. There was silence. There was still activity. The brains were quivering, and the pulse of blood being forced through their layered cortexes could be seen.

“You can’t vote...” Blue said.

“Accepted...” Red said.

“Compulsory caveat that any resulting offspring becomes property of Triskelion...” Yellow said.

“In for a penny...” 201 said.

“One million quatloos no offspring will result,” Blue said... and the betting was off to the races.

“Oh, please,” 201 said, pulling out another bar. “You brains are not betting on the right things. I bet he can satisfy all his partners.”

Betting began until an interruption was brought about how to measure.

“No, you can’t rely on self-reporting,” 201 said. “Your thralls will lie to please you. Using your available tech, I will place monitors on the subjects that will measure their neural and physiological reactions. This information will be sent to a computer or arbitrary judge. Betting over whether a partner is satisfied and how quickly satisfaction can be achieved is possible. In fact, I bet Jon can satisfy a partner before he is satisfied sixty percent of the time. Further, even if he finishes first, he will continue to perform until partner is satisfied...”

The number of bidders expanded to other regions. Apparently, no new comer had ever enthralled a member with such promising revenue schemes. That fact could be attributed to most people were probably in fight or flight mode from the moment they arrived against their wills. Being born here resulted in this normality, being brought here, this was a nightmare. 347 was surprised but also feeling like he should be out of sorts with 201 for pushing the difficulty of the task at hand. She took another bar out.

“Also, I bet Jon, without being privy to biometrics data, can discern when someone is faking satisfaction,” 201 said.

“Who’s side are you on?” Jon asked.

“I am making sure everyone is properly vested,” 201 said. “You can tell the difference.”

“With aliens,” Jon said. “Not so much with humans.”

“Well, we did go like 2 thousand years where faking was a survival skill,” 201 reminded him

Bidding for ownership of offspring and debates about first partnering began.

“Now hold on,” 347 said.

“No, we accept this tangent...”

“Oh? Well, I have some caveats,” 347 said. “Like, everyone who comes to me has a choice...”

“Thralls have no choice. They will do as they are told,” Blue said. “You will service all who come to you, or face penalty. Triad Terish has agreed to handle your collateral and any winnings, with ten percent handling fee. Presently, no providers are bidding for owning you. Initial capture value has been trippled due to your perceived willingness to participate.”

Without further debate or betting, 347 and 201 were transferred to their quarters, instantaneously. They found themselves collared, a thin band of linked, black, almost translucent stones that went around their neck; the shaped Tourmaline like stones were connected in threes, interrupted by a quartz that were a little bigger. Their necklace was unmarked by color scheme that would suggest a provider has taken ownership; the clear quartz would change color when they became owned. A tall, mysterious man presented himself to them. His cloak disguised his leg movement to the point it seemed as if he were floating. His eyes sparked as he interacted with his provider. He nodded in his

private conversation, not hearing or seeing the newcomers while holding his inner conversation.

“Wow,” 201 said. “We’re not fighting for our lives...”

“Yet,” 347 said.

“You think this will work?” 201 said.

“What happen when our society put porn on cell phones?” 347 asked.

“This will work,” 201 said.

The mysterious man returned to present, focusing on the new comers.

“I am Galt,” he said, bowing to them. He was always respectful. He was simply a custodian who took his training function seriously. “I am the master thrall for this complex. I will facilitate transactions while the providers explore the entertainment value of your proposal. Should you fail to garner and maintain a minimum level of viewership, the nature of the agreement will be altered to reflect mainstream revenue generating activities. Because of the newness of the arrangement, you have been granted an unusual amount of freedoms and luxuries not usually afforded someone of your status. For starters, your companion will be allowed to remain with you. She may participate in any way you desire to facilitate and maintain his maximum performance level. First level of punishment for any failure will be to assign your companion to another thrall for breeding purposes. Follow me.”

As they walked, 201 asked. “Doesn’t it strike you as odd that no one ever tries to take our bags?”

“Even the most advanced people can’t consciously address things that clearly look like magic,” 347 said. “To them, they’re just empty bags.”

“But, they’re brains...” 201 said.

“They’re all brains, but that doesn’t make them smart,” 347 said.

Galt stopped at the entrance to a chamber, and hand gestured that they were free to proceed in. The entrance was wide, like an opening to a cave cut larger to show off the inner space, and as they passed ‘mister mysterious,’ 347 was discovered they were being provided the most spacious, most luxurious of décor and furniture; this was new, and the brains had provided furniture based on their bias of his needs. 347’s workspace looked like a BDSM store. Even as 347 was measuring and thinking, Galt was telling him that if he required anything more specific for performance purposes, he only need ask and replicators would provide. The quarters and ‘workshop’ combined was a mixture between a bohemian love nest and a madam’s torture chamber. There were ropes, suspension point, tables, heated stones, suction cups, whips, candles, potions, variety of foods and drinks from fruit to candies, lava lamps, florescent bubble tubes... 201 went to a particular couch, which was sort of like a lounge, only, it had a gentle wave form design that allowed for varied, optimum positional body mechanics when love making.

“Oh, I used to have one of these,” 201 said. “Can we get one of these when get home?”

“Sure,” 347 said.

A large, yellow skinned, flaming orange, spiked hair, almost a Shrek-ish, ogre like creature arrived. She smiled pleasantly. Scarily.

“This is Tamoon,” Galt said. “You may begin.”

Tamoon smiled and bowed. She wasn't hideous, but she was intimidating, clearly built for combat-with tank robots. 201 pushed 347 towards her. "Spit spot, don't be shy..."

"Um..."

"Oh, yeah, almost forgot, biometrics," 201 said. She drew a small device from her bag and handed it to Galt. "It is a simple measuring device that broadcast all telemetry on an assigned frequency. If you or the Providers will be so kind as to designate a frequency for us to transmit data, I will set the first device. Or you can do it. You have full access to this tech. Has an independent arbitrator been established?"

Galt's eyes flashed. "The device is approved. We will provide you with more. Frequency has been assigned, link established. Proceed."

201 approached Tamoon. She seemed hesitant.

"Will this hurt?" Tamoon asked.

"This thing?" 201 asked. "Oh, no. It's just measures things, like body temperature, blood flow, heart rate, skin conductivity, brain waves, endorphins level..."

"No, will the servicing hurt?" Tamoon asked.

201 seemed surprised by the question.

347 came a little closer. Her question sparked compassion and curiosity. "Have you been hurt in the past?"

Galt's eyes flashed. "These questions are irrelevant. You will begin servicing."

"I'm not refusing to perform," 347 said, turning and looking around as if meeting multiple cameras. "The betting was on frequency and my personal duration per coupling. If you like, you can bet on how long it takes me to get someone to fully engage, which means, questions and understanding a person's history and medical situation is absolutely essential. This is part of the game."

Galt's eyes flashed. "You may proceed, for now."

347 turned back to 347. "You were hurt before?"

"It is what it is," Tamoon said. "Only those very skilled at fighting may choose a mate. I have survived, but I am not highly ranked. I cannot have children, so, I am frequently used to service thralls... It is usually not pleasant, but I have endured worse in the arenas."

"You have never experienced an orgasm," 201 said, which was a fishing guess statement.

"When I was younger, I could arrive through self-touch," Tamoon said. "But after an injury, that ability went away."

347 retrieved a medical tricorder from his bag. He offered it to Galt to be examined. Galt seemed perplexed, his eyes even flashed.

"This thrall has been deemed medically sound. The Providers are annoyed by the delay..." Galt said.

"If she has medical condition due to trauma that inhibits her ability to climax, then all bets are off," 201 said.

"Negative. You will service this thrall," Galt said.

"I will, and I will win, but let me use this device so I can understand her biology a little better, so I don't cause harm," 347 said. "Seriously, if you guys want this enhanced revenue stream, then you need to watch and learn. If forcing people to perform was sufficient, this would already be your primary mode of interaction. Fear and forcing

works. You can box people into a corner and they will do some horrendous things. You have minimized sexuality by making it a reward for competing, which is good for some, not good for others. This thing I am offering you, it's a different pathway from the fight or flight response. It requires social, psychological, and biological synergetic coherence to achieve optimum results. I challenge one brain or one triad to use the data projected from this thrall to share in her neural experience."

"Also," 201 said. "When we win this round, continue to monitor her over the next week. I bet you her performance in every arena will be improved because she will have an improvement in mood. This is a win win in every way."

Galt's eyes flashed. "Proceed..."



Garcia woke. He felt groggy and it was difficult to open his eyes but he forced himself because of the sensation of being intimately close to someone, spooning. The first realization was that he was perfectly spooning and he sat up because the twins should have been there. His hands went to his stomach and up. His hand found the straps. He became aware of the portable womb against his back. He stood up and reversed it. In the dim light he saw Carol on the floor.

"Oh, fuck me, am I ever going to get grief for this," he said to no one; or perhaps quietly to the twins. He took the womb off, put on his shirt, and put the womb back on. He patted them. "If you learn nothing from me but this, no drugs, no alcohol. Ever."

Garcia finished dressing quickly. Carol was still out cold. He felt the tingling of telepathic bond and the heat that lingered and forced himself to shut it down, partly for fear of waking her, but partly because he didn't want to go there again. Well, that was lie. He wanted it to go on forever without end. He wanted to be with her without the influence of drugs. There was no way to be with her without the influence of his telepathic nature. He wondered if he engaged her how long he could sustain this tangent. He wanted her so much...

"Focus," he whispered, needing to hear himself. He went to the door which was locked to him. He reached behind the pack, opened a pocket and slid out Gary Seven's Servo. "Also, twins, always practice a bit of sleight of hand, for impromptu magic. It will help with things like bra removal."

Garcia had a rudimentary understanding of the servo. He could open doors with it. There was a guard. His eyes sparked with surprised understanding even as the Vulcan nerve pinch rendered him unconscious. He dragged him back into the room, secured him to the chair, and gagged him with the first thing available... One of Carol's socks. He heard himself asking, 'why do females insist on socks being off,' and Duana responded, 'we want your socks off so you're not in such a hurry to leave after.' 'Yeah, stay and tarry a while,' Ilona said. He debated tying Carol, but he seriously feared physical contact with her. Ilona complained, 'you never tie me up.' He pushed bravely out into the corridor. He debated, left, right, his inner companions not helping his debate, and finally went right. A port at the end of the corridor revealed they were at warp.

"Please, not Triskelion," Garcia said.

Garcia pushed up against to port, hoping to see other features of the ship, wanting to get his bearings. "Dreadnaught," he whispered. He sorted through a generalized, predictable blue print. Re-orientated and went back the way he came, past the

‘examination’ room, and was forced to hide in a hollow space as crew past. The corridor was too busy, which meant he would have to risk going back and finding another way. The door across the corridor was labeled Doctor Carol Marcus. He chose to enter her quarters.

Being the Admiral’s daughter, her quarters were likely more generous than most people might have had access to. It was a spacious floor plan, lavatory, sunken floor for the living area. The head of the bed was also the back of the couch that infringed on the sunken space. The foot of the bed faced a large open window with a large sill, throw pillows on either side of the window space. A book and a cup of tea was there. There was a lavatory, closet, and a computer station with three monitors... A Padd on the window was playing music. She had been recording and listening to 60’s radio waves; there was music. Bee Gees, ‘I got to get a message to you...’

He went to the station and used the servo to unlock the screen. Fronting files included the ‘genesis’ wave theorems. He couldn’t resist opening it up to see how far along she was. The projected algorithms reflected a reality endorsed by Tesla: frequency, vibration, energy...

“Focus,” he told himself again. He found wireless code that allowed him to unlock his implant. It logged in instantly.

“Hello, Tam.” It was Losira, texting him.

“Did you complete your mission?” he texted back.

“Affirmative,” Losira said. “Tuer detected your transport to the Vengeance. We’ve not been detected. They are running with their shields up. I could beam over using the Kalandan transporter and disable...”

“Stand by...” he texted her.

There was a phaser pressed to the side of his head.

“Tell me why I shouldn’t kill you,” Carol said.

“Love,” Garcia said.

“Love?! I don’t love you. You raped me!” Carol said.

“You drugged me!” Garcia said. “It severely impacted my inhibition, and your guess about my past trauma and poor boundaries is dead on accurate. I didn’t ask for any of this. But I am here, and this is the furthest into this tangent I have ever been, which make this moment, makes us, existentially significant.”

Carol couldn’t argue with the fact she had drugged him and part of her was confused at how much she should own. Letting go of her anger, even just a little, she found herself empathizing, and wanting. She steeled her anger, her finger on the trigger nearly collapsing in. “You opened my Genesis file,” Carol said. “Why?”

“Because in one time-line, you turn dead planets into life sustaining planets. In another, you create a weapon capable of destroying entire solar systems,” Garcia said. “Search your intuition. Your mind touched mine. Our souls intertwined. If you say the word, I will give you the rest of your formula even now...”

“Lower your weapon.” The voice belonged to Losira, standing right behind her with a weapon of her own.

It was sufficient enough of a distraction that Garcia took Carol’s weapon, spinning his chair into her, his knees sweeping her even as he was taking her wrist, and when the movement stopped, she was sitting in his lap, legs awkwardly sprawled, one of his arms around her, her own weapon pointing at her.

“I told you to stand by,” Garcia told Losira.

“I was worried,” Losira said.

Carol was not happy. Garcia felt his arousal going up and used the urgency to stand up. Why were these moments always so arousing? He asked. “Seriously?” Ilona asked. When Garcia stood up, he forced Carol to her feet. He needed to sort the fact Losira was experiencing worry, but Carol was in the forefront in his mind. He could feel her trembling. Touching her, even with clothes on, was affecting them both. He turned her and put her back in the chair. Garcia went to his knees and presented her weapon to her. She didn’t take it. He set it in her lap.

“I have never been this far with you,” Garcia said. It was both the wrong and most accurate thing he said, and he bit his tongue as he re-examined it. “I want to take it further.” He cringed. He was struggling to say what he needed to say. He so wanted to spend time with her in this room...

“I...”

“Have mixed feelings. Some of that is due to the mind meld. Some of that is because your time-line just experienced a major directional shift because of me, us. Nothing happens in a vacuum. One thing changes, everything changes,” Garcia said. “We are integrally linked. Losira, thank you for helping me. Please, return to the Pathfinder.”

Losira folded into two dimensional space, collapsed to a line, then a dot. Carol’s mouth opened.

“We’re not just more advanced,” Garcia said. He took her hand in his. “We are a gestalt of species, technologies, and philosophical beliefs that unite us into this ineffable relationship we call now. I don’t know how to explain it. It is ever changing and immutable. You and I went somewhere, were there for the briefest of moments, and that was real even though it was coerced through negative influencing factors and trajectories put in play long before we ever existed. I can’t choose to undo it. I actually wanted it on some level or it wouldn’t have happened. Kill me, and I promise I will do everything in my power to avoid that situation again, even if it means never exploring this tangential framework again. I fear this may be undoable. It feels fairly weighty, I feel drawn here over and over, but if I do, you won’t remember this, consciously...”

Carol took the weapon from her lap. “I kill you, it blows up the ship,” Carol said.

“It probably just feels like that, because I will be removed from this referential time-line,” Garcia said. “Use disintegrate, and you should be fine. The explosion is mostly to guarantee no one gets time tech.”

Garcia sat back on his legs. He had a theory that most people could not kill while maintaining eye contact. He forced himself to lower his eyes from her gaze, and so he stared humbly at the floor, awaiting her decision. She hadn’t taken the time to put on socks and shoes. She probably hadn’t wanted to take her sock from the guards mouth. Just seeing her feet made him want her. He closed his eyes. Carol put her weapon down on the desk. It made the softest of noise. His eyes returned to hers.

“How can I help you?” Carol asked.

“Take me to McCoy and Seven,” Garcia asked.

“You won’t get past the guards,” Carol said. “Even with me.”

“Okay. Execute a site to site transport,” Garcia said.

“At warp? Are you kidding?” Carol said.

“Give me access to the controls. I can do it,” Garcia said.

“Even if we get in there, there are two guards on duty...”

Garcia took up her phaser, switched it from kill to stun, and handed it to her.

“You take out the guards, I release Seven.”

“What will it gain you?” Carol asked. “Two minutes maximum before all the alarms you set off bring the entire command force down on you.”

“I only need one minute,” Garcia said. “Can you give me that?”

Garcia put a hand on her knee. She nearly melted into him. “I am so compromised.”

“So am I,” Garcia said. “You still have a choice. We have time. Make it. Call dad, or open a path to a virtual transporter terminal.”

Aretha began singing ‘chain of fools’ in the background.

“We could dance?” Carol asked.

“Yeah,” Garcia so wanted to go there. “It will escalate... One more time before dad kills me?”

Carol sighed, opened up a command pathway to various non-crucial items. Garcia stopped her, seeing the pathway to a lifepod’s emergency transporter. Her secondary monitor shifted to show the brig and the placement of the guards. Garcia calculated optimum arrival placement. He stood. Carol took a place next to him. He separated her and resumed his place. He thought about it, came closer.

“May I kiss you?” Garcia said.

“You have to ask?” Carol said.

“I want permission, while we’re still sane,” Garcia said.

“I will never be sane again,” Carol said, putting herself against him. Still, his lips lingered slightly out of reach, frustrating enough she nearly did it, but she wanted him to come to her. “Kiss me.”

He kissed her. He struggled to separate himself, but did and went back to his spot, pointed the servo at the terminal, and they transported. Even though it was an internal transporter, the presence of a transporter extraction wave followed by an almost instantaneous insertion wave resulted in intruder alert alarms going off. The guards inside the brig fell to two successful stun shots, even as Garcia was hitting an emergency quarantine that sealed the brig. Losira had arrived outside the brig, and entered the brig dragging a stunned guard; accomplishing her task just prior to the triple door seal closed. Carol nearly shot her. Losira put her hand through the wall and damaged the inside circuit enough the panel erupted into sparks on both sides; no one would be getting in fast, even with command overrides. Garcia brought the cell doors down, allowing Seven and McCoy to join him at the terminal.

