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“Another Piece of the Action”  
by  
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with love,

always

john erik

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

## PROLOGUE

Tammas Parkin Arblaster-Garcia closed his eyes. He noted the time on his chronometer, provided by his neural implant, and ran some quick calculations. Admiral Leonard H McCoy would be dead just over seven hours now, which meant he had a window of about thirty more minutes in which he could still use the Kelvan technology to resuscitate and restore him to perfect health. The Kelvan ship was in the hangar bay and the control interface he required was in lock down. The technology was basically a computer console woven into a cloth bracelet. The bracelet's fabric was a metallic-gold color which highlighted the only other noticeable feature, the silver button. When touched, the button became a conductor of a sort, connecting the computer to the nerves in the fingertip and from there establishing a direct connection to the brain of the user. An intellectual component was necessary to access the computer, a threshold below which one couldn't access it at all. The minimum intellectual component might establish a connection but that person risked permanent brain damage. The person with sufficient intellectual capacity could access the computer and do miracles. Garcia met and exceeded this attribute, and it was not due to genetic manipulation, good luck, good nutrition, or even a proper education. He was Kelvan, not by birth, but by design. He was descendant from humans who were once Kelvan, and in an attempt to make him more Kelvan than human his neural structure had been modified. The neural map for the Kelvan physiology had been impressed on top of his human neural structure over a period of time starting from conception and ending five years after he was born in a series of procedures, each one building on the previous session's work.

The procedures hadn't been perfect, but it had sufficiently changed his psyche so that he could, through the use of Kelvan technology similar to a transporter, be converted into a Kelvan. The final test was actually transforming him into a Kelvan. Not only had he survived in Kelvan form, but he had full control over his Kelvan physiology. Converting a non-modified human into Kelvan form was a death sentence. One of the most obvious benefits of being Kelvan was that he could use Kelvan technology. Wishes could instantly be manifested like magic. To the untrained eye it might seem as if a telepathic connection to the computer had been made and the will of the user was simply carried out.

But it was neither miracle nor magic. It was science. Science driven by pure intellect.

In this particular instance Garcia's brain would link to the computer in the bracelet which then connected to the main computer on board the Kelvan ship, currently stowed on Hangar Deck 4. Information would swirl virtually around him, providing him with thousands of options, and then, at the push of that one button, his choice would be instantly transformed into work. And the work Garcia wanted done was McCoy brought back to the living. An easy enough task, from the Kelvan perspective. No more difficult than dehydrating an organic creature to its essential ingredients and then the following reconstitution of the same entity. The creature never missed a beat or realized that anything had happened to it. To save McCoy all Garcia had to do was get the wrist control mechanism that was currently under lock and key and put it on. No, he didn't even have to put it on. All he had to do was touch the button, allow his mind to interface with the Kelvan computer system, tell it to repair McCoy, and then press the button. It would be easier than making a wish and blowing out the candles on a cake.

The button was a fail safe. Total chaos would no doubt ensue had there been no button, no barrier between thoughts and reality. If all his thoughts were instantly manifested, every person in his sphere of influence would be in jeopardy of having Garcia's will imposed on theirs. That wasn't a good thing, especially if one of his fleeting thoughts happened to be inappropriate. As it was, Tammas was often prone to wild fantasies, tangents that kept him distracted, and the first time he had used the Kelvan device he had revealed some things about himself that he would have preferred to have kept secret. In particular, the Kelvan device amplified his OCD, obsessive compulsive disorder, and ADD, attention deficit disorder. There had been so many options made available to him, so many possible details cluttering, that he hadn't been precise enough when he had used the Kelvan technology to save Riker's Away Team. Sure, he had restored the team that had been reduced to their essential elements, minus the water, turning the polyhedra back into their original form. But the exception came when he rehydrated Lt. Commander Shelby. He brought her back wearing an outdated Star Fleet Uniform, specifically a mini skirt, tight blouse, and Go-Go boots. And he let her hair down. These were liberties he would not have taken had he been in his right mind.

Thinking of Shelby now, in the uniform McCoy would have recognized from his service days aboard the Enterprise, nearly took him too far a field. He had to struggle to stay focus. OCD and ADD were just two of the side of effects of the procedures that were performed on him to impress the Kelvan mental map over his developing human brain. Great intelligence often came with a price.

Tammas shook his head to clear the fantasy from his mind and forced himself to focus on his goal of saving McCoy. He opened his eyes and continued down the corridor. He was no stranger in the corridors of the Enterprise D. He was rarely stranger anywhere, given his celebrity status, but even more so now that he had recently been deemed a hero by some, including Picard, and a minor nuisance by others, including the likes of Riker. There was no argument that Garcia had recently made a name for himself in Star Fleet and touched a few lives in the process. He picked up his pace so as to avoid the potential for idle chat as he made his way for the armory where the Kelvan control bracelet was being kept. He didn't have time for the interruptions. Still, he made an effort to acknowledge the people who met his eyes, offering a faint smile or nod.

Lt. Jenna D'Sora was on security detail to the armory where the Kelvan bracelet was being kept. She looked up from her desk as he entered, the door closing behind him. She smiled. They had met once, briefly, passing in the corridors of the Enterprise. She had asked if he had needed assistance and had thrown him a casual invitation to be social together. He, of course, remembered the meeting. He remembered everything. A photographic memory had been another side affect of the Kelvan imprinting procedures, and contrary to popular opinion, having a perfect memory was not a pleasant thing because one rarely recalled just one particular detail. When trying to recall any specific item, a flood of information would accompany any one bit of data. It was not enough just to recall D'Sora; his brain gave him everything about that first moment as if he were still standing in that exact same moment of time. There was the smell of the perfume she had chosen that day, the quality of her voice, the people that were in the corridor at the same time, and the way she had looked at him. In addition to the background sounds, like doors opening or closing, the hum of life support, and the quality of the air, there was also the internal dialogue he had been thinking, his emotional state, the grumbling of his own stomach, which caused him to consider if he was presently hungry.

"Tammas," she said, getting up and coming around the desk to greet him. "How are you doing?"

"Honestly?" Tammas asked. He had remembered he hadn't liked her on that initial meeting, and as he studied her he realized his feelings for her hadn't changed. He didn't know why he didn't like her, and he didn't know if his memory from the first encounter was influencing that, but he pushed his subconscious objections away. He had to deal with her if he wanted to succeed in his mission.

"Always," Jenna said. Her expression suggested that she was surprised by his question.

"I was feeling a bit lonely," Tammas said, shuffling his feet. "I was wondering if I might buy you dinner, if that's the correct colloquialism for asking you out."

"Well, yeah," Jenna said, brightening even more, smile lines leaving her eyes. "Sure! I'm off duty in a couple hours."

"Oh," Tammas said, seeming sad. He let his gaze fall to the floor.

She chuckled. "It's not that bad. You're welcome to keep me company until then. I've finished my paper work. Just sort of waiting out the clock."

"May I?" he asked, stepping closer to her.

"Well, sure, Tammas," Jenna said.

"Call me Tam," he said, stepping even closer to her. He was close enough to feel her body heat radiating off of her. "May I ask you something personal?" he asked.

Jenna nodded, leaning back against her desk. He was so close to her now that she wanted to hold her breath, but settled for restricting her breathing, redirecting it for fear of bad breath. "I would like that," she admitted. She became aware of her hands trembling and gripped the edge of the desk.

With a finger on her chin, he turned her head gently back. His question came in the form of a kiss, his hands going to either side of her face. Her left knee came up a little, and her right leg moved to allow him to come closer to her. After kissing her, he pulled back just far enough so that she could breathe. They were sharing air and she no longer worried if her breath was bad. His wasn't. It smelled and tasted like Spearmint. Her eyes remained closed as she absorbed the moment.

“What was the question?” Jenna asked, breathlessly.

Tammas kissed her again.

“Oh,” Jenna said.

Tammas kissed her, pushing her back towards the desk.

“Yes,” Jenna said. “I can see that.”

Jenna sat on the desk, not resisting Tam’s advances, lying back on the table, her legs coming up to hug him. He ran his left hand up her side, across her chest, her neck, and paused on her shoulder. His right hand was behind her neck, his fingers combed through her hair. He held her head tightly against his.

“Computer,” Jenna said, breathlessly. She had to turn her head slightly to speak, and she moaned a little when he bit her ear. “Lock the door so no one can enter. D’Sora, kilo prime.”

“Acknowledged,” the computer responded, and on that Jenna began to return Tam’s eagerness seven fold. She became so hot so fast Tammas almost couldn’t resist following through with this tangent. It would only be a delay of a few moments at best considering how hot they were, and how fast things were developing. But every moment counted. Tammas pinched the nerve in Jenna’s shoulder and she fell unconscious, as limp as a rag doll. He had executed the Vulcan nerve pinch flawlessly.

“Sorry,” he said, regaining control over his breathing. He took in the quiet, intimate details of her face before easing her head to the desk and standing. He straightened his uniform. He looked at Jenna’s unconscious body sprawled out over her desk and shuddered. He still didn’t like her for some reason. Not that that would have stopped him from sharing time with her under different circumstances, he realized. He then went to the Armory door and studied the lock. Clipping an illegal assistant to the side of the door, he was able to unlock the mechanism quickly enough, but when it opened it set off alarms. He was inside the armory before the force field popped into place and he had the bracelet on before the sleeping gas was released. His finger slipped to the button and he counteracted the drug in the air, turned off the force field, and left the armory all with a single push of the button. He could have just beamed himself to Sickbay where McCoy’s body was being kept in stasis, but no, he had to do it the dramatic way. Security guards met him in the corridor, phasers armed. He reduced them to their essential elements and walked on by. After that the rest of security got out of his way. Force fields came up and went off as he passed through them as if pushing through wet tissue paper. The lift didn’t respond, so he drew a circle around his feet, describing the circumference of a hole he was about to make. A hole that took him directly to the next deck when he pushed the button on the bracelet. He bent his knees as he landed on the next level, stood, and repeated the process until he was on the floor he wanted, plus four manhole size sections of the four decks he had cut through, stacked like pancakes. He paused to look up several decks. A security officer two decks up peeked over the edge and down at him, phaser ready, and gave a report via his com. badge.

Garcia turned and entered Sickbay. McCoy was in the exact same place. No one had moved him. No doubt McCoy’s coffin was still being prepared.

“Stop,” Worf said, stepping out into the open.

Garcia laughed and pressed the button. Worf’s phaser became a sword. Garcia held a similar one. “I’ve been waiting a long time for this,” Garcia said, growling.

“So have I,” Worf said and charged.

Garcia blocked and twirled his sword as Worf passed, maintaining his orientation towards him. His confidence with the blade was evident in the way he forced Worf to retreat, up until his hallucination entered the room. She shook her head in dismay. She was dressed in her usual, shades of grey: a dark skirt, a lighter blouse with black trim, opaque but textured hose, and black boots. She called herself Duana.

“You have the power to destroy the turtle head, but instead you play games with him?” Duana asked.

It was enough of a distraction that Worf ran him through the chest with the sword, all the way to the hilt. Tammas gasped with pain. So did Duana, looking as if she were gripping an invisible sword that had impaled her chest. Blood filled Garcia’s mouth and spilled down his chin. He began to asperate, drowning in his own blood. Worf lifted on the sword, drawing Tammas up and closer to him. Worf roared triumphantly in Garcia’s face.

Garcia screamed, coming full awake. He jumped to his feet, just as he might have had his pain been a mere charley horse that had woken him as opposed to the nightmare. His hands went to his chest, sweat

pouring down his face. He sat back down on the bed. Jaxa Sito woke, assessed the situation, and began to comfort him.

“Shhh, it’s okay. It was just another dream, you’re okay,” Jaxa said, rubbing his back.

## CHAPTER ONE

The probability of there being two planet Earths, exact duplicates, is so close to being nil that no one, except perhaps for one particular Vulcan who was bored with his statistical analysis of the growth rate of competing bacteria in a lab class, had ever bothered to do the math. Until that is, a second Earth was discovered. Miri's planet, named by Captain Kirk for the young lady he had the fortune of meeting, was found to be indistinguishable from the planet Earth. The inhabitants of the planet had sufficiently similar genetic structure that they could not even be deemed a new species. After a huge debate and years of research, the conclusion was a bit ambiguous. Some suggested that the race known as the Preservers were responsible. Others suggested a race even more powerful than the Preservers were responsible. After all, this was an exact duplicate of the Earth, all the way down to the same continental drift, as if Earths were being knocked out via a factory style replicator.

Some suggested that the duplicate Earth was a spill over from a parallel universe or an alternate time line. A few even suggested it was just a coincidence, even at the risk of violating all the known rules governing modern theories on Divergent Evolution. And fewer still called for a return to a deity paradigm, for finding two Earths was a scary enough event that it could only mean one thing: there was a God. Whatever the explanation, it was most definitely a cause for wonder. Shades of Adam Douglas wonder.

Unfortunately for the coincidence people, there were other examples of "mere" coincidences. Forget for a moment the odds that it was Captain Kirk who found Miri's planet, as well as the planet now called Omega Four. (Technically, Kirk hadn't discovered it, but he was there.) Forget for a moment that both planets had sought the development of a biological means for prolonging human life. And forget for the moment that these cultures developed so similarly that they had somehow created an exact copy of the Preamble to the Constitution of the United States of America. (And you almost have to forget that one, unless you believed in that old joke of throwing a million monkeys and typewriters together and with sufficient time one of them would reproduce the works of Shakespeare. Shakespeare was one thing, but two groups of monkeys knocking out a Preamble to the Constitution? Even on Earth the Constitution of the United States had been a rare event simply due to the fact it was difficult to achieve consensus between any two groups of people, much less two people. That was one reason why the European Union had so much trouble drafting a Constitution.) At any rate, finding Omega Four, and the Coms and the Yanks, compounded an already heated debate. Did this suggest that perhaps we, as complex individuals, even as isolated as we are as entities, were more common than randomly generated snowflake? (And maybe even snowflakes patterns were repetitious, but no one knew because no one had ever analyzed a large enough sample. (The argument against that being you might as well keep looking for a repeating pattern in pi.))

One scientist finally stepped forward to suggest a reasonable theory. Doctor Richard Galen, who disliked being referred to as Doctor, even though he had at least five doctorates, and several Masters to boot, one day put to print what many scientist had been too afraid to say: "Knowing what we know about biology and planetary evolution, a process we have proved beyond a shadow of doubt through various fields of research and endeavors, even going as far as reproducing such findings in the laboratory, it is unreasonable to believe that evolution alone can sufficiently account for the high number of humanoid species encountered in such a relatively small part of our galaxy." He was simultaneously praised by some and denounced by others. As one of his examples, he offered the Iotians, a species that were so similar to humans in appearance that it is impossible to tell between them without a genetic sample.

After the submission of Galen's paper, another student, sitting in a biology lab on Vulcan and thinking things incompatible with his lab goals, decided to cross reference the Iotians. In the cursory viewing he found the names James T Kirk and Spock, which to him suggested perhaps coincidence was an unlikely choice of word. It was also a strange word that might mean more than even he might suspect, which prompted closer scrutiny. Apparently, a hundred years before Kirk, the Starship Horizon had visited the Iotian planet, leaving behind some cultural contamination. By the time Kirk had appeared on the scene, the Iotians had completed a total makeover on themselves. They had modeled their society to resemble the gangster lifestyle of twentieth century Earth. (Could that mean Omega Four's population had been visited by travelers who had left a draft of the Constitution?) Why any intelligent species would do such a thing as model themselves after gangsters was a curiosity. The Iotians were bright people, perhaps even a good deal smarter than the average human,

their distant cousins. Smart enough, in some ways, to resemble idiot savants. Sure, savants could spit out huge prime numbers on request, and compute incredible sums at the blink of an eye, but when faced with applying it in a practical way they more often than not fell flat on their faces.

After thinking about this for a while, and based on his observations, this particular student wrote a paper, attached it to a Star Fleet application, and submitted it.

The paper was subsequently lost. Coincidence? Perhaps not, but when it finally resurfaced, it prompted another research mission necessitating another visit to Iotia prime to observe what had transpired since Kirk. The USS Minnesota, a Constellation Class Starship, under the command of a Captain George Heller was dispatched. The ship arrived at Iotia Prime three and a half weeks after being sent and took up a parking orbit on the opposite side of the planet's only space station.

It was a primitive space station, and not an unreasonable thing to find in orbit, seeing it was just shy of a hundred years after Kirk's visit. After all, they knew the Iotians were bright. In a hundred years after the Horizon encounter they had reformed their society from an agrarian culture to one of a gangster culture, with all the trappings of early twentieth century American culture, so it seemed reasonable that since Kirk's visit they had figured out how to put people in orbit.

What Captain Heller and his crew didn't expect was that the Iotians had developed working transporters and that they had been waiting for Star Fleet's return. The first wave of intruders arrived on the deck of the Minnesota just prior to the Captain officially hailing the planet's leader. The Iotian's President appeared on the view screen just as the intruder alert klaxon began blaring.

Captain Heller grimaced, signaling for the communication officer to put the President on hold while turning to his security officer to receive an explanation. A second wave materialized out of thin air, in a manner not unfamiliar to anyone with transporter technology. Three of these people appeared on the bridge, in full space gear, carrying explosives.

"Wait," Heller said. "We come in..."

Captain Heller never finished his sentence because at that very moment most of his ship evaporated due to an uncontrolled mixing of matter and anti matter. This was the direct result of an intruder in engineering, also wearing a space suit, who decided a suicide was better than getting caught. He had figured that blowing him-self up would puncture the deck, venting the atmosphere and crew into space, and his comrades could study the ship afterwards. What he hadn't known was that the illuminated tube behind him was a warp core, or what that warp core contained. He was gone before the searing white light registered on his eyes. There were some splintery fragments of the starship remaining in orbit, which would continue to spread until a very thin ring of debris circled the planet. The particles and fragments were of such insignificance that even the Iotians wouldn't be able to backwards engineer any new technology from their recovery.



Four Star General, Louis Hammon came to a halt in front of the President's desk. He casually inhaled through a cigar and blew smoke towards the ceiling. "You wanted to see me, Mr. President?" he asked, not bothering to remove the cigar, speaking out the side of his mouth

"Put that out," the President commanded. "Haven't you heard, smoking kills?"

"I happen to know the Sergeant General," Hammon said. "It hasn't stopped him from smoking."

The President shook his head sadly. "Well, what do you have to say for yourself?"

"Ooops," Hammon offered, flashing a smile, consistent with his general air of sarcasm and lack of concern about most things in general.

"Ooops?!" The President shot back. "The first Federation ship to come within transporter range in a hundred years and all you can say is Ooops?!"

"We're viewing the tapes, Mr. President," Hammon assured him. "We're pretty sure it was an accident."

"Do you think we got enough information on those tapes to backward engineer warp technology?" the President asked.

"Probably not," Hammon admitted. "We only managed to get fourteen people aboard, and none of them came back with technology. At 1245, Houston time, we observed via satellites the approach of the

Starship. At 1248 we had trained all available ground based telescopes on the ship. The first wave beamed in at 1313 Houston time. At 1315, the whole thing disintegrated. We're about to launch two capsules to sift through the debris for anything salvageable, but given the extent of the damage, it's not very promising."

The President threw a pen down on the desk and cursed. "Without warp technology, we'll never break out of this Starfleet enforced quarantine. And by the time we figure out warp drive on our own, there won't be any planets left to colonize. Damn Kirk. Damn his New Deal. And damn Starfleet."

"With all due respect, Mr. President, you're speaking blasphemy and treason. I'm sure it's not all that bad," Hammon said.

"All that bad? The Federation has been abducting our people for experiments over the last hundred years, plundering the galaxy of all its resources, and it's not all that bad?" the President asked. "Can you tell me something that might make me feel better?"

"I doubt it will make you feel better, but I think you should know that I don't think the Federation has been abducting our people," the General said.

"What do you mean you don't think the Federation has been abducting our people?!" the President asked. "Of course they have been abducting our people. Kirk clearly said that the Federation wanted a percentage, and they obviously weren't talking money because no one's come asking for it."

"Haven't you wondered why there is never any evidence left at these UFO sightings and abductions?" the General asked.

"Because they use transporters!" the President said.

"Well, yes, Mr. President, I believe transporters are used in the abduction cases," the General said. "But we seem to be dealing with two different technologies, which possibly means two different aliens. The ship that we boarded in orbit resembled the Starship Enterprise that Kirk arrived on. They appear to have made some advances, if our telescopes are any judge, but they are still using technology that isn't so far advance that we can't comprehend it. Now, the UFO's on the other hand, we can't even get a good photograph of one. And if we accept the stories of these little gray aliens, then, I really think we're dealing with two different sets of entities."

"And what do you propose to do about this?" the President asked.

"Nothing," the General said.

"Nothing?" the President repeated, forcing himself to take in a deep breath. He stood up, leaned on his desk till his knuckles went white, and then in a surprise burst of emotions he tossed everything that was on his desk to the floor. The dial tone on his phone became the prominent sound following the crash, and he reached down and picked up the phone, jerked the line free from the wall, and tossed it at a book shelf. In his rage, he failed to notice a loop in the line that had snagged his hand, jerking the phone back at him so that it hit him in the gut and fell towards the floor, dangling just at his shins as he tried to extricate himself from the line. He kicked the phone away, nearly tripping on the notebooks that had only recently lay on his desk. He surrendered his anger and dropped to his chair, sulking.

"Mr. President, with all due respect, there is little that we can do. Whether it is Star Fleet or a new visiting alien, we simply do not have the technology to go up against them at this time. And quite frankly, if they really wanted to wipe us out as a species, well, there's nothing we could do to defend ourselves," the General said. "All we can do is to continue with our research. Perhaps we can figure out what went wrong with our boarding of the Star Fleet ship when we've analyzed all the data."

"I don't like this. I don't like not having control. What do I tell the people? Just lay back and enjoy the probe, because there's nothing you can do about it?"

"I say we stay with the general line," the General said. "There are no UFO's or alien abductions taking place. The media will continue their misinformation campaign about sleep paralysis theories and mass hysteria. Meanwhile, Star Fleet maintains minimal contact while we continue to advance our technologies."

"You know, we can't wait another hundred years for a Star Fleet contact. We're running out of resources," the President said. "We have enough oil reserves to last thirty years, and after that, this world will grind to a halt."

"I find that hard to believe," Hammon said. The president didn't try to alleviate his concern. "What about alternative energy? Wind? Solar? Hydroelectric?"



“Oh, we’ll be able to keep the elite of our nation comfortable for some time,” the President agreed. “But when you have at least one billion spoiled, middle class and want-to-be elites, and fourteen billion poor, you can expect the transition to complete poverty is not going to be a pleasant one. War, famine, pestilence, chaos... Imagine your worst nightmare and multiply it by a factor of ten, and you’re still off by a thousand.”

“The Federation will never let it come to that,” Hammon said.

“Please. Don’t tell me you are one of those Kirk groupies, are you? All Utpoia, all the time? Kirk will save us?” the President said, mockingly.

“No, Sir,” Hammon said. “I believe in hard work. We knew transporters existed, we put our brains and resources to the task, and we built transporters. Granted, they still need some fine tuning, but we wouldn’t have gotten a toe hold in space if it weren’t for them. We certainly wouldn’t have got our space station built without it. And, we have our brightest minds working on warp drive. I believe we’ll figure it out. I do admit that I believe the Federation is going to help us, or maybe has been secretly helping us all along. There must be a reason for the Long Silence.”