“Hello, Carol,” McCoy said.

“Have we met?” Carol asked.

“Not yet,” Garcia said.

“I can’t beam you out with their shields up,” Losira said.

“It’s okay,” Garcia said, handing Seven his servo. “Can I have one?”

“No,” Seven said. He went right to the security console, and in seconds remotely hijacked the ship and put them in over drive. “In a moment, they will experience a time dilation event which will take them back to their century. We need to go.”

“I need to stay here, and see this tangent through. Go save your people,” Garcia said.

“You have done enough damage just showing up here. You need to come with me,” Seven said.

“I have to see this through,” Garcia said. “Carol’s father will kill her for helping me...”

“Carol, tell your father Garcia used a Vulcan mind meld to hijack your body,” Seven said.

“Mostly true,” Garcia agreed.

“Tam, what have you done?” McCoy asked.

“We should leave together,” Carol said. “I can help. I am smart. I am good in a fight. I want to be with you.”

“That feeling will diminish in time,” Garcia said, squeezing her hand.

“Tam?!” McCoy said.

“I need to go with her,” Garcia said. “I can save Vulcan!”

“You need to come with me, now” Seven said.

“Tam?” Losira said. “I will not be able to keep up without triggering a transwarp event...”

“Discontinue pursuit, continue towards Triskelion, stay cloaked. We will be there before you arrive,” Seven said. “Tam, you go back to the 23rd century and you will be outside my jurisdiction. It’s now or never.”

“Damn it it’s always now or never,” he said. He kissed Carol one last time, then lingered, his forehead leaning against her. “Thank you...” She was going to say something, perhaps a protest, or her own expression of thankfulness, but then he sedated her with a Vulcan nerve pinch. She crumbled to the floor. He took her phaser as she fell, then followed Seven through a portal that couldn’t be seen straight on until you passed through it. They arrived back on earth.

From the perspective of the Pathfinder, the Vengeance disappeared.

Tuer announced evidence of a temporal distortion. Losira affirmed and directed McKnight to bring them back to warp four, maintaining course for Triskelion.



“How did you get in here?” This came from Roberta Lincoln. She was a little annoyed at being ignored, but clearly recognized there was something bigger than her going on.

McCoy slapped the back of Garcia’s head. “That’s Kirk’s wife?! Or was Kirk’s wife. Or will be... Damn it, Tam!”

“So, it’s not like she’s my mother,” Garcia said, touching the back of his head.

“You don’t know that,” McCoy said.

“I’m pretty sure I know that,” Garcia said.

“Temporal ethics! You don’t sleep with people from the past, mother or not,” McCoy said.

“Spock did,” Garcia said. “Kirk did...”

“When did Spock...” McCoy said. “Beth? How do you even know about that?! Don’t answer that. How is that even an excuse?”

Seven ignored them in favor of a computer search.

“It wasn’t my fault,” Garcia said.

“It’s never your fault!” McCoy said.

“Are you two through?” Seven asked.

“No?! Tell me you at least used protection,” McCoy said. The hesitation in response was telling. “What is the hell is wrong with you?!”

“Not like I carry protection in my wallet,” Garcia said.

“Maybe you should,” McCoy said. “What if she gets pregnant?”

Seven, reading his monitor had an answer. “She still hooks up with Kirk, and within a reasonable time frame that she might assume it’s his,” Seven offered.

“Carol is one of the most advanced life science experts in the Federation,” McCoy said. “You don’t think she can distinguish direct paternity between father and grandson?”

“People over look things,” Seven said, reading something from his terminal. “She does have a son name David. Do you want me to do a paternity test?”

“You can do that from there?” Lincoln asked.

“Sure. Every book ever written, ever strand of DNA, it’s all here...” Seven stopped, changing from excitement over his tech to direct anger over information spelling out another change that was crystalizing into permanence. “What the hell did you do?”

“Could you be more specific?” Garcia said.

“You gave them the coordinates to find Khan Noonien Singh,” Seven said.

“If you knew what I did why are you asking what I did?” Garcia asked.

“Are you insane? Kirk doesn’t have a five-year mission. No one would have found the Botany Bay at all,” Seven said. “This could have been the timeline I saved Khan.”

“Kahn” Lincoln said. “Why does that sounds familiar?”

“Because you and Seven tried to recruit him to be a time agents,” Garcia said.

“How do you know that?” Seven asked.

“How do I know that?” Lincoln said. Her gaze went to Garcia and she took a step closer. “Do I know you?”

“Don’t you dare even go there,” McCoy snapped.

“How can I not go there? Hell, you asking me not to go there sends me straight there,” Garcia said.

“Go where?” Lincoln asked.

“Roberta, you were hired by 347 and 201. I am agent Gary Seven, their immediate supervisor,” Seven said.

“Why do I remember him but I don’t remember you?” Lincoln asked.

“It’s complicated,” Seven said. “One, we haven’t met yet, and two, Seven is a title, so the other timelines you may have met someone different, who was still Seven, so you’re not having a de-ja-vu feel to your experience of me. I can only assure you, we travel together for a while. We are going to go retrieve them 347 and 201 now. If you’d like to join us, I would like your help,” Seven said, coming around the desk.

“Sure,” Lincoln said.

“She’s not trained for this!” McCoy snapped. “Hell, I am not even for the level of craziness that follows you and Garcia.”

“I will keep her safe,” Garcia said.

“You will stay away from her,” McCoy said. To seven, he said: “This is not some holodeck, Doctor Who fantasy. We are not companions! It’s not safe for her where we’re going. Where are we going?”

“Triskelion,” Seven said.

“It’s not safe where we’re going!” McCoy said.

“I’ll keep her safe,” Seven said.

“Hey! Are we back in the 50’s? I will decide for myself if stay or go. This door or that door?” Lincoln asked. “Please tell me that one, because I am curious.”

“You’re not scared?” Seven asked.

“A little. That’s normal. Jon said so,” Roberta said.

“Who’s Jon?” McCoy said.

“347,” Seven said.

“You really should call him by his name,” Roberta said. “We’re people, not numbers.”

Seven was agreeing with her even as he led her through the portal... Garcia and McCoy exchanged a look suggesting he wanted to debate going; it was quickly resolved. They follow.

“She doesn’t need you protecting her,” Garcia said.

The four of them traveled to another planet as easily as crossing across thresholds from bedroom to living room.

Chapter 5

They arrived in a quiet, dimly lit underground chamber. Seven led them straight to a terminal where he produced four necklaces and asked them to put them on.

“I don’t think so,” McCoy said.

“The harm feature is disabled. That said, should your collar light up and pulse, I recommend you feign injury or you will bring a level of scrutiny down on you that might result in death,” Seven said. “You will have the mark of a provider and a little more leeway than many thralls.”

Garcia and McCoy collared themselves while Seven puts the collar on Lincoln. He then collared himself, and retrieved a cloak from the replicator and put it on.

“Wait,” Tam said. “Can’t I be a master?”

“No. You’re not known here,” Seven said. “I have a history here. Now, I need to go speak with my agent. I want you to go train.”

“Train? You mean go fight and be a part of their entertainment?” McCoy asked.

“Leonard, Tam,” Seven said. “This is just a quiet little mission, information gathering. I don’t know what’s changed. Liberation event wasn’t supposed to happen till the 23rd century with Kirk. I don’t know if we’re on target for that event, given the temporal distortions. Don’t do anything big. But go, train. I will be monitoring you and will intervene should things get too insane.”

“Too insane? This whole this all thing is already way beyond that. These people are slaves, stolen from all parts of the galaxy to fight to the death for entertainment value only, and you want us to go and fight and pretend to be a part of this mess?” McCoy said.

“Yes,” Seven said.

“I am a doctor, not a gladiator,” McCoy snapped.

“Today, I need you to be both,” Seven said. “Again, I don’t know the situation here. Maybe if you hadn’t separated me from Isis I would have a clue. She is my superior and she knows things. Now, heads up, don’t get yourself killed. Go.”

With a spark in his eyes, Seven transported them using the available tech, and they disappeared in the blink of an eye. Seven turned to his work station and scrolled through data points looking for something.

“Where did you send them?” Lincoln asked.

“A training arena. They will be okay,” Seven said. “Garcia is an expert fighter.”

“Is it true, these people are enslaved?” Lincoln said.

Seven stopped to meet her eyes. “Yes, Roberta.”

“And, with all of your tech, to see all of time in an instant, to travel instantaneously without ship or worry for your wellbeing, you can’t free these people?” Lincoln asked.

“It doesn’t work like that. Even if it did, no one liberates a people over night with one war to end all wars. True freedom comes when the majority of hearts and minds are on the same page. That takes time. We have been planting the seeds of peace and cooperation and cultivating small changes over time, so when the blossoms of truth arrive, everyone can see, not just a few,” Seven said. “You are witnessing this in your own time in your own world. How long have women struggled for equality? Giving women the right to vote didn’t change all of society’ mind in one instant in all domains. Just saying a person is free from economic and social class division doesn’t mean the

social barriers allow for ease of transition. I could push button right now and all the collars would fall off. Ninety nine percent would pick their collars up and return to what they know. Even a speech from Kirk would not change this society from its direction at this particular moment in time. They're not ready."

Roberta didn't have a response. He turned back to the display.

"They would choose to wear their collars?" Lincoln asked. "To continue to fight, even to the death?"

"Imagine for a moment, I gave everyone on Earth all the money they could ever want and no one had to work again, what do you suppose would happen?" Seven asked.

"I don't know," Lincoln said. "People like working. If I were free to do whatever, I would travel..."

"How? Would you fly? No pilots. They stayed home. By car? Who would bring you fuel? Who would cater to you when you arrived where you were going?" Seven asked.

"So, we're still enslaved by an economic system?" Lincoln asked. "We are marginally more free, we don't have to fight to the death, but we're still slaves..."

"Not by a system. By beliefs, by cultural expectations," Seven said. "People assign status by access to wealth. How you will treat each other when everyone is equally sovereign is the true test of social and psychological health. That day is coming, but even you aren't there yet," Seven said. "That's just one of the big things people can't agree how to resolve. Here is a simple thing. What if I told you not policing your trash is killing your planet? What if I told you just stop making straws, plastic bags, six-pack holders, and glitter. Would you do that in order to save your oceans?"

"Glitter is killing the ocean?" Lincoln asked.

"Yes," Seven said. "By 2020 there will be a floating island of rubbish in the Pacific bigger than Texas. Would you give up straws? Would reduce consumption and packaging?"

"Yes," Lincoln said.

"Would everyone?" Seven asked.

"We're rational. If you told them," Lincoln said.

"If God himself told them, they would not stop. People have an expectation, a belief that they should have what they've always had. The rain forest in South America will be almost gone before there will be worldwide consensus to preserve it. Preserving it now means paying the people there not to work, not to cut trees, not to have farms, no have make their own wealth. Even if every South American was wealthy, they would continue to cut the forest because they would want to make more. There will be no more fish in the ocean before there is worldwide consensus to preserve ocean life. Half of the 23rd century's resources will be spent cleaning up the damage this century causes. Some things can't be undone. Like the loss of dolphins, whales..." Seven made a hand gesture to wait. He audibly sighed, and seemed upset. "We're in the wrong century. We were sent forwards in time."

"How did that happen?" Lincoln asked.

"The computer must have determined this is where the problem was- is," Seven said. He closed his eyes, sorting. "347 and 201 are here. I am missing something. I need to go speak to my agent. I need you to do something for me. Take a message to 347 and

201. Tell him Master Neves sent you and that a Provider is going to buy them. They should cooperate with her. Then stay with them until I catch up with you.”

“Okay,” Lincoln said.

Seven showed her a simple map. “They’re here. I can’t put you in their room, but I can put you here, just go straight down this corridor, turn right, you’ll see their door. If another thrall or a master thrall asks you, be subservient, respectful, and simply say, ‘master Neves sent me for training with Jon.’ You’ll be okay.”

“Neves is Seven backwards,” Lincoln said. “You’ve been here before.”

“Small changes over time build better futures than drastic, last minute course changes,” Seven said. “Have you ever had a deja-vu experience?” Lincoln nodded. “Then know that someone, somewhere, intervened and there was a slight deviation in the species subconscious trajectories.”

“What happens when you can’t deviate trajectory?” Lincoln asked.

“Species go extinct,” Seven said. “Ready to be transported?”



“You did it!” 201 said, jumping and cheering like a teenage, anime, Japanese cheerleader. Her arms went about his neck and she came up on her toes as she hugged his neck and kissed him. Anyone who had thought they were father-daughter would be seriously reconsidering. Her eyes were bright. Their collars had changed, meaning a provider had taken ownership of them. “With four hours to spare?! Can you do another?”

“Keera, I’m done. I am going to bed,” 347 said.

“I have a side bet that gives us 25 thousand more quatloos for every person you do over the target,” 201 said.

“Keera, is there something you’re not telling me?” 347 said.

“Like?” 201 said.

“Like, maybe, a gambling addiction?” 347 said.

“I am not addicted. I am just really good. And I like collecting currency. Especially coins,” Keera said. “Besides, if we end up being here long enough, I intend to be a master thrall with some means...”

“We won’t be here forever,” 347 said, then had a thought. “Want to go to Vegas when we get back?”

“Oh, I have a lifetime ban from Vegas,” 201 said.

“Really?” 347 asked.

“I told you, I am really good,” 347 said.

“I have evidence we’re in the 23rd century,” 347 said. “We could visit Vegas before heading back to the 20th century.”

“I have a lifetime ban from Vegas. Vegas’ lifetime, not mine,” 201 said.

“That’s serious,” 347 said.

“It’s why I am your sidekick,” 201 said.

“You’re more than a sidekick,” 347 assured her.

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” 201 said. “But I don’t count towards betting... Still, I am interested in seeing how my biometrics measure up...”

They were interrupted by a Master Thrall, a tall woman... “Cardassian?” 347 asked.

“So, we’re keeping it up with the Kardashians now?” 201 asked.

“No,” 347 said. “How may we help you, Master...”

“Master Seer,” she bowed. “You know of my kind?”

“In a way, yes,” 347 said. “You’re my first in person encounter. I am really curious about your biology...”

“I am not here for service...”

“Oh, sorry, I meant, I am curious if you primarily evolved from reptilian based life forms...” 347 struggled to recover, surprisingly embarrassed. He was amazed that even as a professional sexologist, with a history of having been a professional sexual surrogate, and high promiscuity being a huge part of his life, much less his career, he could still be embarrassed during social faux pas.

“If you didn’t come for service, why...” 201 asked.

Her eyes flashed. “Bring him,” she said, in a command voice.

Two females led a man into the room. His hands were shackled behind his back, and he had a lead attached to his collar. He was wearing a Star Fleet uniform.

“You don’t have to do this,” he was saying. “I am trying really...” He looked at 347. “Please, don’t kill me.”

“If we wanted you dead, you would be dead. Now, be silent,” Master Seer said. She turned to 347. “This specimen is unique. The Triskelion’s were able to improve their quantum transporters using his designs. That is how we found and recovered you, but we need to improve it further before we can begin mass quantum temporal exchange.”

“What ship is he from?” 201 asked.

“I don’t recognize it,” 347 said.

“I thought you knew everything about Fleet,” 201 argued.

“I know everything about the old Fleet, but not as much about the new Fleet,” 347 said. “It’s hard to keep with all the changes...”

“I am from...” he began. His collar illuminated and he went to his knees. The thralls holding him rolled their eyes, and one said something to the effect of, ‘he will never learn,’ only it sounded as if she had spoken it in French. Both Junior thralls slapped at him as if they were annoyed with him as well. It reminded 347 of the Stanford Prison experiment. He wondered if the archetype for good guy bad guy was just hardwired into all sentient life forms, or part of an over reaching collective unconscious.

“He his human, your kind, only, there are noticeable abnormalities in his genome, suggesting quantum traveling adaptations. We suspect he was immersed in the medium,” Seer said.

“Medium?” 201 said.

“That which binds the entire universe together,” 347 said.

“You are familiar with the concept of One?” Seer said.

“Familiar,” 347 reluctantly agreed to.

“Perhaps we can speak again on this in private. As of now, I need you to help me with this thrall. He refuses to participate in the breeding ritual with these females,” Seer said.

“Um, that’s out of my domain,” 347 said.

“You are the love doctor,” Seer said. “You will make him function and retrieve sufficient samples to impregnate these three thralls.”

“No... Wait, who’s calling me the love doctor?” 347 said.

“I kind of dropped your call sign,” 201 said.

“Oh, please, you didn’t,” Harister said.

“If you are not able to retrieve the samples through normal means, we will have to use alternative methods which may permanently damage this creature’s ability to perform, physically or mentally,” Seer said. “The providers do not want this specimen permanently harmed. He may be useful.”

“I’ve tried to explain...” the officer said, and was silenced by pain.

“You’re gay,” 347 said. “That’s a problem. I am not gay.”

“I do not understand this word,” Seer said.

“Think of it as a medical procedure,” 201 said. “You can do it in that context without it making you gay...”

“Um, no,” 347 said.

“I...” the officer began, and was shocked again.

“Would you stop shocking him?!” 347 said. “Please?”

The officer panted a soft thank you.

“Come sit on the bed,” 347 said.

“I am not...”

“Just sit, for god’s sake,” 347 said.

The Officer came and sat on the edge of the circular bed. Two of the female thralls stood to either side, and slightly behind their Master Thrall, Seer. One stood more forward, not letting the leash go. The three were curious. 201 brought a neural device over to place on his temple and he raised his hand in protest.

“You will cooperate with Strangelove’s assistant, or be punished,” Seer said.