“I’ll explain the Long Silence. We’re on our own down here. It’s sink or swim, survival of the fittest,” The President said. “Don’t you read and understand The Book?”

“Yes, Sir. But if you will permit me some speculation,” Hammon said. “I bet it doesn’t take them another hundred years to discover what happened to their latest ship.”

“You better be right. For all our sakes, you better be right, and you better figure out what went wrong up there, because we can’t afford to be stuck on this little planet much longer,” the President said.

“Dismissed.”



Tammas was unable to return to sleep. He lay there, in the dark, listening to the silence. It wasn’t utter silence. “Space would be even more silent.” It was an obsessive compulsive thought that he immediately recognized and squashed with the words, “Cancel that.” He took an audible inventory of his surrounding. There was the hum of life support, the ticking of an antique clock, and the snoring of a companion sleeping beside him that were noticeable without effort. Less noticeable, to most people, was a high pitch hum which was possibly an energy conduit running the length of the far wall. He focused on the most obvious sound coming from the companion. The rhythm of her breathing was anything but a calming influence. Her name was Jaxa Sito and she was not a quiet sleeper. Both her inhalation and exhalations were accompanied by small, little squeaky noises. Anybody else might have considered the whimper like sounds cute, but to Tammas they were annoying, and almost as distracting as his own thoughts. In between each different set of noises was a rhythmic silence that kept him alert in anticipation of the next auditory event. Had she been drumming her fingers on a desk he would have asked her to stop, but how do you ask someone not to make noises in their sleep? For all he knew, he made noises in his sleep, but then, he didn’t keep himself awake with those noises so it was irrelevant. He tried listening to her from a medical perspective. What was it about her anatomy and physiology that produced these sounds? Were they idiosyncratic, or did all Bajorans make these noises in their sleep? He wondered.

He tried to focus on other things. He could feel her body’s heat radiating away from her. She was warm, which was a pleasant sensation considering that the air temperature of the room was a bit chilly for him. It was chilly enough that he had given in to his temptation to tighten down the edges of the blanket and hide his head. He didn’t like re-breathing his own air, so he kept his mouth and nose free and took the cool air into his lungs. He could feel Jaxa’s breathing against his neck but he couldn’t smell her breath. She was under the sheet. He could feel her arm draped over his chest. The linen had the fresh, clean smell that all Star Fleet linen had after being replicated. Various scents could be added on request to fill aromatherapy needs, and in this case there was just a hint of lavender. Jaxa suggested it might help him relax, provided everything else she did to help him relax was insufficient to bring on sleep.

Jaxa rolled over to her side of the bed, putting her back to Garcia. She took the covers with her, pulling them tightly around her. Tammas stared towards the ceiling. Not that he could see the ceiling. There was no window in this room, which belonged to Ensign Kellogg. She and Jaxa had doubled up, and Kellogg had offered the bed to Jaxa so that she could get some quality rest. Tammas was technically assigned to

Selar's quarters, but given their questionable status he hadn't returned. How could he, he asked himself, still be technically married to Selar, but biologically bound to Princess Simone?

It drove him crazy wondering which one of them would draw him into a Pon Farr ritual first, or if one bond superceded the other, or if their clocks had been reset when Selar had transferred his bond to Simone in order to save his life. It was all Vulcan craziness!

How did life get so complicated? How did he end up here? he asked himself and then had to define what "here" meant. Did it mean here with Jaxa? He had been walking aimlessly and had bumped into her. One thing led to the other and... Perhaps "here" meant on the Enterprise. He and Jaxa had been on a training exercise on the USS Chance, which had been destroyed. He and the surviving crew had been rescued by the Enterprise. Or maybe "here" was more abstract, such as in the sense of what he was feeling and thinking. He was lonely, even though he was with Jaxa. He was mourning several losses: his sister Jovet and his biological father McCoy. Was he really feeling loss because McCoy died, or because it was the idea of McCoy being dead? They had had a relationship, but it hadn't been a father son sort of relationship. What were they? What could they have been? The question was now irrelevant. No one lived forever. "So, why prolong it. Just step into an airlock and...CANCEL THAT!"

"You know, if you put a pillow over her head, we could get some sleep," came a voice from the dark. He hadn't heard the voice since Simone had used the Kelvan technology to teleport him to the Enterprise. He couldn't see her face in the dark to confirm it was who he thought it was, but he was confident it was Duana, one of his recurring hallucinations. He felt her snuggle closer to him, opposite side of Jaxa. He unconsciously moved away from her. That act caused Jaxa to fall out of bed.

Jaxa sat up groggily. "Computer, lights."

Her eyes adjusted. Tammias was at the end of the bed, urgently dressing. She didn't see the two other women in bed with Tam, since they were his hallucinations. Duana was the dark one, in dress and hair. Ilona, wore shades of white and had blond hair.

"What's wrong?" Jaxa asked.

"I got to go," Tammias said, ignoring his two hallucinations that were stretched out on the bed to either side of him.

"Why?" Jaxa asked, standing. She draped the sheet around her, more to keep warmth in than to avoid exposing herself. "Did they call you for something?"

As Jaxa sat next to him, the two hallucinations moved to accommodate her. Duana put her chin on Garcia's shoulder, flashing a smile at him. "And I thought she was annoying when she was sleeping," Duana said.

"I told you he was with her," Ilona said.

Ilona was Duana's alter ego. Or were they his alter egos? He didn't know what to think, but he was going to go be medically re-evaluated. He sat back down on the bed to put on his boots. Jaxa dropped a side of the sheet in order to put a hand on his back.

"You're acting strange. I'm worried," Jaxa said.

"Strange?" Tammias asked.

"Did I do something wrong? Are you angry with me?" Jaxa asked.

"This isn't about you," Tammias said, standing.

Jaxa grabbed his arm. "Tell me something."

Tammias paused. What should he tell her? That he's crazy? Tell her that he is hallucinating? If that rumor got about it would spell the end of his career in Star Fleet. He took her hand and placed it on his chest near his heart.

"Jaxa," Tammias said, hunting the right words. "I'm sorry I woke you..."

"Woke me? You pushed me off the bed!" Jaxa said.

"I did?" he asked, trying to recollect. He did. "Oh, I'm sorry. It must have been another nightmare. And, I really need to go to do something physical to walk it off so to speak. It's not you."

"I could help you with the physical part," Jaxa offered.

"Tramp," Ilona muttered.

He sighed. "Maybe later. I just need to walk. Alone," he emphasized looking at his two invisible side kicks. He turned back to Jaxa. "Okay?"

"You're going to turn that down?" Duana asked. "We could make it a foursome..."

"No," Tammias and Ilona said simultaneously. His eyes met Duana's eyes.

"Tammias?" Jaxa asked, her concern level rising again.

"Lingering dream thoughts," Tammias said. "I've got to go."

Tammias exited the bedroom, only to find the living area dark. When the bedroom door closed, he had to navigate the apartment by memory. Duana said something distracting and he stumbled, catching the coffee table with his boot, going instantly to the floor.

"Ouch, that's going to smart," Duana said.

"Computer, lights."

Ensign Kellogg rose from the couch, propped up on her elbows. "Jaxa? Is that you?"

Tammias stood. "Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you."

"Garcia?" she asked, falling back to the couch while simultaneously pulling her blanket up to her neck.

"Maybe she'd like to join us?" Duana asked.

"No!" Tammias said, and then to Kellogg, "I mean, yes, I'm Garcia."

"Like everyone wants to sleep with him," Ilona said, with evident sarcasm.

"What are you doing in my quarters?" Kellogg asked.

Jaxa entered. "Sorry, he was visiting me. I'm sorry we woke you."

Kellogg dropped back to the couch. "Try to be more quiet."

Tammias ignored his unwanted companions and offered an apologetic smile to Kellogg. "Sorry."

"It's alright," Kellogg said, and rolled over to face the back of the couch.

"Have lunch with me later?" Jaxa asked.

"Okay," Tammias agreed, accelerating his departure.

Once in the corridor Tammias breathed a sigh of relief. The brightness was full, solar-day spectrum and brought a bit of comfort. Day shift people were about, doing day shift tasks. D'Soto was passing, nodded pleasantly, until she noted the room he was exiting. Was it envy that crossed her face, Tammias wondered, or was he projecting?

"Isn't she the girl from your dream?" Duana asked.

"Better keep it a dream, Tam. She's high maintenance," Ilona added.

Tammias orientated himself and headed for the nearest turbo-lift.

"Where are you going?" Duana asked.

"The holodeck, if I know Tam," Ilona said.

Tammias started walking faster. The hallucinations increased their pace as well. He accelerated even though he knew it was useless. You can't out run yourself. What was the old joke, he asked? Where ever you go, there you are.

"No, really, where are you going?" Duana asked.

The turbo lift arrived simultaneously with his arrival, opening to allow an occupant egress. She nearly spilled her coffee on him. He stepped back to allow that person passage, apologizing. "It's okay," she said, pausing. "I'm Nancy Kyle, primary teacher. We haven't met, but I've heard a lot about you. Would you mind being a guest lecturer in one of my classes?"

"Everywhere we go," Ilona shook her head in disgust.

"Sure. Can I coordinate with you later?" Tammias asked.

"Oh, yeah, I'm sorry," she said, a little embarrassed to have stopped him and held up the lift.

"It's okay," he said, offering a smile, and touching her shoulder lightly.

Two people had remained in lift. Lt. Commander Riker and Lt. Worf waited patiently, sort of. Worf scowled while Riker attempted a smile. Tammias wondered which one was the most sincere gesture. He held his breath, considering if it might not be better to wait for the next lift. For a moment he even thought of following Ms. Kyle, and not just because she was less intimidating than the two of these almost legendary figures before him. They were both powerful individuals, and his rivals for the love of Troi. All three of them were in love with her. Duana pushed him into the lift and the doors closed. There were now three people in

the lift, plus two hallucinations. For Tammias, there was hardly room to breathe. Worf and Riker seemed less patient.

“Aren’t you going to introduce me?” Duana asked.

“Where to?” Riker asked.

“How about your place,” Duana asked, pressing herself against Riker. “You’re so tall. Did you know he was so tall, Tammias?”

Tam’s eyes nearly tracked to Duana, but instead, he rolled his eyes, almost simultaneously with Ilona offering the same gesture, only her disgust was more real.

“Um, sickbay,” Tammias said.

“You’re not going to tell them about us, are you?” Ilona asked.

“Are you alright?” Riker asked.

“Yes,” Tammias answered Riker.

“You can’t do that,” Ilona argued, as if the “yes” was for her. “They’ll lock you up in a straight jacket.”

Tammias wondered if it was significant that his hallucination was attracted to Riker. He dismissed the tangent his mind began to run on and unconsciously began to whistle. It was a nervous, nonchalant little whistle as if trying to impress innocence even though he felt as if he were caught red handed, a fist in a cookie jar. The lift came to a stop and the doors opened. Tammias backed out of the lift, looking at Duana and trying to will her out of the lift. He had no control over the hallucination. He became more aware of Riker and Worf staring at him. He offered the Vulcan hand gesture with a wave. The doors closed, with Duana still in it. Riker shivered.

“Is it my imagination, or is he acting weirder than usual?” Riker asked Worf.

“It is hard to tell with him,” Worf muttered.

Tammias stood at the turbo lift doors staring at them. Should he call the lift back and tell her to get out? No, that wouldn’t be suspicious behavior. Not at all, he thought sarcastically. He turned and headed for sickbay.

“This is really not a good idea,” Ilona persisted. “Tammias, talk to me.”

Doctor Crusher looked up as he entered and smiled, letting him know she’d just be a moment. She wrapped up with her patient and then greeted him. He had already made himself comfortable on the bio-bed and was observing some of the read outs on the display behind him when she approached.