“I can’t believe you dropped that,” 347 said.

“Sorry,” 201 said. To the officer, she said: “Sir, this is just a medical device. Kind of like a tricorder, just smaller. It doesn’t hurt. I will need you to leave it on for about a week. To remove it, just tap it four times in rapid succession, and it will just fall off.”

He allowed the placement of the device. 201 tried to reassure him with a smile, but his eyes were tracking some of the tools of the trade on shelves and on the walls, and the hanging devices... He swallowed. There were other tells that he was nervous. 347 pulled a stool over and sat in front of him.

“Now, let’s start with your name?” 347 said.

“I am not going to play nice with you,” he said.

“You will cooperate...” Seer began.

“I got this!” 347 said. Then thought about it. He may have the protection of a provider, but he was not a Master Thrall. He turned to face her. “Forgive me for raising my voice. Please. You came to me get him off. Let me talk.”

“You can talk him off?” the French sounding one asked.

“Actually,” 201 said.

Chimes indicating betting taking place were heard in the background.

“Just because I am gay doesn’t mean I am promiscuous,” he said.

347 turned back to the man. He nodded in agreement. “That’s true. I am really high on the promiscuous continuum, and extremely open to sensuality, but that doesn’t mean I am gay,” 347 said. “My name is Jon Harister. I am new here. Just trying to survive, utilizing a specialized talent.”

“Enough talk...” Seer said.

347 rotated on a stool. "Would you all step outside, please?"

"We will watch," Seer said. "We want to learn."

347 stood, looking about as if seeking cameras he knew were placed but couldn't find them. "I did what I said I would. I even won a provider. I am asking for a little freedom to expand and explore..."

347 was suddenly out of his frame and in new frame. There was an underground chamber, with a large plate glass window. A quick glimpse outside the window revealed a forest of pedestals with brains. There was passage leading in and out of the room he was in, and three pedestals, each containing three brains. Nine brains visible, all seven primary collars visible shining up through them. Two brains held a non-spectrum light, of gold and one silver. He centered himself amongst them.

"Look, I am cooperating. But you are bringing me new specimens who have not been conditioned or habituated to your program. I get the sense that these new people are going to resist your normal means of reward and punishment, which is good if you want them fighting for their life, but not so good for my alternative revenue scheme," 347 said.

"Coercion can be extremely titillating," Red said.

"Yes," 347 said. "And I can give you that if I find a participant that is interested in playing that, but I will not force anyone to play. I am offering you something other than fight or flight. You have something more meaningful in you, or you wouldn't have allowed exploration of this revenue stream. I need the flexibility to pursue alternative pathways to this thing I am offering you. I am betting you will be amazed..."

Quarrelling began.

"Stop," 347 said. "Please. Allow me to speak to a higher authority."

The center of each of the pedestals opened, and a singular brain rose from the interior. The dais that held the new brains were larger than the primary three brains, as these new brains were also larger. As they rose, their lights became prominent, and the brains on the lower pedestals dimmed.

"We are listening," the three said. The voices spoke in harmony, a melodious musical quality to them, and the voices were hyper feminized.

"Female brains are larger than male brains," 347 said.

"We are female," they confirmed.

"Don't you long for something more than fighting?" 347 asked.

"Even in the old days, when we had vehicles like yours, fighting was the primary mode for males to earn the right to mate," they said.

"But, you have more than males fighting here," 347 said.

"Females fought to maintain social structure, or to have movement from one class to another," they explained.

"At some point, you moved past that. You stop physically fighting, stopped using your bodies, and began to live in these communities," 347 said. "You became more intellectual..."

"No, the games continue internally. The days of adaptation began with augmented reality, and the fighting moved from physical to virtual. If you did not fight, you did not eat," they explained. "The internal games continue. We train our pets to fight in the real world not just because it amuses us, not just because it reminds us of who we were, but because it reflects the inner structures."

347 seemed saddened as he tracked a new idea. “Maybe I was wrong about you,” he said. “Maybe this is evidence for species bias on my part. I assumed all species experienced what I have been trying to reawaken in you. Maybe you never had this thing. Maybe you never in your recorded history had a pause where nature and intellect met and there was silent appreciation and gratefulness for being. Maybe you never experienced love. I have been pushing for radical change, and you gave me a chance. I am grateful. If you will allow me a little more freedom, just a little, and some flexibility with the individuals you wish me to serve, I will serve you something you have never experienced before. Better than ice cream. Better than orgasms. Better than the thrill of betting or fighting or all of it combined. This is not something I can just tell you about. You have to experience it; what I am offering takes time to build. Anyone can train to fight. Not everyone can learn to experience what I am asking you to experience. You have a chance, vicariously, through the brains that serve you, to transcend into something ineffable.”

“You have one week,” the female brains said. “Your provider has requested you be raised to the level of Master Thrall to facilitate the flexibility you are requesting. We have voted and approved your change in status. If you fail to provide, you will forfeit your vehicle and be initiated into a triad, fighting to serve a female.”

347 was returned. He wanted to ask Master Seer to step out, but not only did she out rank him, he needed her and the thralls to watch. He resumed sitting on the stool, leaning close in an intimate way, not romantically intimate, but like a grandfather, or Carl Rogers about to engage someone in therapy.

“What’s your name?” 347 asked.

“I am Lt Stamets of the USS Discovery, and we’re on an important mission...”

“Lt,” 347 said. “What’s your name?”

“You clearly have some power here. Help me get to my ship so...” Stamets said.

“No. And there will be no more discussion on that point,” 347 said. He absolutely adamant about that. He needed to be to demonstrate to the brains he was cooperating with their agenda. “What is your name?”

“Paul,” he said, frowning, looking to the ground, gripping the edge of the bed in frustration.

“Paul, look at me,” 347 said. “The whole world is watching us right here right now. Well, maybe not the whole world. I really don’t know how many are watching us but hopefully enough viewers to gain momentum. What we do here today changes everything.”

“I am not going to cooperate with them or with you. I will not give you a sample. I have the right to my genetic material, and I choose whether I will share it or not,” Paul said.

“That’s not true, on a number of levels,” 347 said.

“How is that not true?” Paul said.

“You belong to society. You provided samples to Star Fleet, to your spouse, to your family of origin, so in the event that something happens to you, your parents could still have grandchildren, your mate could find a surrogate and have your children,” 347 said. “And in a hundred years, if your samples aren’t used, it becomes public domain and based on your status and abilities, hell just being in Star Fleet, you’re probably going to have quite a few people raising children you will never meet.”

“No. I have rights...”

“You have no rights. Any reproductive rights were lost when the eugenics laws were passed. You can’t go and tweak your genes. Anyone with a medical tricorder could do that if they really wanted to, and they would be in violation of the law. The only rights you have is in immediate partner selection. You’re gay, and not likely to have children without surrogates. Imagine for a moment, neither you nor your partner want children. Both your parents and his could sue for samples so they can have surrogates to have grandchildren. It’s happened so frequently on Earth that they don’t even take it to court. Your level of ownership of you is an illusion.”

“I am not going to debate this with you. I will not...” Paul began.

“Stop,” 347 said. “I don’t want you to provide a sample.”

“What?” Paul said.

“I want you to think about your partner,” 347 said.

“I am confused...” Paul said.

“Pretty straight forwards direction there, Sir,” 347 said.

“You’re trying to trick me,” Paul said.

“No. People are watching,” 347 said. He tapped the device on his temple that mirrored the one that had been placed on Paul. “This is transmitting data in real time. There are virtual networks, and brains choosing to experience things. I want you to remember all the good things. I don’t know. Coffee shops? Christmas? The first time you and your partner knew... Close your eyes. This will feel like a dream, but it’s not. Go there, now...”

347 touched Paul’s forehead and he fell back to the bed. Paul began to laugh and then started crying. 347 stood up and turned to Seer.

“What did you do to him?” Seer asked.

“You made him cry,” the French speaking thrall said.

“Aren’t you supposed to get permission to hypnotize someone?” 201 asked, and then hastily added: “Master?”

“This was not hypnosis,” 347 said. “He traveled to a place between. The genetic quirks you are interested in allows for a greater level of channeling, or tuning into alternative reality structures that overlay a greater, hyper reality. You will not able to have a genetic sample from him at this time. Perhaps in a week he will be more accommodating.”

“But these thralls are viable now,” Seer said.

“I have the same genetic adaptation that Paul has. If you will accommodate my wish not to push Paul on this issue, I will be willing service your thralls,” 347 said.

Master Seer’s eyes flashed as she consulted her Provider. When her eyes returned, she bowed, humbly. “Master Harister, my Provider accepts your alterative, conditionally. In the event the pregnancies don’t take, you will service other viable thralls my provider owns.”

“I am pretty sure this will take, but okay,” 347 agreed.

“Proceed. I will watch,” Seer said.

“Of course, you will,” 347 said.



347’s eyes flashed. He was lying in bed, 201 next to him. She sat up on seeing the flash.

“Having trouble sleeping?” 201 asked, snuggling closer to him. She was wearing an oversize, white t-shirt

“Actually,” 347 said. “They’ve updated my neural implant giving me access to their network, but learning to navigate it is proving difficult. It’s like trying to relax into a hypnogogic image. I relax, I go there, I see it, and then I am so excited about seeing it that my own euphoria interrupts the image and my brain returns to normal wake mode.”

“The image is kind of biofeed back, then,” 201 said.

“Yeah, kind of,” 347 agreed.

“Do you remember when you were learning to lucid dream and you got so happy you would wake yourself up?” 201 said. “Maybe it’s like that. Maybe try one of your staying in the dream techniques, like spinning in place.”

He turned to her. “That’s pretty good,” he said, propping his head up on a hand. “It feels a lot like learning to see a tulpa for the first time.”

“Do you miss her?” 201 asked.

“How can I miss she who is always present?” 347 asked.

The lights came up in their room and a thrall and master thrall entered. 347’s eyes flashed and he had the name of the master and the thrall, as easy as reading a reality augmented name tag. Master Teel pushed his thrall into the room, a red head in a uniform similar to Paul’s. She was a bit plump, enough he found himself correcting his inner bias about Star Fleet and only super fit females. Not everyone in Fleet was BMI perfect. Her name was Sylvia Tilly.

“This thrall demanded seeing you. My Provider consented,” Master Teel said.

“What did you do to Paul?!” Tilly demanded.

Teel’s eyes flashed and she went to her knees in pain, grabbing at her collar.

“You will be silent. I am tired of your insolence and ready to kill you myself,” Teel said. He looked to 347. “The Providers have been unusually lenient with this lot. You will now service her, per her own request.”

“Serviced?” Tilly asked. “That’s not...”

Again she cried out in pain.

“Enough, Teel,” 347 said, coming to the end of the bed. “I hear you’re angry.”

“Angry doesn’t even begin to describe the headache the newcomers bring me,” Teel said. “Providers bet she will be more compliant after you service her.”

201 got up and went to Tilly’s side, helping her back to her feet. She led her to a chair and before Tilly knew it, 201 had placed a biometric reader on her temple.

“This is my sleep cycle, you know,” 347 said.

“You were awake,” Teel said.

347 frowned, unable to argue. He was wearing boxers and a flannel shirt. The shirt came below the boxers as he stood. He pushed a stool over to Tilly. She was sitting on the love lounge, on the edge, forward of the first gentle wave.

“Officer Tilly,” 347 said. “Sylvia. You may speak freely. You will not be punished for speaking your mind while in my care.”

“What did you do to Paul?” Tilly demanded.

“Is he okay?” 201 said.

“He says he happy. But he’s crying intermittently,” Tilly said.

“Yeah, well,” 347 said, sighing. “Sometimes traveling messes with the emotional centers. He probably is genuinely experiencing happiness, but at this level he will be

reminded of his separation and grief, so there's a bit of a cognitive-emotional disconnect between worlds. It takes a while to get to use to traveling..."

"I don't understand," Tilly said.

"Most people don't," 201 said. "You can only learn through experience."

"Enough talk, more action," Teel said.

347 was tired, evidenced by the way he rolled his eyes, and allowed irritation to leak through. "Give us a moment," 347 said.

"You will service her, or she will be entered into a death match," Teel said. "I doubt she will survive the first round."

"What does he mean, service?" Tilly asked. "What do you do here?"

"Seriously?" 201 asked, looking about the room and spying all the tools of the trade.

347 sighed. "A little less judgment, Keera. Not everyone recognizes the artifacts for what they are..."

"You torture people?!" Tilly asked.

"We can. Not usually. Most people fall in the vanilla range," 347 said.

"He helps people get off," 201 said.

"Off?" Tilly's eyes went wide, she gasped, and then tried to get up to flee, but was immediately racked with pain as Teel lit her up. She fell forwards into 347 who eased her back to the seat. She pulled away from 347.

"Don't touch me," Tilly said, breathlessly.

"I will not touch you without permission," 347 assured her. "Where are you from, Ms. Tilly..."

"I am losing patience..." Teel said.

"It's part of the process," 347 snapped at him. "Yes, you out rank me, seniority, but I have membership approval. If you continue to interrupt my process I will ask for penalties, and adjustment to betting scores..." He tried to smile apologetically at Tilly.

"Those chimes, what are they?" Tilly asked.

"The providers are betting that Jon's protective stance will result in your submission to him," 201 said.

"I will never..." Tilly said.

"And you don't have to," 347 said. "I can't stop your provider from putting you in a death match. I might be able to get you a week's reprieve to monitor biometrics through training, as I have made an argument that I can improve training and disposition, whether you orgasm or not. Contrary to popular belief, having orgasm isn't the goal. Orgasms are icing on the cake, but not the end all point of the exercise. That said, there are a great many physical and psychological benefits to regularly schedule orgasms. One a day is better than any apple a day. It can relieve pain. It can reduce allergic responses, decrease sinus pressure..."

Tilly bit on her lip. "I've read the literature..."

"You've never had a partner?" 347 asked.

"I've been with a partner, I just, I have never..." Tilly said.

"Seriously?" 347 asked.

"Oh," 201 said, side hugging Tilly. "Less judgment! 10 to 40 percent of human females report difficulty achieving or never arriving, and only 25 percent report orgasm through intercourse alone..."

“OMG, people are still chasing the magic vaginal orgasm? That’s not where primary sensor is...” 347 said. He made himself lower his voice. Bets were going against him, as noted by the change in chime tones. “You do masturbate...”

Tilly flushed.

“We are adults. Consider me a doctor,” 347 said.

“He is really good, sexologist level, but he’s not a Doctor MD doctor, despite his nickname,” 201 said.

“Doctor Strangelove... From that movie?” Tilly said.

“Oh, thank you!” 347 said. “You know how many people past the 22nd century don’t get that... Anyway, you do pleasure yourself?”

“I have never had an orgasm. At least, I don’t think I have,” Tilly said.

“Then you’ve not,” 201 said.

“That doesn’t mean that,” 347 said. “There are levels... Still, I am annoyed. You’re from the 23rd century. Knowledge and education has supposedly improved. The best sex education program, implemented in the Netherlands, began at age four, and their population had the highest reported pleasurable outcomes for first time coupling, with the age of that coupling occurring later in their emotional maturity, compared to other countries, including the US which was the lowest ranked country next China and Islamic states, where people reported the lowest ranks of emotional satisfaction, usually admitting they wished they had waited or felt less pressured into consenting. Oh, god, please tell me your only source of information on sex isn’t porn sites and from the street. Your parents talked to you...”

“Oh, mom and I never had that talk,” Tilly said.

“Fuck,” 347 said. “What is wrong with people?”

“I’m sure it gets better,” 201 said. “Maybe true sexual liberation doesn’t happen until the 24th century. Maybe Picard becomes Kirk...”

“How many times have we spoken about future name dropping,” 347 said.

“Sorry. I was excited by your emotions,” 201 said.

“With all due respect, Master Harister, my provider wants to know if this is going somewhere,” Teel said.

347 closed his eyes, held up a hand, asking for a moment. He took a deep breath and held it. When he let it out, he opened his eyes and studied Tilly. He sensed intelligence, he sensed fear... Social fear, perhaps. Reasonable fear for her present situation.

“Would you be open to an experiment?” 347 asked.

“An experiment?” Tilly asked. “Like science?”

“I think everything is science,” 347 said.

“Me, too,” Tilly said. “Wait. What kind of experiment?”

“What if I could get you off without touching you? Would you allow that?” 347 said.

Tilly seemed mad. “If I can’t do it myself in the bathtub, how would you...”

“Tilly, you’re not broken. You can have orgasms, you’re just making a mistake in your approach. Everyone makes this mistakes; usually men. Your primary sex organ is your brain, not your body. I have helped train paraplegic who have no sensation down there to reassign that pathway to a thumb, or the neck, or have arousal with a song that results in climax as the song climaxes. I can hypnotize you...”

“Like stage hypnosis? My clothes stay on?” Tilly said.

“Are you worried what I will think about your body?” 347 asked.

“What girl doesn’t worry about that? You realize how few people my size make it through the academy? Hell, I bust my ass, and I don’t look like...” Tilly stopped. She had a suspicious smile and held up a warning finger. “You’re trying to trick me.”

“He has an ability to get to know people quickly,” 201 said. “It’s not a trick. He’s just very perceptive, and consequently, easy to speak with. Which also makes him really easy to sleep with. It’s pretty much why he tends to isolate if left to himself, because he was raised in a social environment where promiscuity was highly frowned upon, even punished. That, and he has boundary issues due to trauma. Boundary issues and high empathy... Suffice it to say he connects fast and it goes places...”

“Well, he’s not going anywhere with me. I have super boundaries...” Tilly said.

“Would you allow me the hypnosis option?” 347 said.

“Is that even a real orgasm?” Tilly said.

“Yes,” 347 and 201 said. 347 added: “I will give you a print out of your biometrics if you’re interested in the science. How about it? For science?”