“Are you feeling alright?” Crusher asked.

“I would like a complete physical examination,” Tammias said.

Doctor Crusher smiled. “We just did a full evaluation on you after we got you back. You’re in perfect health.”

“I want you to do it again,” Tammias said, reclining back. He looked up into her face, wondering what her hesitation was all about.

Doctor Crusher complied, shaking her head a little. She produced a medical tricorder and began running general sweeps. Ilona scrutinized Crusher’s procedures. Her eyes wandered from the tricorder to Crusher to Tammias back to Crusher. Ilona’s eyes lit up with sudden anger.

“You’re in love with the Doctor, aren’t you?” Ilona accused.

“No!” Tammias snapped.

“No what?” Crusher asked.

“You can’t lie to me. I’m in your head. Tam, she’s old enough to be your mother!” Ilona commented. “You’re friends with her son, Wes.”

“Um, no...” Tammias tried to focus on Crusher. “Scan my head.”

“You’re perfectly healthy,” Ilona said. “She won’t find what you’re looking for.”

“It would help me if you tell me what we’re looking for,” Crusher said.

“I’m experiencing a headache,” Tammias said, his eyes locking with Ilona’s eyes. “A really annoying headache.”

“A headache?” Crusher repeated, extremely surprised. She could count on her hand how many headaches she had treated in her entire career, minus the ones that were symptoms of a concussion. Medical

science had cured migraines and sinus headaches. “It might be stress related. Can you tell me specifically where you’re head is hurting?”

The door to Sickbay opened and Duana entered. “Oh god, that man is so fabulously delicious,” she said, pretend swooning to the bio-bed next to Tammias. Tammias tracked her with his eyes. Selar was approaching from that side so that it appeared to Crusher that Tammias was just looking to her.

“It’s possible that the level of telepathic activity you have experienced lately is giving you the headache,” Selar offered. “Ever since Simone transferred my telepathic link with you to herself, you have had several mild and uncontrolled bursts of telekinetic episodes, which, in the untrained, can result in fatigue, irritability, and miscellaneous aches and pains.”

Duana propped herself up on her arm, looking at Tammias. “Don’t you just love Riker?”

“No!” Tammias snapped.

Selar raised an eyebrow.

“I mean, no,” Tammias said, an auditory level more appropriate to Selar’s suggestion. “I think it’s something else.”

“Even so,” Doctor Selar said. “You might counsel with Simone and allow her to perform a mind meld. Her mental discipline is second to none, and now that she is technically your bond mate, and you seem to be having trouble finding your new equilibrium, a mind meld with her might facilitate a quicker return to normalcy.”

“Thank you, but I have enough people in my head for the time being,” Tammias said. “What I need is some solitude.”

“You’re recalcitrant behavior suggests that you are not experiencing as much distress as you would have us believe,” Doctor Selar said, crossing her arms as she might with an argumentative child.

“How dare you,” Garcia snapped at her. He turned to Crusher. “Doctor Crusher, will you give me something to help me sleep? Something that will block the REM state?”

“No,” Doctor Crusher said, pocketing her tricorder. “I find nothing wrong with you. Nothing that warrants drug therapy, anyway.”

“Told you,” Ilona said.

Tammias sighed.

“Look,” Crusher said. “You’ve been under a great deal of stress. Why don’t you go speak with Counselor Troi, or meditate, or go exercise? Or a combination of the three. But most of all, give your self some time to mourn and cope.”

Tammias frowned, but pushed himself off the examination table. “Fine, I’ll go exercise,” he said, ignoring Doctor Selar as she gave him that look that only she could give him. If he hadn’t known any better, he would have sworn she was pouting. For just a brief moment he wanted Doctor Selar back in his life, but the impulse fled as soon as he was out of sickbay and out of her presence.



The song stuck in Garcia’s head as he left Sickbay was “Old Man River,” a version sung by Ray Charles. As he approached the doors to holodeck three, the song in his head had shaped the idea for a music session. Unfortunately, the holodeck was occupied. It was currently running a program known as 47-C. “What is forty seven C?” he asked.

“Cliffs of Heaven,” the computer responded.

Garcia was curious. “Is this a closed session? May I enter?”

“You may enter when ready,” the computer answered.

The doors to the holodeck slid open, with a sound that suggested they were much heavier doors than the standard ship’s door. He had wanted to inspect the doors, but he was instantly distracted by the beauty of the program. The combinations of colors and lights from sky, earth, and water were so captivating he forgot that he was on a Starship traveling faster than light. He walked down the beach, staring up at the tremendous drop. Natural erosion had sculpted such features into the cliff as to have made it seem that it was done by an artist, but then, the human mind always wanted to make something more out of random patterns than was warranted, Garcia told himself. A girl was coming out of the ocean, shaking water from her hair. The sea was

emerald blue with streaks of green. The girl smiled and waved. Sand clung to her wet feet. Who ever programmed 47-C hadn't missed a beat.

"Hello," she said. "You interested in doing some diving?"

Garcia looked at the cliff, looked to the girl, and then back to the cliff. "You jumped off that?" he asked.

"I did," she confirmed. She offered her hand. "My name is Kristin."

Garcia shook hands with her, meeting her gaze. "Tammas, but you can call me Tam."

"So, are you in for a jump? You can change behind that rock if you like. I'll wait," Kristin said.

"Alright. Computer, Arch. I need a contemporary swimming suit," Garcia ordered. The trunks appeared and he excused himself to go change. He chose to change behind the rock, not out of modesty, but because he wasn't sure what Kristin's customs were in the regard.

"Strange, I had heard rumors that you weren't so modest," Kristen said.

"You heard that?" Garcia asked.

"Is it not true that you went naked to classes at the academy?" Kristin asked.

"Oh, bloody hell. Did Wes tell you that?" Garcia asked, pretend fuming.

"Not directly, no. I heard it from a friend of a friend," Kristin said.

"And what else have you heard?" Garcia asked.

"You mean beside the hero talk going on?" Kristin asked.

"Please, I'm not a hero," Garcia said. "I was just doing my job."

"In my book, that's one definition of a hero," Kristin said.

Garcia returned from behind the rock and modeled his new trunks, purposely changing the subject.

"Nice," Kristin said. "Are you sure you're up to this? It's one thing to say you can do it from sea level, but another thing to actually do it from up there."

"Um, I've actually dived from higher," Garcia said, starting up the path. She looked skeptical, but walked side by side with him. He noticed she was squinting when she looked at him due to the position of the sun, so he moved to her other side. She stepped up onto a rock and stretched, enjoying the breeze at this altitude. The sun was behind her head, producing a halo effect. She was quite beautiful, on top of the world, perfect posture.

Kristin smiled at him, fluttering her eyes. She was a goddess ready to fly. "Are you going to stretch? Or are you just going to watch me?"

"Are those my choices?" Garcia asked.

Kristin laughed. She jumped off the rock and patted him on the stomach. "You, my friend, have a reputation for being a lady's man."

"I wouldn't have such a reputation if I weren't so particularly good at it," Garcia said.

Kristin laughed again. It was melodious laugh, rich with tones colored by both mirth and joy. She hugged him, looked up into his eyes, noticing how warm his hands were against her hips. In truth his whole body was warm, as if he had a fever. "What would you say if I were to tell you to go jump off a cliff?"

"Well, I'd say I have one handy, right behind me," Garcia offered.

"You're quick," Kristin said.

"How do you know?" he asked, pretending to be shocked.

Kristin barked a laugh, understanding the double meaning. "I meant quick witted," she corrected him. More serious, she asked, "Why are you here?"

"The doctor told me to get some exercise," Garcia said.

"No. Why are you here?" Kristin asked.

"I don't understand the question," Garcia said. "With you on the holodeck? Here on the Enterprise?"

Kristin took his hand and led him to the cliff's edge. "Look at the immensity of it all," Kristin said, the breeze whipping her hair back.

"It's an illusion," Garcia said.

"Pretty convincing illusion," Kristin said. "Are you afraid?"

"Yes," Garcia admitted.

"Of illusions, me, or the fall?" Kristin asked.

“Of the illusion of falling for you,” Garcia offered.

“Quick,” Kristin said, chalking a point in the air. “I think I got you figured out. You’re going to jump because you’re afraid?”

“Yes,” Garcia said.

Kristin kissed him. “See you at the bottom,” she said and then she tossed herself off the cliff. In Garcia’s mind Kristin paused in midair, head up, arms swept back like wings, and then she folded, orientating herself in a head down position to complete the dive. In real life, she was falling the moment she left the cliff but her dive was executed perfectly. She disappeared into the ocean and surfaced a few meters away. She waved up at him, screaming with joy.

Garcia followed her, observing the cliff face rushing by before plunging into the ocean. The change in sounds from falling through the air to water and bubbles against the ear was always a startling effect. He was pleased with the warmth of the water, for it reminded him of home. He opened his eyes and took in the seascape, corral reefs, clown fish, and sea horses. He wanted dolphins. What he got instead was Kristin. He swam to her and touched her as he surfaced in front of her.

“Not bad, for a rookie,” Kristin said. “Again?”

“Sure,” Garcia said. They swam to the beach. Garcia was intrigued by her mannerisms as she made small talk. Her eyes lit with joy as she described her work on the Enterprise and again at the mention of particular shipmates. She laughed at everything, but drew very serious as she mentioned a friend who had died during the conflict with the Borg.

“Were you here when the Borg...” Garcia asked, and regretted it instantly.

“No,” Kristin said, but the look on her face was enough to know that she remembered exactly where she was that day, and it was a day she would never forget. It was an expression Garcia had seen all too often when ever the topic of the Borg arose.

“I’m sorry,” Kristin said, bringing herself back to the here and now. She forced herself to laugh. “Right now, I’m okay, and I’m happy. Are you happy?”

“At this moment?” Garcia considered. “I am. It must be the company.”

“Umm, flattery will get you everywhere. Triple flip,” she announced, kissed him on the cheek, and jumped off the cliff again. She didn’t quite finish the third flip before she hit. It wasn’t a good hit, either.

With the safety override on, the computer would have instantly aborted the program the moment Kristin had injured herself. Unfortunately, Garcia had instinctively known she needed help and had immediately jumped in after her. Due to their close proximity, the computer chose not to abort the program while he was in mid fall, for obvious reasons, and the moment he was in the water, he had maneuvered to Kristin’s aide. The moment he touched her, the computer override recognized that the emergency was being handled and aborted the shut down procedures. Garcia surfaced, dragging Kristin up and towards the shore. “Computer, end program. Medical emergency, two to beam directly to Sickbay,” he yelled.

The program disappeared around them, leaving the two of them on the floor. Since the water had been holographic matter, the instant the program went off, the water in Kristin’s lungs disappeared, but the damage had already been done. He leaned in to give her the first series of rescue breaths, oddly noting the discontinuity of the room. The black room with yellow grid lines was broken by his uniform that was folded up in a corner, but he barely had time to process it. An instant later, they were in the Enterprise’s medical facility. Garcia was already in the process of CPR when a nurse came up behind him just a moment shy of Doctor Crusher hustling in from the direction of her office.

“She landed wrong,” Garcia said, between counts of chest compressions.

“Keep breathing for her,” Crusher said, opening her tricorder. “Nurse, hypo spray of cordrazine, ten CCs, also get a cortical analeptic and a cortical stimulator ready.”

Crusher got down on her knees, putting the tricorder on the floor beside her. “I’ll take over chest compressions. Nurse?! Where’s that stimulant?”

The nurse was suddenly there, injecting it into her arm. Crusher waved Garcia to wait. “Okay, she’s back,” Crusher said, pocketing her tricorder in her smock’s pocket. “Help me get her to a bed.”

Garcia picked Kristin up. Crusher moved with him, supporting Kristin's head. They set her down gently and Crusher began another series of scan. "She pulled a ligament in her neck. Shoulder's out of alignment."

"Shall I help you set it while she's still unconscious?" Garcia asked.

Crusher nodded and the two of them worked together to pop the shoulder back into place. Kristin sat up, suddenly full awake, and in agonizing pain. She was disoriented and didn't know whether to gasp for air or scream. Garcia eased her back to the bed, "Easy, you're alright. Take in deep breaths. Easy."

Crusher brushed her patient's forehead. "That's good. Just keep breathing deep. Relax. I'm going to give you something to reduce the pain." Crusher retrieved a specific hypo spray from the tray the nurse was rolling up and when she turned back, she noticed that Kristin was no longer showing signs of distress from pain, and noticed Garcia applying pressure to several pressure points.

"Wow, what did you do to me?" Kristin asked.

"And can you teach me that?" Crusher asked.

"Yes, but it's a temporary fix. If that's Terakine for the pain, I would recommend one quarter the dose, or you can wait until she begins to experience discomfort again," Garcia said.

"I'd rather not feel that again, thank you," Kristin said to Doctor Crusher. "Tam, what happened?"

Garcia chuckled. It sounded forced. "You tucked when you should have rolled," he said.

Doctor Crusher administered 5cc's of Terakine and Kristin visibly relaxed, literally melting into the bed, falling more towards Garcia side than Crusher's. She suddenly seemed to have puppy dog eyes and warm, friendly smile that suggested intoxication. Her eyes locked on Garcia's eyes and her mouth made an O, like she had considered blowing a kiss but stopped to breathe. "That's good stuff, Doctor," she said, touching Garcia's arm. Her eyes started to drift.

"I need to know, for statistical purpose, what program you were using," Doctor Crusher said. "And was the safety features on?"

"47-C," Garcia and Kristin said simultaneously. Kristin laughed and squeezed Garcia's hand.

"Safety feature were on," Garcia said. "I don't know why it didn't abort the program. I can look into it, if you like."

"Let's do it again?" Kristin asked, yawning.

"Anytime," Garcia said. And held her hand till she went to sleep. Doctor Crusher motioned him aside. "Yes?"

"I thought you told me you were going to exercise," Crusher said.

"Cliff diving doesn't count?" Garcia asked.

"It wasn't what I had in mind, no. Cliff diving is an adrenaline rush which will give you an immediate high, and given the depth of your recent low, I think a steady paced exercised that would have slowly brought you back to a more temperate mood more fitting. Your goal is to be stable, not bipolar," Crusher said.

"You're more likely to rebound now than..."

"I get your point," Garcia snapped.

Crusher sighed. "I'm sorry. I could have been more specific with what I expected from you. And, I guess it's a good thing you were with Kristin. You saved her life."

"We'll keep that between you and me, eh?" Garcia said.

"No, I have to include it in my report," Crusher said. "Let me know if you find out what caused the Holdeck safety protocols to malfunction."

Garcia nodded. He took a moment to observe that Kristin was indeed sleeping peacefully before departing Sickbay.



## CHAPTER TWO

The only thought on Garcia's mind was determining what had gone wrong with the Holodeck safety protocols. He was halfway down the corridor when his curiosity to the unusual amount of stares he was receiving brought awareness to the fact that he was naked. He had not specified a real suit versus a holographic suit! He quickened his pace toward the holodeck, and his awaiting clothes, meeting the smiling faces that greeted him on his way with an equally warm smile. Breathe, he told himself. No one cares.

His clothes were still waiting for him when he arrived on the holodeck. He had been happy with Kristin present, but now he was sinking back into a mood. The mood grew fowler when he suddenly realized why the holodeck safety features hadn't kicked in. Had they kicked in the moment Kristin was hurt, he would have been hurt when he crashed into the deck, as opposed to an ocean. Crusher was wrong about his quick thinking saving her life. His quick thinking had imperiled it! Had he waited, the program would have aborted, and Kristin wouldn't have drowned.

He punched the wall, regretted doing that, and slid to the floor, nursing his wound. Nothing was broken, at least. Sighing, his thoughts returned to his original idea on coming to the holodeck. Exercise. He really needed to work off some steam. But he wasn't in the mood for exercise. What he wanted was music. Music was the therapy he most often chose to change his moods. He ordered up a River boat, the Mark Twain, and headed down the Mississippi. It wasn't the first time he had taken this trip. Ray Charles was playing the piano at the lounge. Without fanfare, the waitress brought Garcia a non alcoholic drink. The waitress was one of Tam's regular holodeck girls, the one he had assigned to play Terra Tarkington, a character from an old Sci-Fi novel he had found. She seemed to recognize his mood and left him to work it out with Ray, who was just finishing a song. As coincidences occur, it just so happened that the song was the very song that Tammas had been hearing in his head about an hour ago. It wasn't really a coincidence, Garcia knew. The program selected at random from a list Garcia had provided it.

Ray took a sip from a drink and smiled. "You've been away for awhile," he said to Tam. That comment was based on the disparity between present time and the last time the program had been activated.

"Yeah," Garcia agreed.

"Feeling kind of down, are you?" Ray asked.

"Aren't I always feeling down when I come to see you?" Garcia asked.

"All you have to do is change the song in your head," Ray said, tickling the simulated ivory keys. "Change your theme song, change your life."

"I was hoping you might help me with that," Garcia said, accepting the guitar that Terra brought him. She always seemed to know what he needed. So did Ray. Of course, he made them this way. "How about Save the Bones for Henry Jones?" Ray asked.

Several numbers later, Garcia was feeling much better. He thanked Ray for the tunes. Ray just shook his head and smiled. "You just come back and see me any time you feel the need to change that sad song in your head."

"I will. Thanks, Ray," Garcia said.

As he stood, Terra came to take the guitar from him. "You got time for me?" she asked.

"Always," Garcia said. "I need a good workout."

"Running, jumping, climbing exercise or, something a little more intimate exercise," Terra asked, stepping in closer, teasing him just a little.

"Why not both," he asked her. "If you reward me for hard work, I might actually do more hard work."

Terra laughed. "And here I was thinking I had the hard part, always waiting to be rescued. So, what shall it be this time? Held for ransom by a squadron of Klingon soldiers?"

"Oh, nothing that strenuous, this time around. Just sufficient effort to get my heart rate up," Garcia said. "I know. Computer, access my saved file on the Great Train Robbery. Safety protocols off."

"Ah," Terra agreed. "We never did finish that one. I'll be waiting."

Terra and the Riverboat faded and Garcia suddenly found himself on a train. If he remembered his goal correctly, he had to get to the front of the train, crossing over the top. Climbing, running across a moving train, and jumping cars were just varieties of exercise, but made it much more fun. The rocking train helped develop balance. The wind in his face and sensation of motion got the blood flowing. There was nothing like

the sense of speed and the threat of falling to one's death to move the heart. Better than lifting weights or running on a boring, old treadmill. Just getting out and doing things was better exercise than working out in a gym. Natural setting to please the eyes. Fresh air to fill the lungs. Full spectrum lights to stimulate the skin and help the body create vitamin D. Since he couldn't get "out" and go rock climbing or swimming, the holodeck's would have to do. And, in reality, the human brain couldn't distinguish between the illusion the holodeck offered and the illusion reality offered.

Before he could cross the top of the train, he had to sneak up on, and incapacitate a bad guy. Even with the difficulty level at its highest, Garcia quickly dispatched his opponent. He slid the door open and looked out. The ground directly beneath was a blur with speed. Getting to the top of the train was easy enough. A little jump, grab on, swing leg up and over, and then he was up. Walking down the train was a little more difficult than he had anticipated due to the wind. The train rocked back and forth as it moved down the track, traveling about 90 kilometers an hour... Or, 60 miles an hour, according to the train's gauges. It felt much faster, especially when the train rounded a corner. He had to drop and lay flat as the train went under a tunnel. He stood up as he came out into day light. The train rocked hard and he tumbled. It was a good tumble, except for the fact he rolled himself right off the top of the train. He just barely grabbed hold of the side, and pulled the finger nail off his index finger on his left hand, which smarted so much he almost let go of the train. He was about to pull himself back up for a beautiful recovery, but something impeded his progress. That something was a tree. Apparently, the one, solitary tree on the whole damn prairie had to grow right up next to the track. A tree that harbored some sort of grudge, and had waited there in that one spot, growing, waiting for the day it could exact its revenge on some unsuspecting human.

The tree had grown near enough the track that it would have been able to reach out and grab Garcia had it wanted to, but instead, it simply opted for brushing him off the side of the train, like a multi-bladed windshield wiper throwing off an unwanted bug. The branch that cleaned him from the train broke some ribs and his right arm. A lower branch broke his knee cap, spinning him so that when he hit the ground he hit it head first. The fall to the ground broke the other arm. He blacked out for an unknown length of time. When he came to, he found it peacefully quiet. No sounds of a rumbling train, part of him shaded by the tree. He could see black blobs circling over head, and wondered if he were seeing spots. His vision cleared long enough to make out the vultures, and he thought to himself, "Nice touch." He blacked out again. When he came to the next time, he stayed conscious long enough to discover how much pain broken arms and ribs could cause. Blacking out was bliss.



Lt. Barclay paused outside the holodeck. He looked around as if to see if anyone was watching, went through his work schedule in his mind, and decided he had time and the inclination for a bit of "comfort" play. He stepped up to the control interface and was about to instruct the computer as to what sort of distraction he wanted. He felt a tinge of disappointment as he noticed the holodeck was already in play, decided his "quicky" would have to wait, and started to leave. He paused, returned to the holodeck to inquire who was using it. Learning that it was Garcia, and "the Great Train Robbery," he asked if he could join in. The computer had no objections, and the game was not marked for privacy. Still, as a courtesy, Barclay used the paging system. When it failed to elicit a response from Garcia, Barclay turned to leave. He, probably better than anyone, understood how embarrassing it could be when someone walked in on your fantasy uninvited. Then again, he wondered as he paused, his curiosity getting the better of him, how often does one get to join in on a Garcia adventure with Garcia himself! Though he knew too well the dangers of intruding, he simply couldn't resist. There were legends about Garcia's holodeck creations, for they were all tied into his novels and other lines of fiction, available to anyone who wanted to take the time to download them off the InterStellar Net, as opposed to creating their own stories.

Without further ado, Barclay entered the holodeck and stepped out onto a gravel road. He walked down the road until he came upon a railroad track intersection. He looked both ways, wondering where the train was. Had Garcia already stolen the train? And where would one take a train after stealing it? He wondered. He shrugged and turned to leave. Out of the corner of his eye he saw someone lying in the shade of a tree.

"Garcia?" he called out.

No response. Well, that wasn't unusual. Even he had been caught napping in a holodeck. Of course, he had been caught in a more compromising position, his head resting on the lap of a facsimile of Doctor Crusher. He moved closer to Garcia, growing more concerned the closer he got. He quickened his pace with each step so that when he finally realized something was truly wrong he was running. The obvious clue was one of the arms twisted into a non-human position. He stopped and knelt down beside Garcia, one hand reaching for Garcia's neck to measure a pulse, his other hand activating his comm. badge.

"Medical emergency, holodeck four," he announced.

Garcia woke to a bustle of activity all about him. He tried to sit up, but Doctor Crusher shoved him back down to the bed. It was probably not a shove that knocked him back to the bed, but it felt like it. Then again, judging by the look on Doctor Crusher's face, it might well have been a shove. She didn't even bother to tell him to lie still. He didn't have the strength to resist or even try to get up again. He orientated himself, trying to get a clearer idea of his situation, turning his head to get a view of the scanner Crusher was holding.