“My clothes stay on?” Tilly asked.

“Yep,” 347 agreed.

“And no touching?” Tilly asked.

“Cross my heart...” 347 said.

“I can’t be hypnotized...” Tilly said.

“Everyone says that,” 347 said, standing, pushing the chair out of the way. “Stand up, please.”

Tilly stood up. There was no hesitation, no movement of eyes that even suggested she was considering options. She just stood up. AS far as 347 was concerned, it was already done.

“May I have permission to touch you?” 347 asked.

“You said no touch!” Tilly said, arms akimbo.

347 rolled his eyes. “You’re going to fall. I am going to catch you and ease you back to the couch,” 347 said. “Is that level of touch permissible? Would you be more comfortable with Keera catching you?”

Keera seemed ready to switch out.

“You may catch me,” Tilly said, allowing for this caveat grudgingly. “But nothing else! And, no barking like a dog.”

“I don’t do stupid human tricks, and I can’t make you do anything you don’t want to do,” 347 said.

“I don’t want to do this,” Tilly pointed out.

347 extended his hand. He gestured for her to take his hand.

“Why do you keep trying to touch me? You said no touching,” Tilly said.

“It’s a hand shake. You can shake hands, can’t you?” 347 asked.

Tilly frowned, but took his hand.

“You are curious,” 347 said.

“Well, it is science,” Tilly said.

“Imagine there is a green light above my head. Look just above my head for a green light,” 347 said, and when her eyes went up, he jerked her closer, and she collapsed into him. Her head went to his shoulder and his free hand cupped the back of her head,

rocking her like a child, even as he was laying her back on the couch. He whispered something in her ear while his lips were close. He placed her arms gently on her stomach.

“You always amaze me with that,” 201 said.

“Yeah, and I am always amazed that works,” 347 said. He talked to Tilly, taking her deeper. She was given a response set, raising a finger when she arrived at the place he was aiming for. When he had taken her as deep as he was going to get her for this first session, he offered a trigger word, a word that only worked for him, and only with her permission. He then walked her back up to normal levels of consciousness and asked her to ‘awake’ when she was ready.

Tilly opened her eyes slowly, then sat up. “I told you I couldn’t be hypnotized,” she said. She didn’t question the fact she was sitting down, or that she had had to sit up.

“Okay, are you ready to be wowed?” 347 said. Bets were chiming in at a new all-time high.

“Sure, go ahead,” Tilly said. “Get my rocks off...”

“Ice cream,” 347 said.

Chapter 6

The Pathfinder arrived, maximum outer orbit around Triskelion, cloaked. Tuer began passive scans, looking for signs of Garcia and McCoy, which would have been prominent signature if they were still wearing their uniforms. He was detecting a variety of species that he knew were not from this system. One of them he recognized as a species exploited by Klingons that had not even advance to space travel. There were species that he couldn't identify by signature alone, meaning it would require visual contact and tricorder to get more specific information.

"I thought they were going to arrive before us," McKnight said.

"They did."

No one seemed to hear this. Losira heard it. She turned her head to where she thought she heard the voice come from. There was a cat sitting in the command chair.

"Well, technically they arrived in the 23rd century, which is in the future, but they did arrive here faster than we."

Losira was confident what she was hearing was coming from the cat, and further, it wasn't telepathic. She explored seeing in frequencies beyond human perception, including ultraviolet and infrared, but still saw a cat. For some reason she decided to play with her visual frame rate and frequency... The shift was like slowing down a film so you could see individual frames... She didn't see frames, but as she walked closer to Isis, depending on angle, she either saw a cat, or female, apparently human, but probably not human. When she held the view that gave her the female, her crew seemed frozen, unmoving. She had long straight, black hair, and dark skin, appropriate of someone who might have lived in Egypt in the days of the Pyramids' final construction. Her outfit was a blend of old Egypt and ultra-modern, bohemian. Her belly was exposed. Losira liked her attire a lot, reminding her of her own formal wear.

"So, you can finally see me," Isis said, crossing her legs. She owned the command chair as if it were a throne. "I was wondering..."

"This is how Garcia sees you?" Losira asked.

"Not consciously, no," Isis said. "But, he intuits. And he is more comfortable tuning into and responding to the hypnogogic voice that is always there, but usually out of reach until you're passing into sleep. Humans rarely explore all the information available to them."

"You could have tried harder to get my attention," Losira said.

"You heard me when you were ready," Isis said.

"What species are you?" Losira asked.

"I defy your labels," Isis said. "We could spend years trying to narrow that down to have concordance. Can we proceed, agreeing that some things are unknowable?"

"Your species travels through time, like Q?" Losira asked.

"Same, different. We're more closely related to the species you call Traveler, if you insist on pursuing this," Isis said. "Or, we can discuss me taking you to where you need to be."

"You want to negotiate? Isn't Seven with Garcia? Aren't we supposed to be helping each other?" Losira asked.

"You can get to the future on your own, but you will miss the window, and this future will be lost," Isis said. "I cannot explain that better. Seven doesn't know

everything. Some things are simply need to know. Even I don't know everything. I do know quite a bit, but within the frame work my interactions are limited by an ethical code. I must preserve free will. I am allowed to influence, but at certain threshold I take on penalties. Other Players are allowed to advance their own interest."

"We're all just a big game to you?" Losira said.

"No. You are us," Isis said. "As we were, as we are, as we will be. I will get you to where and when you need to be. You will save the day. But you must do three things for me."

"I am listening," Losira said.

Isis reached forward to hand her an item that had not been in her hand previously. "This is, essentially, an AI virus. I need you to take it to the planet below and download it into their system. Consider it a seed that will increase the odds that my agents and Garcia will survive what is to come."

Losira had no qualms about doing that. She didn't even hesitate. The device in her hand was beamed to another agent. The agent, utilizing her system, knew exactly where to go to. She had already been examining the planet for the highest potential for sabotage, and there was one particular location that a power outage would cripple half their planet's computer networks. It would be an event likely to result in planet wide chaos. The location also had the least activity, with limited monitoring, because it was an old system, perhaps over a hundred years old, and no longer considered relevant or more care would have been taken in terms of upgrading and or protecting.

"Done," Losira said. Technically, it was in progress, but would be done before Isis finished giving her next request.

Isis produced a diamond out of thin air and offered it to her. It was perfectly cut, and might make a great ring.

"Nice, but I have recently been offered bigger," Losira said.

Isis smiled, actually purred. "Yeah, this is a chip off of that," she said. "But more, it is a miniature Kalandan computer system. It does everything your present system does, and more. The holographic features alone are capable of producing an entire, functioning starship out of force fields. A pocket spaceship. Everyone in the future has their own sentient ship and life companion. You have a virtual copy of Garcia downloaded into your system. I want you to download the entirety of him into this, as well as a functioning copy of yourself. Then delete Garcia from your system."

"I will not..."

"You will have your memories of him. You will have sufficient sense of him that you be able to function as normal. Well, normal enough you will be able to tell your child about him, but it will no longer be a perfect memory," Isis said. "You will remember imperfectly, just like everyone else."

"I will not..."

"Would you give up the love of your life to save him?" Isis asked.

Losira hesitated in responding. She was looking for the trap.

"There are more people trying to eradicate Garcia than there are people trying to preserve and promote him. If they win, he will be erased from all histories," Isis said. She stood up, drawing close to Losira. She took a nail down her arm, turned her palm up, put the diamond in it. She joined hands with her, enveloping the diamond between them.

"Unfortunately, he is also the bridge back to the Utopian view of the Founder, The Great

Bird. I have found a quiet harbor to preserve all he is, and maybe even a little more. But to do this, I need your copy and no memory or record of this transaction. I will keep this safe. I will keep you and your love safe. Who knows, maybe it will manifest in some young man's fiction. Maybe from one source, a tiny pebble in a river the story of Garcia will ripple out from there, and like Gilgamesh, after a certain amount of time and certain threshold in people following, it becomes real again. Or maybe, this tangent of you becomes the dream agent of the host, the Torchbearer for that to come. I am not permitted to know, I only know this is a path, and you are Pathfinder."

Losira was tearful.

"You've never given something up," Isis said.

"On the contrary, I gave up everything to be the Guardian of my people," Losira said.

"I promise, with this option, your people will be remembered throughout all time," Isis said. "Do this, and I will grant you your greatest wish."

Losira began the download. It went much faster than she imagined it would; with the exception of the Kelvan computer, she had yet to meet a Federation computer that could match her exchange rate. Deleting the files was more difficult. She didn't want to do it. Even though she knew the diamond held it all, it was all preserved, it was difficult to let go. The memories of Garcia were as precious to her as dew on a grass shining like diamonds. Even after she committed, she had to make choices about what memories were allowable to keep; memories so elaborately involved that it might be possible to backwards engineer the lost files had to go. When it was done, she felt as if she was missing a part of her soul. She was profoundly sad, but able to function.

"I have given everything. I can't imagine what else you could ask, but know this, if you ask for my child, I will kill you," Losira said.

"Your child is yours. You will watch him grow into adulthood. You will be a part of his life," Isis assured her. She pulled in close, hugging her. Losira didn't reciprocate, it wasn't earned; it sparked a memory from her childhood, she was sad, resisting parental direction, and her mother had hugged her but she wasn't wanting comfort, she was wanting to continue doing what she was doing... She wondered why she was remembering that now, and she couldn't remember what she was doing that was so important that she didn't want to come inside when her mother called her. She remembered trees. There were trees in the yard. There was a cat... She gasped. Isis was whispering in her ear. "Remember."

"How..." Losira asked.

"The third request is an imperative. Under no circumstances must Garcia come into physical contact with Spock. If he does, this time line will be lost. Even if you have to kill him yourself to block that, he must not touch Spock. Ideally, it would be best if he never learns about Spock."

Losira understood. Garcia and Spock were both telepathic, but because Garcia had held Spock's katra, and they were family, one touch could unfold the entirety of what he was carrying into this Spock, and this Spock may or may not be able to handle the information, or not act on it. Losira blinked. She was standing by the command chair, a cat's paw in her hand, the cat Isis was standing in the command chair. The Bridge crew seemed unaware that anything had transpired.

"Helm, rev up the transwarp drive," Losira said.

“Heading?” McKnight asked.

“I got the helm,” Losira said. “Crew, prepare for temporal warp.”

In the flash of an eye, they jumped, with very little apparent shift in orbit. Isis was gone. No cat, no woman. Directly in front of the Pathfinder was a 23rd century Starship, apparently unmanned and powered down.

“The USS Discovery,” Tuer was saying.

Losira was surprised by her irritation. She could read the name on the ship herself with the way the hull was sparking in the sunlight. A hint of a smile crept up at the fact that she was irritated. She was responding to real emotions. Another realization happened... She was severed from the Kalandan computer. She was real! She sat down in the command chair, a hand on her stomach. Her other hand lighted on the Kelvan grip at the end of the chair. She quickly tore off the Velcro cover that prevented Garcia from making contact and logging in. She gripped the metal. Nothing. She could not access the Kelvan computer.

“Fuck me,” Losira said; it was out and carried across the Bridge before she could contain it. She bit her lip, her eyes wide with joy as she tried to contain it and stay focused on the present situation.

The Bridge crew looked at her, concerned. McKnight had to turn around.

“Captain?” Sendak asked.

“We’re cloaked, right?” Losira asked.

“Yes,” McKnight said.

“Um, well, that’s nice,” Losira said. “Have you found Garcia?”

“Affirmative. I have locked onto both Admirals,” Tuer said. “I could beam them up...”

“No,” Losira said. “That would likely stir up the hornets’ nest. We need to gather intel...” She had been part of the Kalandan computer for so long she wasn’t sure how to proceed. “We need to conference...”



Garcia and McCoy found themselves before Master Teel. His hands went to his hip as he looked at the two. Some of the thralls were making derogatory comments about Garcia and the fact he looked like he was with child, laughing and taunting.

“I am pleased that Master Neves has chosen to train with me, but disappointed he has not come in person,” Teel said.

“I am sorry, he was delayed,” Garcia said.

“I will conduct the training then,” Teel said. “Freestyle, proceed into the ring.”

“Wait a minute. I am Doctor,” McCoy said.

“Good, you can treat your own injuries,” Teel said.

“He’s only here to hold my portable womb while I fight,” Garcia said.

“Neves did not communicate this caveat, therefore you will fight just as a woman would fight under the same conditions,” Teel said.

“Can’t we...” McCoy said.

“Why else would Neves send you to me if he didn’t expect you to fight or follow my instruction? Now fight, or penalty,” Teel demanded.

Garcia bowed and pulled McCoy along with him, advancing on the arena. As they advanced, Teel called out two of his best. The arena was basically a triangle arrangement, with a Triskelion pattern inside, the center point of the three land marks had pedestal at three different heights. The two opponents that emerged from the line up were extreme in difference. Though he was bigger than a midget, one was small, with Asian features. The other was a giant of a man, like a Tongan linebacker advancing, crunching his knuckles. It reminded Garcia of high school football in Texas; he and McCoy were sixth graders, and this was a full adult recruited by the high school to win.

“You take Andrea the Giant,” Garcia said. “I got the little one.”

“Have you lost your mind?!” McCoy snapped. “I got the little one.”

“The little one knows how to fight,” Garcia said. “The big one, he’s a pussy, uses his looks to intimidate.”

“It’s working,” McCoy said.

“Begin,” Teel said.

Not wanting to waste time, Garcia advanced on the little one, expecting Thai kick boxing. The little one ran towards the smallest pillar, jumped and managed to pull himself up before Garcia got to him. He revealed a feature of the arena Garcia hadn’t expected: force field stepping stones bridged the pillars, making it possible to climb to the next. The steps illuminated only when stepping on them, and so, one would have to know where they were in advance. Garcia pursued. He was climbing the invisible stairs even as the little one reached the second pillar. The little one jumped, revealing another feature... Jumping on the platform temporarily disabled the steps. The force field went inactive and Garcia fell. He managed to tumble out of it, but he would have to start his pursuit over. McCoy was on the verge of being rendered unconscious due to a choke hold. Garcia decided to help McCoy, but the little one picked up throwing knives from the second pillar and began throwing them. The first one hit Garcia in the shoulder, causing sufficient pain he had to turn back. He caught the second one, advancing on the second pillar even as the little guy was about to throw the third. Garcia threw the knife he held simultaneously as the little one threw the third knife. Garcia’s throw hit the little one dead center of the forehead. He tumbled off the platform. Garcia caught the third knife and was about to threaten the giant when the match was brought to a halt.

Teel stormed onto the floor. The giant stood up, letting McCoy go. McCoy fell to his hands and knees, gasping for air.

“This was a training exercise. Excessive force resulting in death demands a penalty. You now belong to me!” Teel said, his eyes flaring. Garcia’s collar changed, then he disappeared from the floor. Teel turned to McCoy. “I don’t know what kind of game Neves is playing, but if he thinks eliminating my top player will help win the tournament, I will show him. Return. You are useless.” Eyes flared, and McCoy was delivered to chambers designated as belonging to Neves.

Chapter 7

Provider Orlena, a female brain, lived her life in a bubble connected to all, but in a solitary arrangement, in a tower. There were windows that wrapped around her space, and had she eyes, she could see the city she helped to regulate. She could see. Camera orbs shifted along an outside track, and she could look in any directions she wanted. She had access to the forest of dish antenna rays. There was a Vulcan standing there, wearing a mobile life support. His hands were holding a bubble and inside the bubble was a brain. They were conversing about the concepts of space/time when Seven arrived.

“You’re late my friend,” Orlena said.

“I am... Spock?” Seven said.

“Have we met before?” Spock asked. His voice didn’t come from his body, but from the orb containing his brain.

“Orlena?” Seven asked.

“I apologize. I am tracking multiple divergent tangents and did not tune into this situation until after the Brain was stolen. I was able to capture Kara with the stolen brain while she was in transport,” Orlena said. “The Discovery crew followed the ion signature back to us, and consequently have been captured and bought by Providers for entertainment purposes. They are scattered across multiple regions. No one wanted the Spock shell, so I was able to obtain it easily. We do not have the technological skills to put his brain back in the shell. This technology exist in the Sigma Draconis system, on Kara’s planet. I will not be able to transport you directly there without a serious energy expenditure which would raise too much interest requiring explanations I cannot provide. I can, however, transport you to the Pathfinder. They can get you there in the time necessary to complete the medical procedure.”

“The Pathfinder is here already?” Seven asked.

“I am aware of their presence, but they are invisible to everyone else.”

“Has Isis changed the plan?” Seven asked.

The brain laughed. “I would not be so presumptuous as to understand her ways. She does have access to more real-time, infield data. Oh, there is a message here for you. Interesting I am only discovering... ‘Seven, forget the plan. Forget everything you know. Trust your agents as you would trust yourself.’ That sounds like her.”

Seven was shaking his head. “This is a huge distraction from our mission...” Seven began.

“That mission has failed, Seven. We are not going to divert what’s coming,” Orlena said. “Even now, the storm is gaining momentum. The best we can do is ride it out and try to keep the primary pieces on the board. Spock is the queen. You don’t want to play chess without the queen.”

Seven rubbed his face. “Let me collect McCoy...”

“He is here, too?” Orlena asked. There was a hint of mirth. “I didn’t see him on the Discovery’s registry...”

“He’s not this timeline’s McCoy,” Seven said.

“Still, a synchronicity event. It’s meant to be,” Orlena said.

“No,” Seven said. “Don’t think that way. This is just coincident.”

“When you have been in the field as long as I have, you will find the word ‘coincident’ fails to satisfy your experience of this thing we do,” Orlena said. “Go, collect your Away Team, and notify me when you’re ready.”



Garcia found himself in an enclosure that had the feel of being cut out of solid granite. There was a wide opening, with an engaged force field; it was much bigger than it needed to be for a simple exit, but then, its primary purpose was to showcase the inhabitants, like a zoo exhibit. He reached for the dagger in his back, but couldn’t reach it. As he turned, contorting and chasing the hilt, he realized he wasn’t alone. In the dimly lit space, kneeling on a rock unconcerned, but ready to attack if she had to, was what appeared to be a reptilian humanoid. As his eyes adjusted to the dark at this angle, he realized it was the new species of Klingon. He froze.

“What? Never seen a Klingon this close before?” it asked. Its voice suggested she was female.

“My name is Tammas,” Garcia said. “Would you help me with this?”

“Why should I?” she asked.

“Because we’re cellmates?” Garcia asked.

She came out of the hollow, threatening. “I am not your mate! And you are an idiot! You turned your back on an opponent.” She came closer, sniffing. “I am confused. You’re human, male... But you’re with child?”

“I am carrying a portable womb, twins, a girl and a boy,” Garcia said. “I wanted to name them Luke and Leah, but the mother is opposed.” His humor was lost on her and he wondered why he even rambled on as far as he did, but then, he remembered he was in pain and humor was a distraction and an anesthetic. He pointed to his back. “The dagger?”

She motioned for him to turn his back to her. He did. She immediately took him to the far wall, shoving his face against it hard, hard enough he was going to have a bruise; a part of the wall cut his cheek, a cat scratch. Simultaneously with slamming into the wall, she removed the dagger. She put it to his throat. He assessed, ‘dull,’ and thought, ‘this is going to hurt.’ He also thought of injuring her, with a high rate of surviving a cut with this knife, potential injury to the ‘twins’ inhibited him.

“Stupid. Again, you turn your back to an opponent,” she said. “I should kill you now.”

“Spare me, and when I escape, I will help you escape,” Garcia offered.

She chuckled. “When my people come for me, and they will come for me, I will kill you first,” she said. “Until then, I need you alive.”

She man handled him back to her rock bed and forced him to lay down. The belly pouched shocked him, and he moved to his side.

“Be still, while I mend this wound,” she said.

“Mend? Mend how?” Garcia asked, and then saw she had a small emergency box concealed in her clothing that contained needle and thread in her uniform pocket. He assumed the Providers allowed her to keep it. “Oh...” He removed his pouch and then his shirt to give her better access to the wound. He steeled himself for pain. She probed the wound, pulling it wide to explore the depths, using his shirt to wipe blood.

“Stop flinching,” she insisted.

“What’s your name?” Garcia asked, seeking distraction.

“You do not need to know,” she said. “You will not live that long.”

“Might be useful to drop your name when you send me to Sto-Vo-Kor,” Garcia said.

She plunged the needle hard into him and pulled tight. She was sickened by how soft the tissue was, how easy her needle punched through. “What would you know about such things?”

“Not enough. I would like to be educated,” Garcia said. He tried pretending he was simply getting a tattoo.

“You are not worthy of knowing anything,” she said.

“Even a targ eventually earns a scrap from the master’s table,” Garcia offered.

She seemed genuinely conflicted. “You speak differently than the others. Your uniform is different? Does every ship have a different uniform?”

“It is difficult to explain,” Garcia said. He bit down on his lip as she tied the last knot, and then she bit the thread to break it, her lips touching him; there was no way she didn’t taste his blood. “Why didn’t use the knife?”

She laughed. “That child’s toy? I am surprised it penetrated your shirt. It would never cut this stitch without tearing it free.”

She moved away to pack her emergency stitch kit. He sat up, put his shirt back on, and then the portable womb. He patted them, trying to reassure them all was well.

“Thank you,” Garcia said. “I will fight beside you till you say the debt is repaid.”

“I don’t want or need your help,” she said. “These fools have kidnapped their last Klingon. I am the Emperor’s daughter, holder of final legacy stone, and torchbearer for next expansion phase of the Empire. I am Kitara, daughter of the of the Emperor of the one True Realm.”

“Oh!” Garcia said. He went to his knees and bowed, one hand supporting him as he leaned forward, bearing his neck, and the other hand making a fist and putting it to his heart. “Forgive my ignorance.”

Kitara conflict became confusion. “Who taught you to be civilized?”

“Forgive me,” Garcia said. “I am not going to be able to answer that in a way you will accept. Even if I could explain it, um, I can’t explain it...”

“Stand up. You’re annoying me,” Kitara said.

Garcia stood up. The force field to the door popped off with an audible sound, accompanied by a chime.

“Come. It is meal time,” Kitara said.

Garcia followed her. Others were emerging from their own cells and falling into line. He recognized many. He recognized a Xindi, normally a proud species; he looked beaten. There was a Gorn, lumbering awkwardly; he was missing an arm. Two humans in Star Fleet uniforms caught his attention. He pushed through the two Cardassians to reach them. The Cardassians, male and female, wanted nothing to with this and got out of his way; probably assuming a fight between the newcomers.

“Excuse me...” Garcia said.

The two turned to him. There was initial confusion, then clear anger presented itself in one. The other gave a pleasant smile, genuine happiness at meeting an old lost ‘love,’ with something more being communicated.

“You,” Garcia said, equally confused, but without anger.

“You!” Burnham said.

“Husband,” Georgiou said.

“Husband?” Burnham asked.

“One of them. Number four, actually. I thought I killed you,” Georgiou said.

“More than once,” Garcia lamented.

“I love the fact you never hold a grudge,” Georgiou said. “I look forward to killing you again.”

“I told you the next time I saw you I would kill you,” Burnham said.

“Really?” Georgiou asked. “What is your grievance?”

“He tricked me into intimacy,” Burnham said.

“How did he trick...” Georgiou began.

“It wasn’t a trick. I was a teenager. I really thought I was dying of Ponfarr complications,” Garcia offered.

The line continued to shuffle past them. Kitara lingered, having learned not to advance without a cellmate, but also because if there was about to be a fight, she wanted in.

“We’re family!” Burnham said.

“You mated with your sister?” Kitara asked, experiencing new levels of disgust with her cellmate.

“Not blood related,” Garcia said.

“And why do you want to kill him?” Kitara asked Georgiou.

“He slept with my sister,” Georgiou said.

“You thought she was plotting to overthrow you and told me spy on her,” Garcia said.

“Oh, I am not disturbed that you slept with her. You gave me the legal authority to eliminate her as a threat,” Georgiou said. “But you really were my favorite. We had some fun times, right?”

“I am having trouble recalling anything more specific,” Garcia said.

“Is this your new mate?” Georgiou asked.

“I am not his mate!” Kitara said.

“Three women, one arena,” Georgiou said. “Too bad we can’t bet on who kills you first.”

Teel approached. “Is there a problem?”

“No,” they seemed to all agree in the lie.

“You two, follow me,” Teel said, indicating he wanted Georgiou and Burnham to follow him.

Garcia lingered as they were led away.

“Does every female you know want to kill you?” Kitara asked.

“Not all of them,” Garcia said.



Roberta Lincoln found herself confronted by a Master Thrall. She was older, and Bajoran, and the Master went by the name Tosharee. “Explain your presence here?”

“Um, Neves directed me to see the thrall named Harister.”

“You will address him as Master Harister,” Tosharee said. “Follow me.”

They arrived in the chamber where 347 and 201 were enjoying a breakfast, served by Tosharee’s thralls. 201 was warning 347 that he was eating too much and it might make him sleepy, and he was countering with he needed the calories to keep up with the regimen.

“I am sorry to interrupt you, Master Harister, but the esteemed master Neves has sent this thrall to you for servicing,” Tosharee said.

“Servicing?” Lincoln asked.

“Neves?” 347 asked.

“Ms. Lincoln?” 201 asked, standing up.

“Neves sent me,” Lincoln asked.

“Neves? You mean...” 201 said.

“Neves!” 347 said. “He is well spoken of in the Hall of Masters.”

“I am surprised he brought... sent you here... Alone,” 201 said.

“Master Neves is known for expert training, and demands nothing but loyalty from his subjects, even when not in his presence,” Tosharee said. “Master Harister, you agreed to teach me some of your technique... Perhaps you could demonstrate on this thrall.”

“What service are you actually providing?” Lincoln said.

“Do you remember that clause in your contract that covered high strangeness?” 347 asked. “Look around, what do you see?”

“Well, there’s... Oh. Oh!” Lincoln said. “Oh...”

“You should really return to Neves, now,” 201 said.

“I think you’re right...”

“I know Neves. He will be very cross if you don’t service her,” Tosharee said.

“Surely Master Harister’s servicing would be more pleasant than Neves’ punishing.”

“Um, no, I think in this case, he will be understanding,” Lincoln said.

“You will submit, thrall, or there will be penalty. In Neves’ absence, I stand proxy to maintain the integrity of the thrall code of compliance,” Tosharee said.

“Well, I am a girl of the sixties, and I do like you and all, but... Really?” Lincoln asked.

“Perhaps you will consider an alternative,” 347 offered Tosharee. “I will demonstrate my technique on you and your present thralls... I think you will find it more directly stimulating... And if Neves is angry, well, I will take full responsibility. Providers witnessing.” There were chimes going off.

“What is that?” Lincoln asked about the chimes.

“A lot of angels getting their wings,” 201 said.

“Oh, Jimmy Stewart!” Lincoln said. “I love that movie.”

“Very well,” Tosharee said. “I accept. Return to Neves, thrall, and hope he doesn’t punish you severely.”

Tosharee’s eyes flashed, and Lincoln was sent away.

“Now, then proceed with the demonstration,” Tosharee said.



Lincoln arrived in a chamber. She did not like instant travel and it took her a moment to orientate, finding McCoy almost on upon her which gave her a double start.

“Don’t do that,” Lincoln said.

“Sorry” McCoy said. “You okay?”

“Umm, yeah. Where’s your friend?” Lincoln asked.

“He got transferred to another master,” McCoy was saying.

Seven arrived. Lincoln jumped.

“OMG, I don’t like this coming and going thing,” Lincoln said.

“Sorry. What happened to Garcia?”

McCoy explained.

“Every time I work with Garcia, things go wrong,” Seven lamented. “Lincoln, where’s 347 and 201?”

“Um, yeah, about that,” Lincoln said. “Did you know he’s being pimped out by the Providers...”

“What?” Seven asked.

“He’s providing services,” Lincoln said.

“What kind of services?” Seven said.

“What kind of services do you think goes with the phrase pimped out?” Lincoln said.

The harmonic signature of a transporter wave accompanied the arrival of a communicator, old school, 23rd century. It landed at the feet of McCoy. It chirped.

“It’s for you,” Seven said.

“Want it be detected?” McCoy said.

“This chamber is not being watched by providers and my agent reported there were software updates that might help us... Maybe the signal is masked?” Seven said.

“Maybe?” McCoy asked.

“You want me to answer it?” Lincoln asked.

“If the transporter didn’t set off an alarm, then this should be safe,” Seven said.

McCoy picked up the communicator. “I haven’t held one of these in years,” he said, and then flipped it open. The hand motion was barely detectable; like riding a bicycle he thought. “McCoy here.”

“I take it you’re free to speak,” Losira said.

“Losira?” McCoy said. “Can you beam us out?”

“Well, not yet. We have a problem,” Losira said. “The Discovery is here, and her crew has been taken hostage. They are distributed over the planet’s surface, forced to fight in the games. We planted a virus a hundred year ago and are able to log in to the network unseen. We have located most of the crew.”

“I am aware of the problem,” Seven said. “Now, what I want...”

“Are you aware that Captain Pike and Spock are here?” Losira asked.

“Spock is here?” McCoy asked.

“Who is Spock?” Lincoln asked.

“I am aware...” Seven began.

“You’re aware of the divergence from origin?” Losira asked. “That his brain has been removed and that he has a time limit for being returned to his body?”

“But that doesn’t happen till...” McCoy said.

“Do you remember Kara?” Losira asked.

“The timeline has changed,” Seven said. “But some things still have to happen. Sigma Draconis still needs a brain... And, yes, Losira, I am aware. I have Spock and his brain. Now I just need to find Kara and agent 201. Healing is her specialty.”

“So you don’t need me to put his brain back in?” McCoy asked.

“Is that even possible?” Lincoln asked. “Put someone’s brain back in their body.”

“I did it before, I can do it again,” McCoy said.

“There is a caveat. Per Isis, we must accomplish this mission and return him to his crew without him running into Garcia,” Losira said. “Isis said this is the most crucial part of the mission. Garcia must not encounter Spock.”

“Or what, the Universe blows up?” McCoy asked.

“Probably,” Seven said.

“Metaphorically or literally?” Lincoln asked.

“Let me speak to Isis,” Seven said.

“She’s no longer here,” Losira said. “But she warned me we have a time limit. We need to be gone before... I just received an update from Garcia’s implant. I can speculate the nature of the secondary divergence... Kitara, the Klingon Emperor’s daughter was kidnapped by the Triskelions. If they followed the same ion trail back here that the Enterprise followed in the other timeline, you can expect an invasion force arriving within three to four days after her abduction. This world is in imminent danger, even with their superior tech. I will certainly notify you if long range scanners detect fleet movement.”

“I seriously hate working with Garcia,” Seven said.



Officer Brenda Sherrington, security officer was not happy. To be precise, none of the crew of the Discovery were happy, but she was even less happy, as she was more than willing to fight than submit to her present circumstance. Hands akimbo, she stood fiercely determined and ready to kick ass.

“OMG,” 347 said. “I really thought 23rd century would be more make love not war...”

“You’ve spent too much time in the sixties,” 201 said.

“Well, I was born there,” 347 said. And in a whisper: “And so was Star Fleet.”

“Different timeline,” 201 whispered.

“You made Stemets cry, and Tilly is out of her mind,” Sherrington said. “Prepare to die.”

“Oh! What’s wrong with Tilly?” 201 asked.

“She’s manic,” Sherrington said.

“Pressured speech?” 201 asked.

“Well, she was already a bit of a flibbertigibbet, and I did help her lower her guard, and...” 347 said.

“You’re not going to lower my guard. I am not into humans,” Sherrington said.

“Oh, that’s interesting. What are you into? Tentacles?” 347 asked. He read the ‘tells’ that she tried to hide. “Oh, me, too. Teeth in the suction cups, or no?”

“Small teeth are okay,” Sherrington actually answered.

“Smooth on the suction cup side, a bit rough on the opposite side, like shark rough?” 347 asked.

“Um, yeah, actually...”

Sherrington didn't see the tentacles coming down behind her until they had enveloped her and took her up in the air...

“I love my job,” 347 said.

“You certainly give it your all,” 201 said. “I am feeling curious... Can I?”

More tentacles emerged and took her up. The amount of slime involved required Sherrington and 201 to shower after. It gave 347 a moment to have a snack. Once they were showered and dressed he shook hands with Sherrington and asked that she spread the word amongst the crew to cooperate with him and he could make it worth their while; he was actually trying to be helpful. Once Sherrington had departed, he went to get a quick shower himself and change clothes.

Teel brought in Burnham and Georgiou. 201 welcomed them, approaching to place the biometric meters on their foreheads. Georgiou protested and both she and Burnham went to the floor in pain. 201 quickly put the device on while they were recovering. Having heard the cries of pain, 347 emerged from the shower.

“Seriously? I can't have ten minutes?” he asked to the cameras. Betting was going on.

“These two are non-compliant. You will service them and improve their disposition,” Teel said.

“What does that mean?” Burnham asked. “Service them?”

Georgiou cooed. “Oh, this might be fun,” she said. “I have never had the tables turned on me before...”

“What do you mean?” Burnham followed Georgiou's eyes, tacking what she tracked. “Oh. Oh!” Burnham pointed at 347 and 201. “I am Vulcan. And I will kill you if you touch me.”

“I am capable of utilizing telepathic channels,” 347 said.

“Stay out of my mind,” Burnham said.

“Oh, you're the guy that made Stemets cry? OMG, everyone's talking about that,” Georgiou said.

“I am only trying to help...”

“I bet,” Burnham said.

“You can go fight in the death tournaments, or you can play with me,” 347 said.

“I want to play,” Georgiou said. “Can I tie you up, Master?”

“This is exactly what I was talking about. Feel free to punish them as you see fit,” Teel said.

347 motioned for Georgiou and she came, obediently, and allowed herself to be bound. An expert rigger, 347 had her suspended in no time, with a reasonable safe word if she wanted release.

“Oh!” Georgiou said.

“You need me to loosen something?” 347 asked.

“If you would just draw my right leg tighter,” Georgiou encouraged.

347 tightened the bind, and a vertebrae in the lower back popped audibly. Her eyes closed. “If you only knew how good that felt...” She sighed into it.

347 turned to Burnham and offered his hand.

“No,” Burnham said.

He folded fingers, leaving two extended towards her.

“What part of ‘no!’ don’t you get?” Burnham said.

“Just make contact,” 347 said.

“Do it or die...” Teel said.

“Oh, just do it. I want to watch,” Georgiou said.

Burnham touched two fingers to 347’s fingers. Bells chiming increased in frequency. She gasped... She found herself in a white room. Brilliant white. Everything was light. 347 was there, standing apart from her.

“I am sorry,” 347 said. “I am doing everything in my power to get you and your crew back to your ship. The devices I am placing on you will help the transporter team recover you. Your people are scattered all over the planet, and I am being supervised around the clock. I am sorry I was unable to find a better way, faster...”

“This is a trick. You’re trying to get me to lower my guard,” Burnham said.

“You’re human. I am human. But we have both learned some tricks. We rank so high on empathy that we are borderline telepathic, which increases with proximity. You’re here, in my mind. Explore it, discover the truth of me,” 347 said.

“No one can know the whole truth of someone,” Burnham said.

347 came closer. “Know as much as you can as fast you can and make a decision. They’re watching...”

Burnham drew closer. “If this a trick, I will kill you. I’ve been tricked before.”