"Lie still," she ordered. The tone in her voice seemed to confirm his suspicions that she was not happy. She continued to scan. She nodded to the nurse who began gathering up her instruments. She first removed the cortical stimulator and a cortical analeptic drip dispenser that was a package deal, set to cure a combination of issues for head injuries, such as edema reduction, neural monitoring, and arterial tissue repair. Once those two items were removed, the buzzing in his head subsided.

"Alright, sit up, slowly," Crusher said. "Look at my finger, follow without moving your head."

Garcia complied with her instructions, glancing at her eyes for signs that she was satisfied that he was healed. Other than the ringing in his ears, he felt normal. She finished examining him. He smiled at her. She scowled back.

"What the hell do you think you were you doing?" Crusher demanded, not returning his smile. "Are you trying to kill yourself?"

That wasn't the response he had expected. The door to sickbay opened and Captain Picard strolled in. On either side of him were Garcia's hallucinations. He felt suddenly very tired and looked away.

"Doctor?" Picard asked.

"He's fine, Captain," Crusher said.

Duana was tapping her foot, arms akimbo, and saying, "tsk, tsk, tsk."

"Garcia, until further notice, the holodeck is off limits to you," Picard said.

"But..." Garcia began

"Excuse me?" Picard interrupted the debate before it got started.

"Don't you realize if you kill yourself you'll also be committing two counts of murder?" Ilona demanded. "We're real people."

"Sorry. I understand, Captain," Garcia said.

"You still haven't answered my question. What were you doing?" Crusher asked.

"Exercising," Garcia said.

"You know, sex is a better exercise than jumping trains and climbing mountains," Duana offered.

"And safer."

"You obviously haven't seen some of his partners," Ilona said to Duana.

"If Barclay hadn't found you, you'd be dead," Crusher said. "Now, you obviously have some issues. I want you to tell me what's going on."

"I'm just trying to work off some steam," Garcia said, only partly telling the truth.

"I could help you with that," Duana offered.

Ilona slapped the back of her head.

"Ow!" Duana complained.

"When you come in here wanting me to find something wrong with you, and then I don't, you go and create something! That suggests to me that there is something wrong," Crusher said.

"Did you find anything?" Garcia asked.

"No," Crusher said. "There's nothing wrong with you... Physically."

"Told you," Ilona said.

"Garcia," Picard said. "I'd like you to go speak with Counselor Troi."

"Alright," Garcia said.

"Now," Picard said.

Garcia frowned. "Computer, is Counselor Troi available?"

"Negative. She's currently with a patient. Next available is 1400 hours."

"Please schedule me in," Garcia said. He looked to the Captain. "Okay?"

"Sufficient for now," Picard said. "Carry on, Doctor."

Picard departed sickbay as quickly as he had strolled in, but the force of his presence still lingered. There was no doubt that Picard was in charge on this ship. And Garcia admired him so much that he felt embarrassment for having gotten on his bad side. Crusher crossed her arms and stared at Garcia.

"May I go?" he asked.

Crusher stepped aside and motioned towards the door. She returned to her office, still a bit agitated. He gave her a half hearted smile as he departed. His hallucinations followed him.

Outside of sickbay, and only after making sure there was no one present to witness, he turned to them. "Please leave," he said.

"But we have no where else to go," Duana said.

"Where do you go when I don't see you?" Garcia asked.

They both shrugged.

"Fine, you stand right there while I walk that way? Okay?" Garcia asked.

They actually complied with his request. They were still standing there when the door to the lift closed. He almost felt badly for being so harsh to them, but then he canceled that line of thought. On a lark, Garcia went to Data's quarters, hoping to find him present. Data was home and invited Garcia in. He found himself assaulted by six songs playing simultaneously at a volume that caused him to squint in pain. Data quickly eliminated all the music.

"I'm sorry if the selections were not to your liking," Data said.

"No worries, Data," Garcia said, inspecting the room. There was a painting in process of a tunnel with a light at the end, a tunnel made of rolling clouds and lightening. The passage to the after life? He wondered. Does Data even wonder about such things? There was a glass sculpture on the table, which Garcia intuitively hated, and with no logical reason to do so, he moved on. A general science tricorder lay on the corner of the desk.

"May I get you a drink? Or perhaps some food. Or maybe I should inquire directly into the nature of your visit?" Data finally prompted, getting up. "Would you like to sit down?"

Garcia nodded at the last and sat down. Data returned to his seat. The moment Garcia was comfortable, a cat jumped into his lap.

"Now, Spot, you were not invited..." Data began, standing to chase Spot away.

"Its okay, Data," Garcia said, automatically petting the cat. "I love animals. Animals and children tend to gravitate towards me. And I seem to do so much better with them than I do with adults."

"I have noted that those who Spot instantaneously like tend to be good people," Data said, taking his seat again. He seemed relieved that Garcia was a cat person.

"Well, good is a qualitative term that I wouldn't use to describe myself," Garcia said. "I'm just a man."

"I would have to argue against that statement," Data began, prepared to list his observations.

"Data, even bad guys have loyal pets, and that only demonstrates how unbiased animals can be. But that's not why I dropped by. I have a line of inquiry for you," Garcia said. "If you have time to indulge me, that is."

"Certainly. I will endeavor to answer your questions," Data said.

"Are there any computer programs that can be down loaded from a computer into an organic brain and still function?" Garcia asked.

"The organic brain or the computer program?" Data asked.

"Both," Garcia clarified. He showed no amusement on his face for he knew Data was attempting to be precise, not funny.

“Interesting concept. I am not aware of any programs of that nature. Can you elaborate on what you are looking for?” Data said.

“Well, I want you to speculate,” Garcia said. “For example, if a person who has a neural implant were to connect to a computer network, could that brain absorb a program and run it, process it, or use it outside of a computer framework?”

“I do not know,” Data said. “It seems reasonable that such a program could be devised. I have seen, and personally witnessed, an organic personality transferred to a computer system,” Data paused at this, as if remembering something personal. “So, it seems reasonable to conclude that the reverse is also possible. There are a number of examples of computer systems that use organic memory modules to store data. Since it does not violate any known rule of software programming, I suspect it would be possible to create software that could take advantage of an organic brain. It would, of course, require very specific codes, meaning it would probably be species specific, and maybe even host specific, given the variation in neural pathways. The software would also need to run in the back ground, such as in the subconscious mind, otherwise it might interfere with normal brain functioning.”

“But we humans use less than twenty percent of our brains, so theoretically, there’s brain power left over to operate any number of programs?” Garcia asked.

“I suppose that would depend on the nature of the program,” Data said. “A virus program, for example, could theoretically continue to replicate itself in the brain until all other functions became suppressed in order to fulfill the needs of the virus program. This would no doubt kill the host organism.”

“Alright, let’s say the software exists that can work inside a human brain. If a person unwittingly has a program downloaded into his head, how would one go about deleting said program, or turning it off?” Garcia asked.

“Another interesting question,” Data said. “Unlike computer memory, which can be deleted and the space utilized again and again, organic memory does not facilitate the easy removal of data. Once it is in the permanent memory area, it is much harder to delete. That is partly due to the fact that memories are not stored in just one location. Bits of memory go all over the brain. Even our best memory erasing techniques are not perfect. It would be better to call them memory suppression techniques because of the difficulty in completely eliminating a memory. You might erase the visual image, for example, and maybe even the sound, only to find that the smell has remained intact. And that one sensory clue has the potential of aiding in the reconstruction of the erased components. Even a complete memory can remain intact with just the links to that memory erased. However, even though the links to that memory are gone, which effectively means the memory is gone, the potential for establishing new connections to the memory exists. Consequently, erasing a computer program would be problematic, because it would surely have built in safe guards to guarantee that it would still run even if brain damage occurred. Why the sudden interest in such programs?”

“Data, can you keep a secret?” Garcia asked.

“I am capable of respecting confidentiality. However, I must warn you that if the secret you wish to share with me violates any conditions, such as the possibility of you, or someone else, coming to harm, or deals with an illegal act, I would not hesitate to inform the proper authorities,” Data said.

“That’s reasonable,” Garcia agreed, chuckling. “Do you remember when I first accessed the Kelvan technology to save Riker’s Away Team?”

“Yes,” Data said. “If you remember, I was present.”

“For lack of a better description, I think when I accessed the Kelvan computer a program was downloaded into my brain,” Garcia said.

“You did act strangely afterwards, however, I believe Doctor Crusher has determined that your odd behavior was a combination of stress and the influence of a telepathic nature,” Data said.

“I wish you were telepathic, Data,” Garcia said. “I would love nothing more than to mind meld with you and let you take a peek at my brain.”

Data blinked. “You have a neural implant, do you not?” he asked.

“Yes,” Garcia said.

“I am certain I could access your neural implant, and perhaps from there I can directly monitor your brain functions,” Data said.

“And you could discern the difference between regular brain wave patterns and thoughts from those of an artificial program?” Garcia asked.

“It is possible,” Data said, getting up. He accessed a hidden compartment in the wall and retrieved several items. He paused, looking perplexed. “Of course, it is highly likely that all I will find is normal brain wave patterns. There are no known procedures established to search for artificial programming in an organic host. However, the advantage of linking directly with my positronic brain over that of the ship’s computer is that I am sentient, adaptable, and should be able to identify anomalies more readily.”

Data returned with his items. He opened a tricorder and scanned Garcia’s head. The neural implant was on the left side of the brain. He placed a small device against Garcia’s temple and activated it. He plugged a mirror component directly to a port on his own temple. Both had blinking lights that began to synchronize.

“I am now accessing your neural implant,” Data said, his eyes looked up and to the left. He looked at Garcia and stated: “Your implant is working within established design parameters. The number of neurons that have directly connected to the device, and their vitality, indicates frequent use. I am now going to attempt to make a neural map...”

Data shifted his head a bit to the left. He was feeling something. He blinked. He felt as if he were petting Spot, only, he wasn’t holding Spot. Garcia was holding Spot. He smiled and forced his hand to be still. “This is interesting. This is pleasant. This is more than pleasant. I am experiencing a feeling. Emotions? No. I am feeling your feelings. I could always discern tactile sensations when holding Spot. I knew how much pressure I could safely apply. I could measure her warmth with my hands, and note the oscillations of her purring, and describe the frequency, but I never really felt this. This is wonderful. Oh, Spot! I can experience feelings for you vicariously through Garcia. I love this,” he shouted, and then, speaking in baby talk, he added: “Spot, I love you.”

Data closed his eyes and continued to ramble. “This is amazing. I now have full access to all your sensory perception. Smell? I should program Spot’s litter-box to clean more frequently! Gee, Spot, that is some pretty powerful stuff over there. I can see myself sitting next to you, Garcia. Is this what bi-location feels like? I have never had an out of body experience before. This is strange. I can see with my eyes and with your eyes...”

Data shivered and his head tilted. “I now have access to more information. Garcia, have you just mind melded with Spot? I am seeing through Spot’s eyes? I can feel you petting her. This is amazing. I never... Spot? I can discern an actual feeling from you. It’s not so much words, but... Spot? Spot! Is this love? Garcia? Am I experiencing love? Spot loves me? I am over whelmed.”

The door opened to Data’s quarters and Counselor Troi walked in. “Data! What are you doing?”

“Counselor Troi!” Data responded. He did a double take. “This is strange, Counselor. I do not see you with my eyes. I do not see you with Spot’s eyes. In fact, you are not here. Garcia, I have discovered the rogue program that was downloaded into your brain. This is fascinating.”

“Data! Stop this at once, you’re killing him,” Counselor Troi pleaded.

Data was skeptical of this Deanna’s intentions, but he couldn’t ignore the warning signs. Data focused on Garcia through his own eyes. Garcia was visibly shaking. He was no longer petting Spot, but gripping the cat tightly. The cat wanted to escape, but was unable. The tremor in Spot’s tail seemed to match the frequency of Garcia’s shaking.

“Trying to disengaged. Unable to comply. I am afraid. Interesting. I am actually experiencing fear. Garcia, I am unable to separate our consciousness,” Data said.