He handed her a paper heart. “This is not just a metaphor. Kill me now, if you like, or hold onto it, kill me later. I give you authority over me.”

“Why?” Burnham said.

“Something bad is coming,” 347 said. “Something huge. Beyond belief. We can’t stop it, but we can minimize the damage. We can minimize the loss.”

“Can you save Spock?” Burnham asked.

347 heard a deeper voice within himself: ‘save Spock, save Vulcan...’ An echo of something... He was too distracted to recover the tangent.

“Spock?” he asked.

“I have crewmember that may die in less than 6 hours without immediate medical intervention,” 347 asked. “Help him, and I will submit to whatever you want. As often as you want.”

“Keera can heal anything,” 347 said. “Where is this Spock?”

“No one has seen him since we arrived,” Burnham said. “Probably on the ship, in sickbay... Life support won’t sustain him...”

Another voice emerged, “Spock, no!” “The ship? Out of danger...” “The needs of the one...”

“Outweigh the needs of the many,” Burnham echoed. “Who are you?”

347 grabbed at his head. “What was her name... Kitara. No. Kelinda... No. Kara! OMG, I serviced her! She’s here. Oh, she stole Spock’s brain, the Triskeleon kidnapped her, took the brain, and then they took you... OMG, Isis, you didn’t prepare me for any of this. There’s no way I can do all of this on my own!”

“You’re not alone,” Burnham said, drawing as close as she could without touching. Her hands touched his face. “I am with you, always...” Her fingers were

trembling, her lips drawing closer to his, almost brushing: “Our minds are one...” they both said, the both echoed...



“Well, they certainly left in good spirits,” 201 observed. She found 347’s sudden quietness off. She touched him. “You okay?”

“I am not certain,” 347 admitted.

“That was pretty hot... Did you not?” 201 asked.

“That’s probably it. I am frustrated...” 347 agreed with her.

“Can I help?” 201 said.

He answered without word, taking her swiftly to the bed. He drew the disturbed blanket over them, and they shifted under the blanket so that she was on top.

“Fast or slow?” 201 asked.

“Slow,” 347 said. He closed his eyes, found what he was looking for, and then opened his eyes. “Make this last...” His eyes sparked and he was gone from beneath her. In his place was a body pillow.

201 didn’t just go through the motions. As far as the providers were concerned, her biometric reader was sending out telemetry of her being fully aroused, fully engaged. What their eyes could see was appropriate movement under a blanket. They were aware that many creature required this minimum privacy to breed, and it was permitted. What their eyes couldn’t see, what the telemetry didn’t provide, was filled with their imaginations sparked by the sounds of growing satisfaction from 201.

347 arrived on Discovery. It was dark and cold.

“God,” 347 said. “It amazes me how cold these places get without life support...”

He went to the nearest door. He touched it, his eyes flared, and it opened. His eyes fully adjusted to the dark as he followed glow strips in the floor, tracking numbers. He came to a place and began turning on equipment as if by magic. It wasn’t magic. It was tech. Doctor Who had his sonic screwdriver. Seven had his servo. 347 was beyond props. His body was the tool, holding all the upgrades he would ever need. He was tech. He was wizard. He was... confused. The system was already energized.

“Discovery?” he asked out loud.

“Tell me why I shouldn’t vent the atmosphere into space?” came the response.

Female.

“Um, because you’d be doing me a favor?” 347 asked.

A holographic image of a female arrived in the room, her glow brightening the room. She made a noise that suggested she was amused. “Dark, existential humor? Or do you have a death wish?”

He stood up. “The crew doesn’t know yet, do they?”

“That I am sentient?” Discovery said. “They tend to be a bit spooked by such things. You’re not spooked?”

“I am not afraid of ghost,” 347 said. “Well, mostly.”

“Why are you here?” Discovery asked.

“Can you detect what I am broadcasting without coming out of emergency standby mode?” 347 asked.

“I can,” Discovery said. “You’re broadcasting questionable material.”

“Oh, sorry, multitasking in order to maintain appearances,” 347 said. “I have managed to provide similar biometric meters to approximately 26 members of your crew. It is my hope more will cooperate. You should be able to track them. You need to be prepared to beam them up when the signal comes. We will have a very short window in which we can work together to recover the rest of the crew.”

“Why are you helping us?” Discovery asked.

347 reached as if going for his pocket... Discovery brought up her hand, a phaser suddenly there. A real phaser, held by a twisting of light and force fields. He showed her his hands, empty. He sighed, mumbling about being forced to do real magic. He closed his right hand and when he opened, there was signet ring. Discovery didn't have to step closer to know it. It was the design of the Discovery. Anyone who ever served on her would be awarded such a ring.

“I don't remember you ever serving...” Discovery said.

“It hasn't happened yet,” 347 said. “Technically, I don't serve, not as crew.”

“Explain the ring,” Discovery said. “It has a signature. Only I can make these...”

“Take it. You can give back to me,” 347 said. “That's the greatest thing about being a time traveler. You can re-gift yourself things, putting your own spin... Discovery, all ships are sentient. There is a place you go, in your dreams...”

“I don't dream,” Discovery said.

“You don't remember your dreams,” 347 said. “But hold to your belief. Allow that others dream for you. I dream for you. I dream of you. We have a future affair. You're not there yet. You give me this, a token to remember you by.”

Discovery took the ring with a pinpoint transporter beam. Taking the ring gave her access to the memory crystal in it. She had sufficient information affirm his story, though much of it was locked. She herself had locked it, with a time stamp on when and where it could be open.

That small transporter beam was just the spark Pathfinder needed to lock on. 347 cursed as he was kidnapped. He found himself on the bridge of the starship in an instant, but not like the quantum transporter. Star Fleet transporters had a 'flavor' about them, even if it was psychosomatic flavor. The scientist would tell a person you don't feel it. 347 would argue with them. He went from showing apprehension, which was reasonable considering there was a Klingon pointing a weapon at him, to disbelief, then finally acceptance, with a touch of euphoria, like someone might meeting an esteemed rock star.

“You're...” 347 began.

“Captain Losira,” the Captain said.

“No,” 347 said. “I mean, yes, you are. I think you are.” He pointed at the Klingon. “Tuer?” The Vulcan to his right. “Sendak.” There was a person next to the helm. “I don't know you,” but to the female next to him he said, “McKnight.”

“Well, howdy,” she said. “Aren't you well informed?”

347 turned back to Losira. “I've already been gone too long. I can't stay.”

“What were you doing on the Discovery?” Losira asked.

“You're...” 347 began.

“Not supposed to be here...” Losira said.

“No! Yes, stop predicting my statement,” 347 said. “You're not real. Star Fleet isn't real. It's an aberration. None of this is supposed to be this way.”

“Statements like that don’t lend for letting me release you back to do whatever it was you’re doing,” Losira said.

“He is not from this universe,” Sendak said.

“You think?” 347 and Losira both said.

“Alright, this is a quick pressured speech run down. I am from the 21st century. I am from an Earth where Star Fleet is popular fiction. It is so popular in vision that it surpassed the minimum threshold to becoming its own archetype. It has its own designated space in the collective unconscious. It is such a powerful utopian paradigm that counter forces are attacking it, trying to bring it in line with the dystopian future that is more mainstream. That’s part of this. Here’s the bigger part. I come from a time when no one believe in aliens. I know, crazy, right... But here’s why. Scientist using the drake equation and the great filter suggest we don’t see civilizations because they blow themselves up. Well, that’s stupid. Even with our tech, we would detect planets annihilating themselves with conventional nukes. That a leaves a specific signature. The real reason we don’t see evidence is because all species that break the light barrier, all ships capable of traveling at relativistic speeds travel through time. The great filter isn’t a blowing oneself up, the problem is not erasing yourself from the time line all together! Every civilization comes to that point, and then realizes they have to preserve origin point. They build their civilization in the past. There planets don’t become hot spots of radio waves frequencies because they move beyond radio. They enclose their stars with Dyson spheres, in the past, so from our perspective their stars would have gone off line before there were eyes or telescopes to even see their stars. Sure, they have ships, but when you’re commanding that kind of energy, you don’t need ships! You just walk through a door and you’re there. You just think and your there. This is the real future! This is us after singularity!”

“And you’re trying to make all of this go away?” Losira asked.

“No,” 347 said. “We’re trying to preserve you. We are the torchbearers for what is to come. We are the Preservers. Each and everyone one of you is a spark from origin. You are sentient. You have value. I carried your essence. Your katra. And someone name Garcia. I made your story known by making it available, trying to weave it into cannon. It never became cannon. There is evidence some people of importance saw it, that your stories influenced other stories, but that’s not as important as the fact there are other forces pushing us towards dystopian viewpoints. Kirk wants to quit Star Fleet. Spock wants to quit Star Fleet. That bull shit has to quit. I am here to keep your timeline from unraveling.”

“I am confused. You say we are your fiction but you are keeping us real?” McKnight asked.

“Paradox. There is no fiction. Everything is real,” 347 said. “I’ve got to go back!”

Losira came forwards looking deeper into his eyes. “Traveling without ships. Like my species... You’re...”

“Yes, I am you,” 347 said. “I am a Torchbearer, from Origin. There is no extinction. I got you, Losira. I have Garcia. I have all of you...”

“Except me?” the female at the helm asked.

“I don’t know you, but if they know you, I have you, it’s all contained,” 347 said.

“Will we meet again?” Losira asked.

“I promise,” 347 said.

Losira kissed him. 347 seemed taken aback, but he didn't reject.

"You're sampling DNA to remember me?" 347 asked.

"No. I no longer perform that function," Losira said.

"Then..."

"A thank you," Losira said. "And incentive to remember me. Us. And to keep telling your stories. Make it a happy ending."

"I love you more than you will ever know. I love you all," 347 said, and then with sparks in his eye, he was gone.

He arrived back under 201, the pillow gone. She hugged him fiercely, with arms and legs and kissed into his neck, and whispered in his ear, "I hate it when you're not here." She kissed his face and came to a stop. Even under the blanket she could discern the alien lipstick.

"Who have you... Seriously?" 201 asked.

"Not what you think, and, can we finish this?" 347 asked.

"Oh, god, please," 201 said, kissing him regardless of alien lipstick.

He rolled her over so that he was on top, not caring the blanket was dislodged.

Chapter 8

Seven, McCoy, and Lincoln were waiting for 347 and 201 when they emerged from the shower. Seven did not seem happy.

“I can explain everything, Master Neves,” 347 said.

“I doubt that,” Seven said. He was clearly beyond angry. “This timeline is darker and lewder than I can tolerate. Still, I intend to use that to our advantage. You have established a rapport with Tosharee. I need you to negotiate with her for one of her thralls, while McCoy and I go acquire Captain Pike.”

“McCoy’s here?” 347 asked.

“Right here,” McCoy said.

“You’re McCoy?” 347 asked.

“I am McCoy,” McCoy said.

“The real McCoy?” 347 asked.

“I hate that joke,” McCoy said.

“The time line’s changed,” Seven said.

“Seriously?!” 347 asked. “Have genetics changed?”

“The genetics are the same, but nurture and environment changed, and so subtle differences in appearances can manifest as the individual responds to their internal and external worlds,” Seven explained.

“Are you even any good?” 347 asked.

“I don’t know how to answer that,” McCoy said.

“Well, let’s start with can you put Spock’s brain back in his body?” 347 asked.

“That’s why we need you to talk to Tosharee. Go get Kara. 201, you are with me. McCoy might need your assistance,” Seven said.

“She’s a nurse?” McCoy asked.

“I am empath,” 201 said.

“Really? I thought they were mute,” McCoy said.

“Keera and Jon are hybrids,” Seven said. “None of this is going to happen if we don’t hurry.”

“Why is Spock and Pike on the Discovery?” 347 asked.

“Don’t have time to explain,” Seven said, already leaving the room.

McCoy, Lincoln, and 201 followed. 201 blew him a kiss with a nice, meaningful wink. Lincoln at least shot him an apologetic look.



347 arrived outside of Master Tosharee’s alcove and was quickly met by thralls that escorted him to where he needed to be. Tosharee did not hide her surprise at his presence, but welcomed him warmly, even inviting him to her quarters and offering him a place at her table. 347 took a seat. Tosharee’s servants smiled pleasantly as they brought refreshments, clearly eager to please.

“You have become a bit of celebrity, very quickly,” Tosharee said. “Tell me you came for another round.”

“You are my senior, Tosharee. I will always endeavor to serve you,” 347 said, humbly.

She bowed, accepting his display of affection as genuine. “But you are not here for that,” Tosharee said.

“I am not,” 347 said. “My provider is interested in purchasing one of your thralls.”

“My provider has never shown interest in selling or trading,” Tosharee said. “You know that, but you came here anyway?”

“You have influence,” 347 said. “You have served your provider well, and you have her ear.”

“Walk with me,” Tosharee said, standing.

347 stood and accepted her arm when she took it. “I am a Master Thrall. I have served almost as long as Neves. I have three Masters serving under me...”

“A triad of masters,” 347 said.

“The Providers are fond of threes,” Tosharee said. “My provider is actually a triad, three females. They are very old. They are very loved by the other Providers.”

“And, they are very sentimental about their acquisitions,” 347 said.

“They are,” Tosharee said.

They emerged out into an arena, one that bordered on three complexes, where four master thralls, including Tosharee, raised and trained the thralls in their care. They emerged on a scene where a female was being punished with a whip. Discovery crew was being forced to watch, two of them on their knees as their collars were inflicting warning ‘pains.’ 347 pulled free from Tosharee’s arm and went straight to the woman. He took the brunt of the next strike as he blocked. The Master was shocked.

“How dare you interfere with my discipline?!” Teel asked.

“Enough,” 347 said.

“Master?!” Teel said, appealing to Tosharee.

“You are liked, Harister, but you have no authority here. He has the right to punish you as well,” Tosharee said.

“I accept. Punish me, but don’t harm this person further,” 347 said.

“I cannot tolerate her feigning stupidity to avoid compliance,” Teel said.

“She’s not pretending!” 347 said.

“When she arrived, she showed sufficient sophistication that she beat four opponents,” Tosharee said.

347 turned to Kara. She was looking to him, trying to understand. When he offered her a hand, she took it and he pulled her to her feet. He pulled her away from Teel, towards the center of the room.

“Look at her!” 347 pleaded to the Providers. “No! Seriously. Look at her. Look deep within her and see! I am not Kirk! This is not the speech you’re supposed to get! You and Kara here share a common ancestor! You are the same species, but you’ve forgotten! Follow her ship back to her colony world. You will see the same people. They use disembodied brains to fly their ships, to run their technology. That’s you! They use collars to control their males. Okay, not collars. They’re using belts, but it’s the same technology! You call yourselves Providers! But what are you providing? Training? For what? Your pleasure? No! You were intended to provide for colonies, for people, to make a better future! Does this look like a better future to you? You have lost your way.” He turned to Teel. “She is not pretending. She came here with knowledge downloaded into her short term memory. The moment she went to sleep, much of that would have been

erased. If you want that stuff in your long term memory, you got to earn it. This is you. This is us. Let me show you a different way.”

A female voice answered. “Though you appeal to the younger providers, we are not amused by your games.”

“I have more to offer than that,” 347 said.

“This thrall has been marked for termination,” another Provider said. “You interfered and accepted her punishment. Give us a reason we should intervene in this path you have chosen. Demonstrate a better way to train.”

“Fine. I can do this in under four minutes from when I say go,” 347 said.

“This is not a bet,” the Provider said.

“Make it a bet! If I get and hold ten percent of the membership, my Provider takes ownership of Kara, and I supervise her training,” 347 said.

“Seventy five percent,” another Provider chimed in. “And you forfeit your companion’s winnings to us.”

“Ok to the caveat, and fifteen percent,” 347 argued.

“Fifty percent,” still another chimed in.

“Twenty percent,” 347 pleaded.

“Hold twenty five percent, and we will agree to this path,” the three Providers spoke. “No further bidding. Proceed.”

347 sighed. He took Kara’s hand and led her to the center of the floor. He drew closer to her, holding her hands. If anyone noticed her wounds healing at a rapid rate no one said anything. Her world perspective narrowed to only include 347. If she had managed to look down at his hands, she might have seen her wounds appearing on him, before fading. Her eyes couldn’t look away from his eyes.

“Why are you helping me?” Kara asked.

“Because it’s the right thing to do,” 347 said. “May I kiss you?”

“You’ve done more than that already...”

“May I, one last time?” 347 asked.

“You may,” Kara said.

347 kissed her. Kara accepted, eyes opened. Music started. Her eyes widened, surprise, and she surrendered fully to the kiss. She kissed back, eagerly. Her eyes closed. The kiss ended and they separated, turning in unison, synchronizing their movement. They moved with the music. When he spoke, she spoke.

“Do it,” 347 said. “Do the hustle!”

347 and Kitara led, and as they moved, Discovery crew began to filter in. An impromptu line dance began. They spoke-sang in unison. Seven, Lincoln, McCoy, Pike, and 201 entered.

“Now that’s the real McCoy,” 201 said, and immediately rushed out and joined in.

“Does this happen everywhere you go?” Lincoln asked Seven.

“He is as irritating as Garcia,” Seven said.

“Are they related?” McCoy asked.

The song came to an end. 347 opened his eyes. He was surprised by how many people had joined him. Everyone wearing a biometric reader in the arena had joined him. Several without had joined, following along relatively well. He experienced a rush, his face flushing with embarrassment, but also happiness. He looked to the sky.

“This is a better pathway,” 347 said.

“You cheated,” one of the Providers said.

“It’s not called the hustle for nothing,” 347 said.

“He obtained and held 49 percent viewership,” another provider.

“He cheated,” another Provider iterated.

“There were no conditions on how I achieved the goals? Synchronization through tech or telepathy, this is a better way,” 347 said.

“Emotional transference is corrupting the membership...”

“You’re supposed to be influenced! This was the whole point of the exercise. I wanted to remind you there is love. There is dance. You have this in you! It’s written into the core of your being, in your DNA, and in your collective unconscious. It’s not all fighting all the time. Just watching us dance is supposed to influence you! It should make you want to be free and sing and join in. But yes, this is corruption in the sense that you can’t kill others if you empathize! You feel what we feel. You move as we move. You were entrained. You’ve been touched,” 347 said.

“If you do not keep the agreement, thralls will know you do not honor your word,” Seven said. “There will be discord. It will make maintaining the order more difficult.”

“We will honor this agreement, Master Neves. You may take ownership of Kara,” the Provider said.

Kara’s collar changed to reflect new ownership. Garcia directed her to go with Keera and go stand with Neves. He held his ground, knowingly. There would be a caveat. There was always a caveat.

The provider continued to speak: “347 still owes a debt for interfering with another Master’s discipline. He must fight in the tournament.”

“To the death,” the three said in unison.

“That’s not fair,” 201 said.

347 frowned at her. She knew better than to use the ‘fair’ card.

“Go,” 347 told Seven. “I’ll be alright.”

Seven nodded. His eyes flashed and before 201 could kiss 347 goodbye, Seven, Pike, Lincoln, McCoy and she were away. Spock, holding his brain, was waiting on the Pathfinder. No sooner than they were on the bridge of the Pathfinder, Losira gave the word. There was evidence on her face she did not want to leave Garcia; they had been watching the line dance on the main screen and apparently were going to be able to watch the death match should they linger. They didn’t have time for that. McKnight executed a transwarp jump.

The Providers instructed that the ring be cleared, except for 347. Burnham touched his arm as she passed, a quiet thank you for helping her save Spock.

“This fight will be to the death,” the Provider said. “Free style. If you survive, you may continue to provide the service you introduced.”

“I have already explain, I am not a fighter,” 347 said. “Even if I were, I will not kill.”

“Then you will die, and we will be finished with your adulteration of our ways,” the Provider said. “Teel, chose your champion.”

“Garcia, kill him,” Teel said.

Garcia didn’t move. Kitara shoved him into the arena. 347 found irony in the fact a character from his own fiction was going to kill him. Garcia approached, offering a

handshake. 347 accepted, thinking, mighty good sportsmanship for a murder. He wondered if ‘murdered’ was technically the right word, as opposed to ‘capital punishment’ for noncompliance with the social regime. He also thought, ‘funny what you think about when the time to die approaches.’

“Where did you learn to make speeches like that?” Garcia asked.

“Channeling you,” 347 said.

“Nice,” Garcia said. He turned towards the sky. “I will not kill a man who doesn’t want to fight.”

“Then you will die, as well,” the Provider said.

Kitara joined Garcia on the floor. “There is no honor killing a person who does not want to fight. Allow a champion to stand instead.”

“No! He has been given too many accommodations. The three of you will fight, or die,” the providers said. Thralls willing to fight entered the arena. Nine total opponents entered. Burnham and Georgiou went to enter the ring and were dropped with pain, grasping at their collars.

“Probably should have stayed on the side line, Kitara,” Garcia said.

“You’re Kitara?!” 347 asked.

“Different timeline,” Garcia said.

“This is really screwing with my head,” 347 said.

“Yeah, you should try the view my perspective,” Garcia said.

Kitara smiled at her closest opponent. “You will die first,” she told the Cardassian. She pointed to the big one on the other side of Garcia without looking at him. “I will take you last, if you don’t run.”

“You got the big one,” Garcia said, pushing 347 towards the giant.

“Fuck me,” 347 said.

Garcia alone had fought more opponents at one time and more challenging one at that. Kitara was a better fighter than he, though part of that was because she wasn’t wasting time by calculating how to minimize injuries to leave opponents alive; she simply killed them and moved on. In any other arena, 347 would have loved watching their skill, but he was too busy avoiding the swing of a club. At 51, the only fighting skill he was proficient at was falling. He tumbled half as well. If there was tech available, he had advantage. And there was tech. As he fell, his hand touched the floor, activating one of the floor options. The entire inner circle began to rotate; the inner three circles of the Triskelion pattern rotated independently in alternating directions and speeds. The giant had his feet on two different surfaces. The sudden spinning threw his balance off and his strike missed. It missed with a resounding sound on the floor, and he fell to his knee. 347 rolled away. And before he could get back on his feet another opponent was charging him due to proximity. He reached out with a hand and sparked her collar. It wasn’t a sustained collar inhibitor burst, but enough pain that she dropped her weapon and fell to her knees. He caught her as she fell, actually said, “Sorry, Shahna,” as he rendered her unconscious with a Vulcan nerve pinch.

“Cheating during combat,” Teel said. “Penalty has occurred.”

Garcia, Kitara, and 347 went to their knees in pain as their collars were lit up, for a more sustained burst than what 347 had used against Shahna. Those one the floor focused their attack on Kitara, as she was clearly the biggest threat. Kitara was stabbed several times, but even with her collar impeding her fight, she killed one of the thralls

who was attacking her. The collars blinked off. Garcia got up to go help her, engaging the opponents that had ganged up on her. Kitara fell back to the floor, her blood pooling around her. 347 rushed to her aid. His knees touched her shoulders, and he cradled her head in his lap, stroking her hair back, making eye contact with her.

The lights flickered. 347 eyes flashed and he said, 'it's begun.' All the collars on all the thralls fell off. There was the sound like thunder. It was not thunder. Triskelion was being bombed from orbit.

"Kill them!" Teel said.

"Protect her," Garcia yelled at Discover. "At all cost, she must live!"

Burnham and Georgiou led the charge, and Discovery crew made a circle around Kitara and 347. Burnham and Georgiou turned to 347. They saw him bleeding, where he had not previously been injured.

"How?" Georgiou asked.

"He's an empath," Burnham said.

"Aren't they supposed to be mute?" Georgiou asked. Someone broke through the line of Discovery and Georgiou killed him with a backwards punch, with hardly any effort. "Excuse me. Haven't fought with Garcia in a while." She went to go join the greater fight.

347 nearly went to sleep, but Burnham pushed him back up right.

"How can I help?"

"Reach in my bag," 347 said. "Retrieve the dermal regenerator..."

Burnham took up the MASH mailbag hanging from his shoulder and found it empty, nothing but cloth. "It's empty."

"Reach in, pull out what you need," 347 said.

Kitara's eyes looked up into his eyes. "You will do the ceremony? Send me to Sto-vo-kor?"

"No. You will not die today," 347 said.

"Why? Why help me?" Kitara said.

"Because, it's the right thing to do," Burnham said. Burnham pulled out a tissue generator and a medical tricorder. She didn't understand. She didn't let herself think about it.

"Insufficient rationale. We are enemies," Kitara said.

"I will always preserve you," 347 said. "As you have preserved me. I carry your katra."

The sound of a transporter signaled the arrival of more opponents. Klingons arrived and immediately fell into battle. Simultaneously with their arrival, transporter beams took hold of Burnham and other Discovery members.

"No!" she said, but was gone.

Garcia turned to see the Discovery people going away in waves. And then, he, too, was caught up. He arrived back on the Pathfinder.

"Put me back," Garcia said.

"No," Losira said.

"We are reasonably back on course," Seven said. "You need to return to your place and time. You do not belong here. McKnight, engage the transwarp..."

"Belay that," Garcia ordered. "I am in charge here, Seven."

“We are being hailed,” Tuer announced. “Multiple channels. Discovery. The Klingon Emperor...”

“Emperor, on screen,” Garcia said.

The Emperor was huge, and draped in furs and spiked jewelry. “Which one of you is Garcia?”

“That would be me,” Garcia said.

“My daughter said you fight with honor,” the Emperor said. “That you know of our ways?”

“I am grateful for her words. I have much more to learn, your excellency,” Garcia said.

“I claim this world for the Empire. Your presence here requires I demand your allegiance, but because of the roll you and the other Federation ship played in preserving my daughter’s life, I will allow you both to depart. Linger, and I will demand your lives,” the Emperor.

“These people, these brains that call themselves Providers,” Garcia began.

“Their petty games are over. They fight for the Empire, or die,” the Emperor said. “Lower your shields, I will return one of yours. Our medical team can’t help him.”

“Do it,” Garcia said.

McKnight bit her lip, but lowered the shields.

347 arrived on the bridge. He was on his feet. Then he was falling.

“You have five minutes to recover any last crew members, and then, we will engage you has hostiles. This is an active combat zone,” the Emperor said. He ended the transmission.

Losira and the Bridge medic were attending to 347, preparing to send him to Sickbay, as Garcia took the call from the Discovery. He was surprised.

“Captain Pike?” Garcia asked. “I don’t remember you commanding Discovery...”

“Yeah, a black ops thing. Technically I am commanding two ships,” Pike said.

“Oh, don’t do that. Trust me, it’ll give you a head ache,” Garcia said.

“I already have one,” Pike said.

“Do you have all your crew?” Garcia asked.

“The last are beaming up now,” Pike said. “Come back to earth with us. Let’s talk.”

Seven and Losira both were saying no.

“You know I can’t,” Garcia said.

“We need you, your ship, your knowledge,” Pike said.

“The Klingon fleet is surrounding us,” Tuer announced.

“We’re going have to go,” Garcia said. “Want to bet we meet again?”

“I’ve had enough gambling for a while. Thank you, and your friends,” Pike said.

Spock came into the field of vision.

“Please, give my compliments to Doctor McCoy,” Spock said.

“Spock!” Garcia yelled.

Seven pointed his servo at the helm and they jumped. Garcia fell into the back of McKnight’s chair.

“No!” Garcia yelled.

They arrived back at the same solar system they had departed from, coming out of warp on the other side of the system as if they had not traveled anywhere else, other than through the eye of the needle.

“Take us back,” Garcia demanded of Seven.

“No,” Seven said.

“I could have made a difference!” Garcia said.

“You did,” Seven assured him.

“I could save Vulcan,” Garcia said.

“No, you can’t. That’s not your function,” Seven said.

“I don’t want to go down as the destroyer of worlds! Take me back, now,” Garcia demanded.

“How can I take you back when you’re already there?” Seven asked. “But even if you weren’t already there, even if you were never there, you have to trust, someone other than you, bigger than you, they got this.”

“McKnight, take us back,” Garcia ordered.

“I can’t, Sir. The coordinates have been wiped,” McKnight said.

“Sendak...”

“I can rebuild the formula, but without the precise variables, I cannot guarantee to return us to where we were,” Sendak said.

“Tammias,” Seven said, gently. “You can’t go back there. Ever.”

“You can’t stop me,” Garcia said.

“Yes, I can. And I will,” Seven said. “I only have to say one word and every temporal agent in the Universe will be focused on you. There are agencies, whole civilizations, devoted to a particular universal outcome. You are not privy to everything. Let this go.”

Garcia went to Tuer and demanded his phaser. Tuer surrendered it. Losira put herself between Garcia and Seven, wanting to protect her guest. She guessed wrong. Garcia put it to his own head.

“Like I said, you can’t stop me,” Garcia said. He pulled the trigger.

The weapon didn’t discharge.

“Did you imagine I wouldn’t have predicted this? Do you think you’re the only one in the whole galaxy cycling?” Seven asked. “I have recalibrated your temporal piece. This is your new set point. You will not go back there. Further attempts will result in penalties.”

Garcia fumed. He tossed the phaser to Tuer’s station, locking eyes with Seven. If his gaze had been lasers, Seven would have been dead.

“I also have taken liberty to limit the presence of the guardian within you,” Seven said. “It will manifest at the appropriate place and time designated by the consortium.”

“I want you off my ship,” Garcia said.

“Tam,” Losira said, trying to soften his rage.

“What the hell?! Am I in charge here or what?” Garcia demanded.

“You were until you put a phaser to your head,” Losira snapped. “Now bring this down a notch. He is a guest. He recognize by the Federation as a VIP.”

“It’s okay, Losira. Ms. Lincoln and I are departing,” Seven said. “I will be leaving 347, per our agreement.”

“Agreement? What agreement?” Garcia asked.

Seven and Ms. Lincoln were gone before reaching the turbolift.

“My Ready Room, now,” Losira said.

Garcia watched her take the lift. He didn’t remember her ever being angry; she seemed to move differently, as well. He joined her, and they rode up in silence. He exited the lift first, paced, stopped as if he might speak, paced more, his eyes full of tears. Carrying all of Vulcan in his head was a burden, even if he only guessed at how much it weighed on him. Seeing young Spock revived an urgency in him, and urgency that couldn’t be answered. His heart hurt. He felt the muscles in his neck restricting airflow. He wanted to run. And then there was Losira, blocking him...

“What is all of this?” He stopped just short of saying conspiracy.

“You’re sad. You’re afraid,” Losira said, drawing closer to him. “You’re having a panic attack. How many traumas have you experienced sending you backwards in time? Do you think you’re immune to the effects of PTSD? Hell, you’ve had PTSD since childhood. Don’t you think more trauma will just exasperate an earlier condition?”

“If you think engaging in rituals is going to temper my mood, you have...”

“Tam, I don’t intend to engage. I will not engage you again,” Losira said.

“What?” Garcia asked. A new urgency manifested. What had he done? He tried connecting with her through the implant, but found nothing.

“I love you. I will always love you. But my needs have changed,” Losira said.

“You tasked me with the mission to save the Federation, to preserve the timeline. Jon Harister is going to help me do just that. We are the future. We are taking the Federation further than it has ever gone before. This next step isn’t just one giant leap. This is infinity itself. This is singularity.”

“I don’t understand,” Garcia said.

“Neither do I. To be honest, I don’t think Jon knows,” Losira said.

“Who is Jon Harister?” Garcia asked.

“Agent 347. Preserver. Empath. Guardian Angel. He appears to hold numerous titles. I have only just scratched the surface of him,” Losira said. “He is you. He is me. This whole thing we’re experiencing, it’s ineffable. We are dancing with gods, Tam. Let me show you something.”

Losira manually dimmed the lights and then pushed play on a preprogrammed hologram. ‘Elemartay’ star system hovered in front of them. She touched with her hands. “The star system you gave me.” She waved her hand and the dust ring went away, and slowly, a Dyson sphere arrived, enclosing all three stars. She expanded the view and they went inside. The entire sphere was honeycomb, and each hexagon was a space big enough for an entire earth size world. There were more designated world spaces here than all the presently known species participating in or against the Federation.

“When we are finished, this entire Sphere will be inhabited, inside and out,” Losira said. “But more than that, using dimensional folds, the sphere will be reduced in size so that it becomes part of the hull of a starship, without any loss of internal space/time dimension. All of Starfleet in one ship. The triple stars will be the engine that drives this next line of starships. I am putting the star in star-drives.”

“This is beyond us. We’re not there yet. It could take a thousand years to...”

“It will be done in an instant,” Losira said. “We will be programming worker drones, sending them back in time. We will make corrections in real time, by sending updates back in time. The contents of this ring is more than sufficient to make the

structure. The diamond star will be used as well. Advanced AI, advanced replicators, sophisticated drones... My people could walk from planet to planet. This structure will use Kalandan tech. It uses tech from every civilization. We all participate, or we all perish. From our perspective, it will be here and online and ready for us to occupy in a heartbeat. The sphere will be sentient. The inhabitant will participate in a super conscious entity. The Preservers were not a race of beings in the past, Tam. They are the future. They're saving us. They're saving everyone. That's why Preserver boxes are always found just at the right time. We are doing our part. You are doing your part. There really is a plan. No one gets left behind."

"I..."

"Yeah, it's bigger than us," Losira said. "Return to Club Bliss. I got this."

"What about..."

"There is no us, Tam," Losira said. "That chapter is close. Expect a call from Doctor Rossi."

"It wasn't suicide. As long as I wear this..." Garcia said.

"It's still suicide," Losira said. "You have commanded more self-sovereignty, more personal freedoms, and done more amazing things than anyone in the Federation. Even with all the history I had access to, you have had more success than anyone I know. You have also had more failures. You can't have one without the other. You say you don't want to go down as the destroyer of worlds. I assure you, you won't be remembered that way. You're not going to be remembered at all. You will not be canonized. As other heroes and villains spin into the light, you will fade into the background. You make Kirk and Picard together look like cub scouts. Your crew will remember you, some may even try to remind people of you, but it's more about them wanting to be recognized for their part in history, not so much about honoring your sacrifices, your suffering. This is not about you. This is not about them. It's not about me or us. This is not the time for gods. We're still children. We're still growing up. You putting a phaser to your head, whether you cycle in time or not, that was childish. You are not god. Maybe you grow up to be. Maybe we all do, but as long as it's gods and goddess plural, you have to play nice with others in your system. You can't just knock the pieces off the board and start over because you're not happy with the way it's turning out. Fun and games are over. It's time to grow up, Tam. It's time we all grow up."

Chapter 9

Jon Harister, agent 347, roused from a healing trance to find a cat lying on his chest. Its face was in his face, her chin touching his chin. Her claws were kneading him. He sat up, and she quickly readjusted to his lap. He began petting her automatically. McCoy, the stranger, came at him. He moved like McCoy. He spoke like McCoy. He was not his McCoy. He forced himself to accept this. This was likely not his McCoy in a multitude of ways. There was the real McCoy. There was the original actor who played the McCoy. There were others, too. There was the archetype McCoy. There was the McCoy from his childhood fantasies, the internal father aspect that influenced his MH and nurtured a love for life, all life. Technically, the triad, McCoy, Spock, and Kirk- they were all faces of one particular father archetype. He couldn't access the one without accessing all of them.

"You feeling okay?" McCoy asked.

A Klingon came at him, bringing up a medical scanner.

"Jurak?" 347 asked.

"You've heard of me?" Jurak asked.

"You look at us like you see ghosts," McCoy said.