“Data! Do something,” the Counselor Troi facsimile urged.

“Counselor, you should call Doctor Crusher immediately,” Data said.

“Data, you know I can’t do that,” she said.

Data shivered. “You’re not real. Hallucination? No. Rogue program. State the nature of your mission.”

“Data, call for help now.” Counselor Troi said.

Garcia fell out of his seat, still holding onto Spot. Data fell to the floor as well, his posture mirroring that of Garcia’s posture. Garcia held Spot. Data held his tricorder. Data lay on his side looking across at Spot

and Garcia. Garcia eyes seemed dazed, unfocused. But Data could still see with those eyes. He could see himself looking at himself. He was literally looking back at himself through Garcia's and Spot's eyes. It was like looking into infinity, two mirrors side by side. He could see Troi's legs. She knelt down into his line of vision and yelled at him to do something. At that moment Geordi La Forge strolled in.

"Data, I thought you were going to meet me..." La Forge stopped. He saw Data, Garcia, and Spot on the floor, and the three of them all appeared to be having some sort of epileptic seizure. "Data?! La Forge to sickbay. Medical emergency in Data's quarters. Use a site to site transport, I need you now!"

Crusher appeared a moment later and immediately knelt down, as if getting her tricorder closer would speed up the process of gathering Data.

"What can I do?" La Forge asked.

"Don't touch Garcia!" Crusher snapped and then hit her comm. badge. "Doctor Selar, I need you. STS," she said, indicating site to site. She didn't have to add ASAP, because the quality of her voice told Selar she was needed yesterday.

Doctor Selar appeared. She quickly ascertained the situation. It wasn't the first time she had seen this phenomena with this patient. She was tempted to reach down and perform an emergency mind meld, but the last time she had done that it had changed the course of her life. And his. She would gladly do so again, but now that Simone was the carrier of his primary bond, a member of the Royal family tracing itself to T'Pol, she could not intervene in this instance. Not with Simone near by. At the same time, she realized that she wanted Garcia back. She wanted to be one with him again. Was she actually missing him? She hesitated.

"Selar?" Crusher asked.

Selar shook herself out of it. "Can you terminate the link with Data?" Doctor Selar asked, forcing herself to be professional, cold, detached. She squashed all feelings for him, which normally wouldn't have been difficult, except for Garcia's influence on her. He was still influencing her! she realized.

"Not at this time," Crusher said. "Data's brain is providing life support to Garcia's vital organs. Data, what were you thinking?!"

"A mind meld is necessary," Selar said, hitting her comm. badge. "Selar to Simone. Please report to Data's quarters, STS!"

"Can't you do this?" Crusher asked.

"She is a stronger telepath than I, and she has been more rigorously trained for these sorts of... situations," Selar said. Selar didn't see the need to add that Simone and Garcia were now one, and the type of intervention Garcia needed would require her touch.

Simone materialized in Data's quarters. "Why have you disturbed my meditation?" Simone demanded, before her senses caught up with her. She suddenly knew why she had been summoned and why her meditation session had been so difficult. Simone dropped to her knees and touched Garcia's face. The tremors stopped almost instantaneously with her touch. Data sat up and shook it off.

"Do not disconnect us yet," Data warned.

Simone looked to Selar. "We are stable enough to transport to Sickbay," she said.

Crusher tapped her badge again. "O'Brien? Lock on to my signal and beam everyone in my presence to Sickbay," Crusher said. A moment later they were on the floor in Sickbay. "Data, can you lift Garcia to a medical table?"

"I believe so," Data said. He stood, experienced his first moment of vertigo, and found himself being steadied by Geordi. "Thank you, Geordi. I feel very strange."

"I can move Garcia," Geordi offered.

"No!" Crusher, Selar, and Simone said simultaneously. Crusher continued: "No one but Data touches him. Data, put him on the table."

"Of course, Doctor," Data said.

Data knelt down and picked Garcia up.

"Slowly," Selar said, ignoring the look of jealousy that crossed Simone's face. She could see Garcia's emotions had affected Simone as much as they had affected her.

Data slowly lifted Garcia from the floor, giving Simone time to stand without losing physical contact to the patient. She followed Garcia as Data moved him to the bed and set him down. Garcia still held Spot. Simone closed her eyes for a moment, and when she finally opened them, she spoke to no one in particular.

"Data can now safely remove the cat," Simone said. "It is asleep"

Data transferred the cat to the next bed, petting it gently. "Poor Spot. Rest easy, baby."

"I can't believe a robot has a pet cat," Ilona said.

Data snapped to attention. In addition to the Deana Troi that only Garcia could see, there were two new females, dressed in complementary clothing. The blond was wearing white and the brunette was wearing black. The first connection that popped into Data's mind was a Ying Yang symbol.

"Who are you? More programs?" Data asked.

"Who's who?" Geordi asked, looking to where Data was looking. "Who are you talking to?"

"Then that confirms it. You do not see them." Data said.

"See who, Data?" Crusher asked.

"Counselor Troi," Simone said. Garcia spoke the same words simultaneously, but softer. "Duana and Ilona."

"You see them?" Data asked Simone.

"No," Simone said. "But Garcia does."

"There's not room for you here," Duana said, angrily. She got right in Simone's face and screamed, "Get out!"

Ilona actually hit Simone.

Simone's head tilted with the blow and when she turned her head back, her lip was swelling and bleeding. She stood, one hand remaining on Garcia's face, her other hand came up to ward off another blow. "You will not hit me again. You will leave this body at once."

"No, he is ours. You can't have him," Ilona said.

"Sleep!" Duana said. "Tam, go to sleep."

"Garcia, you must resist," Simone said.

"Yes, Garcia," the invisible Troi said. "Sleep."

"We will resist you," Simone said.

"Sleep!" Ilona said, her voice sounding like a song.

"We will resist," Simone, Garcia and Data said simultaneously.

A new presence entered. "Data, don't do this. I'm afraid."

"Lal?" Data asked. "How is this possible? You were terminated. I downloaded your programming into mine..."

"Sleep," the four girls, Duana, Ilona, Deanna, and now Lal, sang out.

Doctor McCoy came to Garcia's side, medical equipment in his hands. The chorus of "sleep," was as pleasant as angels singing a lullaby. He brushed Garcia's hair. "I told you to leave my katra alone, but no, you had to go ahead and drag this out, didn't you. You just can't let me go," McCoy said, preparing an old style hypo spray. "Here, this will help you sleep," he said.

"Pa Pa?" Garcia asked, looking up.

"Sleep, son, we'll talk about it later," McCoy said, and administered the sedative.

Garcia went to sleep. Data and Simone collapsed.



Data self-activated, sat up, and looked around. Geordi was beside him, and suddenly, so was Doctor Crusher. Picard stepped closer. The real Counselor Troi was right behind him, at least, all his senses told him that it was the real Counselor Troi. Riker stood behind her.

"Data? What were you thinking?" Picard demanded.

"Just now, I found myself going through a diagnostic routine, observing I have two hours, ten minutes before the start of my duty shift, wondering about Spot..." Data would have gone on had he not been interrupted.

"Data!" Picard snapped. "Why did you try to link with Garcia's neural implant?"



"Garcia approached me to discuss the theoretical plausibility of a computer program being down loaded into an organic brain, suspecting that he had actually acquired one from the Kelvan computer he had accessed. Together we were investigating the possibilities," Data explained.

"You could have killed him!" Crusher said.

"And yourself," Geordi said, obviously more concerned about Data than Garcia.

"I'm extremely disappointed with you, Data," Picard said. "You have exercised very poor judgment in this instance..."

"I did not anticipate the technical difficulties that occurred, or I would have sought assistance in the experiment," Data said.

Geordi shook his head. "Technical difficulties?! Did it ever occur to you that there are no established procedure for the kind of stunt you pulled?"

"I have accessed various sorts of computer components over the years..." Data began.

"But none attached directly to a human brain!" Crusher objected. "The transfer rate of his neural implant wasn't designed to match the speeds you're capable of attaining."

"The difficulties that we experienced were not due to an error on my part, but rather were symptoms created by the artificial program operating in Garcia's brain," Data explained. "I believe that the program utilized a safety feature designed to prevent anyone from tampering with its programming."

Counselor Troi alerted Doctor Crusher to the fact that Simone was waking. She sat up slowly, taking on the posture of not only a Vulcan, but of a Vulcan Princess. She frowned. She touched her jaw and lip.

"How are you feeling?" Crusher asked.

"Psychosomatic bruising?" Simone asked, rubbing her jaw.

"Apparently," Crusher said. "He must have one tough program operating in his brain."

"There is only one program," Simone said. "A Counselor Troi software package that was programmed to bring Garcia to the Kelvan base. It has already fulfilled its purpose and is merely running freely in the background of his consciousness."

"If there is only one program, then who were the other two people you mentioned?" Crusher asked.

"Fully developed personalities," Simone said. "The people from your past would consider Garcia to be possessed by entities or spirits."

"So, what do we do, exorcise them?" Riker asked.

"I assure you, it is not possession, as you think of it," Simone said. "There is a phenomena that sometimes happens during mind melds where various personality traits from the participants merge and become a new entity in their own right. The more participants, the higher the chance of forming new personalities. Typically, these personalities only survive the duration of the mind meld session, but in rare instances, they take up residence in one or more of the participants. In Garcia's case, there are two very distinct personalities sharing his space, possibly more."

"Is there a cure?" Picard asked.

"You can terminate the personalities," Simone said.

"Isn't that murder?" Troi asked.

"Technically, yes," Simone said.

"What are the other options?" Crusher asked.

"Well," Deanna stepped up to the plate. "If we treat Garcia as if he had a multiple personality complex, it might be possible to integrate the extraneous personalities into his own psyche. Since this is not a classic multiple personality issue, any resistance of any of the personalities involved would make things difficult, especially if Garcia is the one that is resistant. He may not want to incorporate their essence into his own. The other option would be to teach him new coping strategies."

"If he is unable to learn to cope," Doctor Selar said. "He will go insane."

"I've known Garcia for a long time. He is extremely resilient," Counselor Troi said.

"I hope so," Simone said. "He and I are now linked. My life may depend on his well being."

"Data," Geordi interrupted. "Right before you and Simone blacked out, you mentioned Lal's name."

"Indeed," Data said. He looked to Picard. "As you know, in an effort to save Lal's programming, I downloaded her files into mine. Apparently, while my mind was merged with Garcia's, duplicate files were

created and saved in his brain. I am speculating at this, but I believe that the Troi program in his head used this as a tactic to distract me long enough to sever the connection between us. It worked. I was completely taken off guard.”

“So, in addition to himself, he has four complete personalities inside him?” Geordi asked, whistling.

“There may be even more than that. I heard Admiral McCoy’s voice,” Simone said. “Garcia must have mind melded with the Admiral before he died in order to save his Katra.”

“No. Garcia didn’t perform a mind meld with the Admiral,” Doctor Selar said. “I was present when the Admiral died. There was no physical contact between them.”

“But they did share an active bond,” Counselor Troi said. “The bond between the two of them already existed. It was established before anyone knew Garcia was capable of telepathy, before he had established personal boundaries of his own.”

“That may explain the Admiral’s presence in Garcia’s thoughts,” Simone said.

“Just how many personalities can a brain hold?” Riker asked.

“The potential is theoretically infinite,” Counselor Troi said. “Think about it. When you dream, the dream characters all have their own personalities. They aren’t just cardboard characters cut outs that your mind created. They are those personalities. True, they are in essence you, but they are complex models that fully represent the true nature of the personalities being emulated. Our brains are social supercomputers specifically designed for us to observe, model, and predict the behavior of others. Most people do not use this capability to its fullest. Like any tool, it has to be developed. In this instance, though, instead of being relegated to just the REM state, Garcia’s extra-personalities are obviously able to be conscious and active during his normal wake cycle. And, given the nature of his psychic training, which I helped develop in him, he would be particularly sensitive to their presence.”