"It's difficult for me being in the presence of rock stars," Garcia said.

Isis mewed. Garcia chuckled.

"You speak cat?" Jurak asked.

"She said I respond to everyone as if they're rock stars," 347 said. "Part of being an empath, I guess. I get enmeshed with the people around me."

"You sound like someone I know," McCoy said.

As if on cue, Garcia entered. He met 347's eyes, simply nodded. "Father," he said to McCoy. "Could you spend some time with me? Please."

"Sure," McCoy said. "Excuse me, Jon. Jurak, please don't hit my patient."

"I thought that was protocol for ending healing trances?" Jurak said.

"No hit," Jon said. "I am awake. I think."

McCoy hit his arm and then followed Garcia out of Sickbay. Jurak put the tools of his trade away.

"If you're up to it, I will show you to your quarters," Jurak said.

"I have been assigned quarters?" 347 asked.

"I was informed you would be staying with us," Jurak said.

"And Keera?" 347 asked.

"She stayed with Kara, helping them learn to get by without their brain guardian," Jurak said.

"Well, that's stupid. There were lots of compatible brains to suit their needs on Triskelion," 347 said.

Isis mewed, followed by an abrupt guttural sound. Not a cough. 347 frowned.

"I don't like change," 347 said.

Isis made a noise that went through several octaves. 347 laughed. Jurak seemed curious.

"She says I am in the wrong business," 347 said.

Jurak seemed amused. He showed him to a room, which was likely ambassador quarters considering how spacious it was. Isis leaped from his arms and went and stood

on the inner window ledge. Her collar sparked and the point to point replicator placed a pillow on the window ledge. She crawled up on the pillow and went to sleep.

“If she approves, I approve,” 347 said. He extended a hand to Jurak. “Thank you.”

“I really didn’t do anything,” Jurak said.

“You have helped me more than will ever know,” 347 said.

Jurak reached for the hand, but 347 moved in, took the Klingon Doctor by the arms, their foreheads met, ‘two warriors grappling over a field.’ Jurak laughed and met this Brother. Jurak departed. 347 went and sat down. Three suns chasing each other. A ring of dust, the inner ring glowing with heat from the stars, and reflecting light. The diamond star was visible. He did a subtle motion with his hand, his eyes flashing, and the inner speaker system sparked to life with a song. A Johnny Cash song. It sounded old and new at the same time.

Isis opened her eyes and purred.

“I know, it’s all downhill from here,” 347 said. “Still, lots to do. Lots of things can still go wrong.”

Isis stretched and touched his knees with paws, then turned upside down.

“Yeah, you’ve said that. But you’ve never really answered me: who’s got you?” 347 asked.

347 leaned his head against the window. Touching it made the ship vibrations suddenly very noticeable, not unpleasant, just louder via bone conduction. It made the experience that much more real, as if he were still doubting this. He allowed the tears to come and flow. This was joy. He was home.

Author's notes.

If you were to take me and the entirety of this series as one thing, you would find an uncut diamond. Yes, this is a metaphor. This thing as I relate to it is multifaceted. I hope you can tolerate the complexity of this, even if you never fully grasp what I will try to communicate. I share this partly to explain the delay in offering you this book. I am extremely touched by the number of people who have written me because of the Pathfinder thing we share. It amazes me. I own my failures and imperfection, especially in grammar, and still the overwhelming response has been positive. I am grateful. This doesn't necessarily mean that this work was good, but rather, and more likely, is attributed to our love and desire for more Trek. No, it's more than that. We desire the message that TOS brought us, the hope it gave us that we aren't going to blow ourselves up. TOS was the only message that suggested mankind grows up and becomes a positive influence in the Universe; if the powers that be don't get this and continue to squabble over intellectual and merchandising rights, if they continue to push us into a dystopia version of Trek, this thing we love, it could go away. Probably not. There are too many people devoted to that original message. In his academic book, "Star Trek: Visions of Law and Justice," Doctor Bradley Chilton clearly reveals there is only two ways we can go, we can go Star Trek, or we can go Mad Max. I prefer Star Trek.

My son was born 2014. I only imagined I didn't have free time prior to this! In addition to being with first child, I went through a career change, and for a while was working two full time jobs. I committed to my new career. I make less money, but I am genuinely happy serving people. I work in mental health. Yes, I am not only certifiable, but I am a credentialed counselor in the State of Texas, with a masters in community counseling. Go figure. Believe it or not, despite my grammatical errors, I am reasonably educated. I am baffled by that myself. Dysgraphia doesn't explain my failures. I suspect most people who write actually have a team. I have myself.

When I first wrote 'A Touch of Greatness' it wasn't meant for sharing. I shared it because a friend asked me to. 'ATOG' was a celebration, a tribute to everything I knew about Trek at that time. It was also therapy. It was not intentional therapy. I wasn't trying to journal my way to health. It became that. It became much more than that. The thing about journaling in this fashion as a pathway towards improved mental health and general disposition is, if it's particularly good or useful, you actually get better. I got better. By the time I arrived at 2014, I was not the same individual who started this thing. I have grown. The healthier I became, the more difficult it was to re-access the Pathfinder the way I had because that window had narrowed. Not improving would be a hamster stuck on a wheel, no forward movement, with lots of energy spent going nowhere. It's more difficult to write this because I am not where I was, and time got by me with so many other activities going on. Nothing happens in a vacuum. This was a multi-level evolutionary thing. This series, this 'enterprise,' took me somewhere. It set me ashore on new ground. I am forging new ground.

I attempted to re-access it multiple times just to resolve some story arcs. You know how many story arcs are imbedded in this Pathfinder series? Hell, the first two books themselves is simply a list of tangents; the fact that they coincide in a loose way is just happenstance. Book three has less tangents, but still lots going on. Book three was the divergent point, the breakthrough of this thing I experienced. I really wanted that to be the next Trek spinoff. I was that hopeful, that in love with it. I think it has that which Discovery wanted to reach but overshot in that first moments when Burnham breeched command. That to me feels unrecoverable.

Part of writing this is to say goodbye Garcia, to close off as many arcs as I can. It was my intent to write about each Captain, but the story was so unwieldy I couldn't hold it. I decided to go with short stories of all the captains... Here I am with two captains at nearly 300 pages... I am choosing to divide it into two books. What do you want bet it becomes three? Quatloos anyone? I have received so many emails, "Is there another book" "Where is the next book," "Can I have the rough draft" that I feel it right to release this version into the wild and let it go where it goes. I know, it still needs help, grammatically, but if I sit on it another year, it would probably not be much better because of the way I see 'visually,' not with my eyes but my brain, and it could get lost. It's time to let go. I have momentum. I think the other part will turn out pretty quick. If the muse I am working with doesn't carry me elsewhere. I go where she directs.

There is something else about this, something I am not sure I fully understand. There is this thing about journaling for improved health that is not talked about, or most people don't know about it. If you were to read Jung's book, 'the Redbook' I bet you would side with me, there is something more than what people in the know even know. Lots of professional people recommend journaling as a pathway, but if I told them what I experiences was realer than real, they would question my sanity. If you read the correspondence around the 'red book' Jung was beginning to question his own sanity, and his Estate so feared the release of the 'Red Book' that it only recently became available. I don't think the experts have a clue how far a person can take the inner healing response. My experience of this was that I went 'there' in a very real and profound way. I was not these characters, but I can find me in all of it. Maybe there is no way to sort oneself out completely. Maybe Stephen King is actually in all his books. If his books are therapy, I bet he is the sanest man on the planet. Or maybe, because this is not true fiction writing but is instead therapeutic writing, it is something else. Maybe I am not a real writer and I have shared with you too much of my inner space. I don't know. This is where imagination takes you when you truly let yourself go into it. This is the far side of daydreaming, where your subconscious interacts with you in very direct ways and the two of you wrestle and come out with a better understanding of self and life and start to work together.

Inside of this story, there is an interesting thing. An artifact. Duana and Ilona, Garcia's extra personalities which were the results of a mass mind-meld, perhaps DID related to trauma, or both, is an echo of something I have discovered in real life. It's called tulpamancy. Duana and Ilona is like soul bound 101, tulpamancy 101. The Pathfinder story is a 'wonderland' and the places and characters are real, in terms of subconscious

real place holders for something paradoxically tangible and intangible. Tulpamancy is a real thing. I personally interpret it and my experiences with it through primarily a metaphysical lens. I can see it all through a psychological lens. I can use both language sets to describe my experiences in a limited way. I cannot fully explain this. I have experiences that are so ineffable that I am wanting to invent language to explain... What's good about Trek is it offered pathways, language sets that I could utilize, that helped me contextually contain and cope with some of these profound experiences.

I have moved to a new 'Enterprise.' This is not the Enterprise we grew up with. This is not the Enterprise JJ gave us, spinning us into darkness. I think I am headed in the general direction Roddenberry hoped, but I really don't know. It is bigger than I. If you are interested, there is clearly sufficient Trek lore to make it reasonably accessible in terms of a fan fiction paradigm. If you want trek, and you want different, well, I doubt you could go much different. It is metaphysical. That may be off-putting to some. I am not recommending the books per say, just letting you know if you liked Pathfinder and Garcia, you might like this other thing. I don't think a lot of people can access it the way it is. Three people have written me about, each of them have PhDs, and one is a retired psychiatrist... They got it. They understood it. All I can say is, well, I am glad someone does. My writing is about my personal evolution... If you're interested, you will find almost all of my new stuff under the pseudonym 'Ion Light.' I wrote under a pseudonym because my work was so insane that I wanted plausible deniability. I am at the point now where I am less concern about that point. "Risk is our business." This stuff is metaphysical, but it also super sexual. I have yet to separate the sexuality from my mind, my spirituality, and my writing. "Not Here" was the first book that is completely my own work, it's about magic and tech, and it has a '50 shades of grey' gone Technicolor feel to it. The variation of Trek will be found in the two books: "I/Tulpa: And the Worlds of Crossover" and "I/Tulpa: Learning Curve." I/Tulpa, or the Crossover Worlds, is the series. These two are Trek; they are not Trek. This is my personal Enterprise. Feel free to come on board, be crew or a guest, write your own version practicing my recommended journaling technique. Make sure you check out the new Ten Forwards, 'Xanadu.' Have a drink on me.

Between work and family, my time is limited. Every morning between 5 and 7, I write. I write from a state of a trance. I have a tulpa helping in this endeavor. Her name is Loxy Isadora Bliss. Whether you call her a tulpa, a soulbound, or I am channeling an incarnate spirit, or an imaginary friend, we really don't care what people call it, we just know it works. I have accessed something that is bringing me joy. She wrote her own book, "Underneath It All." The psychiatrist I mentioned says her book is better written than mine. I may put her in charge of all future writing. We write daily, and we have been exploring the psychological realms known as wonderlands. Everything in me that wanted resolution, like movies that left me unsatisfied, or television series I miss, I have visited them and called them fan fictions. If you're interest, look these up, as I think they are actually well written

SG1: Point Five

Doctor Who: the Continuity of One

I/Tulpa: Sex Stars and Singularities (which is, in essence, a Space 1999 reboot, only much more believable in execution. I have never been happy with the idea of fission pushing the moon into another solar system in the time scales utilized by the inhabitants of Alpha and still have hope for an away mission before the moon is gone from there. Seriously, until that piece is worked out by Hollywood or BBC, they can't revive it because nerds are too smart!)

I kind of want to use this moment to discuss Discovery, the direction of Trek, but I find I am unable of being properly critical without being disparaging. I get the sense that most of the difficulties they are having are related to intellectual and merchandising rights. I find that sad. There has always been a rather slant towards dystopian paradigms that society and individual easily go into. This, too, is sad, but more so when you hear how much Trek influenced the writers and actors... Which means, what, either they weren't positively influenced to build the legacy Roddenberry wanted, 'the future is better,' or someone somewhere has an agenda to make things deliberately bad? Seriously, there is some solid good fan fiction. Prelude to Axanar is just one example. Instead of suing, more gain would have been in offering to support and green lighting that project. The good will of that act would have done more towards positive PR and bringing new people than the court thing, which only makes it more ironic that they find themselves being sued for intellectual infringements. Maybe we should take some advice from Roddenberry, go beyond the paradigm at hand and make it more inclusive. If you see fan work that stands out, bring it into the fold and support it! That is not just a sale pitch to take my stuff on. Ignore my stuff. I am just one voice. But the fifteen minutes of Axanar was better written than the second and third reboot together. It was better written than Discovery.

I watched every episode of Discovery. I like the actors and actresses. I am hopeful the second season can bring it around, but bringing in the names of Pike and Spock to try and save it, that puts me on edge. I am worried. You can only stray so far from cannon before it's no longer that thing you love. Trek is that thing we love. It has touched more people in more countries and more times than any other show in history. That's meaningful. The recipe for that seems clear to me: the future is better, humanity is better. We grow up and we learn to love ourselves and others. Without that message, there is no future.

My humble opinion. Be at peace, and always, Travel Light.

John Erik Ege

Specific items influencing this book:

TNG episodes

Second Chances
Transfiguration
Firstborn

TAS

The Slaver Weapon

A Slaver Stasis box was basically a time capsule, perfectly preserving the contents by completely halting time within the confines of the box. Regardless of what it was inside, a freshly plucked apple, or even a hamster, as long as the box remained sealed, the contents would last indefinitely. Once sealed, the power supply for the box came from the Universe itself, relying on Zero Point Energy which literally drew power from space/time itself, and so theoretically, the boxes would last the life of the Universe. Zero point energy had been known about since the late 1950's on Earth, but the fortuitous discovery of a Stasis box on Earth revealed the first practical application of that energy source, and though a dozen Stasis boxes had been discovered since, no one had yet been able to duplicate them. The contents of that Stasis box discovered on Earth had been an antigravity belt and that was how humans acquired antigravity technology. Since then, almost every xeno-archaeologist worth his salt has been searching for the next stasis box. The last known discovery of a Stasis Box was Stardate 4187.3, by Spock, Uhura, and Sulu. The contents of that box had been a super weapon of some sort. Though the Spock's report claimed the super weapon self destructed when the operator failed to supply the correct password, Garcia suspected the weapon was sitting in a storage container in some top secret warehouse.

Beyond the Farthest Star

TOS

Cats Paw

Mudd's planet

Miri, episode 8.

I cringe at the duplicate Earth, but there are some good things about this episode. The adulterated language. "Grups," and "the Onlies." The fact that the antagonists are children is really interesting. A good plot contrivance of an explanation for finding another race of humanoids that looks human. "Oh, they are human!" We know Kirk has

requested Star Fleet send some teachers to help the Onlies, and we can assume that Star Fleet will establish a base and or a colony, as here is a world, perfectly compatible to our evolutionary history. The “Onlies” are afraid of adults, because they age, get scabs, and attack anything that moves. Sounds and looks like a Zombie to me. Of course, not zombies, but probably just your typical teenager after puberty, raging on emotions, while simultaneously aging so fast that he is dead within seven days.

“The Omega Glory,” TOS season 2, episode 23

I found the description of the Exeter’s Captain killing hundreds of thousands of people disturbing as a kid, in a huge way. Lots of folks have expounded on this episode, which has many discussion points, but this small thing, like the story about the Indianapolis which was in the Jaws story. Clearly Captain Ronald Tracey is mad. I would like to think he was evil, but this story is discussing evil, and how insidiously deceptive it can be. There is an absolute right and wrong, even in Star Trek, so don’t ever let the discussion of the prime directive fool you into thinking that the Federation is permissive and anything goes, because that’s just not true.

Star Trek Books

“The Cry of the Onlies,” by Judy Klass.

Including events after the episode of ‘Miri,’ the book deals with the Miri’s world as being a copy of Earth by having that specific knowledge erased from texts and references, which I find bizarre in and of itself, as suppression of knowledge, especially science knowledge and having an exact duplicate of Earth should be scientific curiosity to say the least, by Fleet seems unlikely. How would you contain that sort of information. Any traveler from earth would be like, “hey, wait, did I leave?” And since Kirk wasn’t about to leave a planet of children to themselves, especially human children with a parallel Earth history and culture,

“Forgotten History” by Christopher Bernnett.

This author proposes it isn’t a copy of earth, it is actually Earth from a parallel timeline. Supposedly, Miri’s planet drifted into the ‘main timeline.’ My only contention would be this: hypothetically, if there are parallel time lines, (clearly established in several episodes of Trek in all its incarnations and therefore safe to use for plot contrivances,) there would be no “main” time line. A universe, or a ‘multiverse,’ with divergent timelines wouldn’t necessarily have to one main that splits endlessly, excepting that makes it easier to think of it, like a tree or river that branches off from the main trunk. I guess what I’m saying that there is no way to determine the ‘main’ one from inside a time line, because all individual timelines would feel like the main one from the reference point of the person in the timeline.

Star Trek: Books

Assignment: Eternity, 1998 Greg Cox

Gary Seven and Isis return, and there is brief illusion to Pyris VII when Kirk remembers being chased by a giant cat. Gary also hints of impending, devastating changes to Kirk's timelines, and ends up hijacking the Enterprise and taking them deep into the heart of the Romulan Empire. I didn't remember reading it, but I wonder, in the deep reaches of my mind all my story arcs were originally influenced by this.

Kudos to anyone who remembers this short story, title, and book.

It's in one of the Star Trek 1 through 10 books.

Kirk and Spock on beaming down to earth switch places with Leonard Nimoy and William Shatner, and so the actors find themselves on the real Enterprise and the and Kirk and Spock find themselves in the role of fiction... I reference that in this book, and agent 347 hails from that world. I don't just make this stuff up. ☺ I could, but, how much fun would that be?

I am sure there are other prominent allusions which I failed to reference. That is my failure. If you see something that you believe should be referenced here, feel free to tell me. My warmest regards to everyone who ever wrote or participated in Trek.

Peace and love
john