“Speaking of the devil, your patient seems to be waking, Doctor,” Riker said.

Counselor Troi shot Riker a look to tell him she didn’t appreciate what he had said, and he understood what she meant by that look. Doctor Crusher came around to Garcia’s side. She helped him as he sat up, his hand reaching for his head. He smiled faintly.

“I was just having the strangest, non-lucid dream about you, Doctor,” he began, and then stopped himself, blushing. He was now quite aware of everyone staring at him.

“How are you feeling?” Crusher asked, updating her medical scans now that he was awake and apparently functioning normally.

“I’m feeling rather odd,” Garcia said.

“Define odd,” Doctor Selar prompted, crossing her arms.

“I have a craving for feline supplement twenty five,” Garcia reported.

Deana burst out laughing and then covered her mouth. Riker watched her, amused. He liked seeing her happy and laughing, but he was enjoying this opportunity to mockingly scold her more. Geordi shook his head sadly.

“What do you remember of how you came to be here?” Doctor Selar asked.

“I don’t know how I came to be here. I went to see Data,” Garcia said, struggling to piece something together. “I just remember going to see Data. No, I remember his music being too loud. I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Crusher said. “It’s probably for the best.”

“When you’re feeling up to it, come by my office so we can chat. My whole day has been freed up just for you,” Deanna said, patting his leg.

Garcia looked around at the faces staring at him. “What?”



Four Star General Hammon’s limousine accelerated after passing through the main gate to the air force base. The flags on the front of the car whipped as it raced to the hangar. Outside the hangar, two Captains, one aide, and a man in full space gear stood waiting. The space gear on the man was ergonomically designed to be comfortable even planet side, in vertical lift offs while experiencing additional G’s, and in space, regardless of temperature. The man wore it out of necessity. He would spend the rest of his days in his suit.

The limousine pulled up to the waiting men and the General stepped out. They all saluted. Hammon noticed the reflection of his secretary exiting the car in the visor of the helmet of the man wearing the space

gear. Hammon wondered where the spaceman's eyes were. Were they facing straight ahead, or was he admiring the legs of his secretary as she slipped out of the car before standing and then straightening her skirt? He felt sorrow for the mutant behind the space mask, for it had once been his best friend. The line of business they were in took a toll on a body, and genetic mutations had been one of the trade-offs for the convenience of having one's atoms disintegrated and reassembled at a distant place. His friend, Jay Botello, was a pioneer in astronautics, and though he had countless lift offs under his belt, his fame came for being the first Iotian to be transported from one place to another using their own transporter design. The first one that lived, that is.

"General," Captain Romano said. "Our capsules are sifting through the debris field from the Federation ship. We found nothing worth salvaging, yet."

"I don't expect you will," Hammon said. "That was a pretty massive explosion. Do we have any idea of what caused it?"

A raspy voice issued from the front speaker of the chest plate on the space suit. "We believe it was a matter antimatter explosion," Jay said.

"Please," Romano said. "Your ideas are complete speculation. General, mixing matter and antimatter to produce energy is completely impractical. We can barely produce enough in the lab to fill a test tube and when we do it has a very short life span. Just the power necessary to generate the magnetic fields to isolate the stuff in a vacuum chamber makes it cost prohibited. For them to have sufficient amounts of antimatter to cause that large of an explosion would require an energy output greater than, well, greater than anything we can do. We're talking about generating more energy than our sun can radiate in a solar day."

"Using your own formulas, you'd have to be able to generate more energy than the total sum of energy available in the known universe to generate a warp field," Jay argued. "And since we know the Federation is doing it, either your theories or wrong, or there is more to physics than we currently understand."

"Nonsense," Romano said. "We know all there is to know about physics. The search for a grand theorem and the quantum math projects are dead end tangents that are a waste of our time. They just don't make any sense. General, it's more likely that the Federation ship was carrying nuclear weapons."

"A nuclear weapon detonation inadequately explains the huge amounts of energy released in that explosion," Jay said. "It would have taken thousands of our conventional, tactical nukes to generate that kind of blast."

The General looked to the Captain who had remained neutral. "What's your take on all this?"

"Our best science agrees that they are not trekking from star to star using conventional energy sources," Captain Elmont said. "If they are indeed warping space, the amounts of energy generating capabilities required for doing so are still light years beyond anything we have. We have some hope for cold fusion, but no one has managed to get that to work."

"And no one will as long the oil industry continues to buy off, or kill, scientists that start dabbling in alternative energy sources," Romano said.

"And you have the gall to criticize my theories?" Jay asked. "You're a paranoid, unpatriotic, little freak..."

"Freak? I'm not the one stuck in a suit! And paranoia is healthy, thank you very much. A little paranoia might have kept you out of a transporter, and you could still be walking around like a real man" Romano snapped. "Besides, Kirk did say he was coming back."

"He never said he was coming back," Jay argued.

"Hello? He said the Federation is moving in and that they want their cut," Romano said. "That implies they're coming back to get it."

"If they take their cut, our economy will collapse," Jay said.

"Enough!" Hammon snapped.

"You think I don't know that? I'm as patriotic as the next person," Romano said. "But to deny that the oil corporations are driving us towards extinction..."

"Did you ever think that perhaps it is our greed that is driving us towards extinction?" Miss Eliot asked.

The men seemed momentarily caught off guard by the secretary's observation. General Hammon sighed. "Dismissed, gentleman. Jay, let's go to the lab and see what you have for me. Miss Eliot, you can take the rest of the day off. Thank you."

The General and Jay entered the hangar and headed towards a lift that required three forms of identification to operate. They took it down fifteen levels and exited the lift. It was a silent affair. The only audible noises came from the whine of the lift motors, a brushing sound that occurred as they passed each floor, and a slight wheezing sound emanating from Jay's suit. The General wondered how much longer the man would live. The General followed Jay into a room where a number of technicians were studying recorded data or live telemetry from the capsules currently in orbit. Occasionally radio chatter from the men in orbit and the control room's response were heard over an intercom.

There had been individual terminal and technician assigned to watch over each of the men beamed up to the Federation Starship. These technicians were called Angels, because they were always watching over your shoulder and advising. Jay led Hammon over to one particular station where the 'angel' had just sneezed into a tissue and disposed of it in a small metal bin beneath his desk. Jay pulled a chair over for the General, but he remained on his feet.

"Show me what you got," General Hammon said.

"Yes, Sir," the angel said, the nasal qualities of his voice almost comical. "As you know, we sent two task forces up, Blue and Red teams. The plan was to materialize them at strategic points near the hull, plant explosives, detonate them, and vent the air into space." The man sneezed, moaned a little, and then continued. "We had hoped this would eliminate opposition and give us free reign of the ship. The helmet cam feed we're viewing here is from Blue Five, a corporal Amass. He arrived in this corridor, planted the explosives on the floor, moved the appropriate distance from the intended hole, and secured himself to a wall. You can make out the first people responding to his presence on this part of the screen right before he detonates the explosives."

The general waited for the rapid decompression of the deck but nothing happened. There was an explosion, he saw the Federation men fall, but they had not been sucked out into space as he had expected them to be. Blue Five detached himself from the wall and went back to examine the hole he had made. He was looking at the hole, extending a hand to touch it. When the area of the hole illuminated with a blue field of light, he quickly jerked his hand back, startled. And then the screen went blank.

"What happened?" Hammon asked.

"The ship blew up," Jay said.

"Because of that? I don't understand what you were showing me," Hammon said.

"Play that last bit again, with the audio," Jay instructed.

The feed rewound and started up normal play. Blue Five was extending a hand towards the hole. "There is some sort of force field that is preventing the loss of atmosphere. I can't even push my hand through..."

Hammon looked up at his face mirrored in Jay's helmet visor. "A force field?! That's incredible."

"Mark, show him the feed from Blue Seven," Jay instructed.

The technician blew his nose, and then punched up the new video. "As you can see, Blue Seven, a Corporal Sims, has just arrived," Mark said, the nasal quality of his voice indicating he was feeling worse. He froze the video and pointed to a cylindrical object that stretched from floor to ceiling, and perhaps continued on up at least another deck. When the video resumed rolling, it pulsed with light. "We believe this to be an energy conduit of some sort. We're almost certain that the explosion that destroyed the ship initiated here. As per protocol, no team members are allowed to be captured. The men in this section immediately attempted to overpower Sims. He didn't even have time to draw his weapon. This icon at the bottom of the screen indicated that he has just armed his suit explosives, simultaneously with all the charges he brought up with him. Standard suicide plan. Take out the enemy, vent everything and everyone out into space, leaving us with technology to examine."

"So, he blew himself up," Hammon said, nodding.

“Not yet,” Mark said. “Notice he managed to pull his weapon free here, and fired off several rounds. He staggers back towards the cylinder, still firing randomly. Notice the line of fire moving across the wall and then... Nothing. Our best guess is that when Singer’s bullets pierced that cylinder the whole ship blew up.”

“Matter antimatter?” Hammon asked.

“It would explain a lot,” Mark said.

“But how can they hold that much antimatter?” Hammon said. “Can a human live in the presence of a magnetic field required to hold that much antimatter in a stream?”

“Remember the force field?” Jay asked.

Hammon nodded. “We need force fields! Can you backwards engineer that from just seeing the video?”

“It took our scientist nearly seventy years to make a working transporter!” Mark said. “And we still don’t have all the bugs worked out of that. The genetic mutations of just twelve transports is enough to put a man in the grave. And the accident that grafted Jay’s space suit to his skin still occurs one out of a thousand transports.”

“But we built it,” Hammon argued. “And it works. And we did it purely on theoretical principals. So, force fields are a possibility.”

“You’re asking a cave man to build you a toaster without a concept of electricity!” Mark said. “And you’re forgetting that Kirk left behind technology that we were able to work with. That was a tremendous aid towards building the communication grid we now have and that communication grid made transporters possible.”

“Surely a force field generator is easier to build than a transporter!” Hammon argued.

“You just don’t understand what’s all involved here!” Mark complained. “And neither of you seemed to have even seen the most interesting feature of the video I just showed you.”

“Well, educate me,” Hammon insisted.

“They have artificial gravity,” Mark said.

Hammon blinked. Mark sighed heavily at their lack of vision.

“To get gravity on our space station, we had to spin it. It’s not really gravity. It’s centrifugal force. The Feds aren’t spinning their ship. They’re producing gravity, and if they can do that, they can certainly influence inertia.”

“So?” Hammon asked.

“Without the ability to eliminate or decrease inertial affects, your space flight is restricted to extremely slow acceleration and deceleration maneuvers, and limited turning capabilities,” Mark said, and saw they were still not getting it. “They’re working on quantum principles so far above us that we’re still throwing stones. Even if I could accelerate a ship to the speed of light, with out some way of dampening the inertial forces the ship would literally implode. And don’t say you can build a ship that can withstand the kinds of accelerations we’re talking about here. Because even if you did manage that trick, with materials I can’t even begin to imagine, if you accelerate too quickly, or stop too quickly, or make a sudden turn, all that’s left of your passengers are going to be blood smears on the wall, just like a fly hitting the windshield of a car,” Mark said, and sneezed vehemently three times in a row before he could catch his breath. He cleaned himself and sighed. “Backwards engineer force fields, indeed. You might as well ask me to invent a cure for the common cold, something, I might point out, we never got until the Horizon came along.”

“So, what do I need to do to make this possible?” Hammon asked.

“Get me one of their ships to examine,” Mark said. “Get me one of their crew members. Maybe we can get one of them to throw us a bone.”

“Jay?” Hammon said.

“In order to transport them we’ll need a way to lock onto their people. Perhaps a projectile weapon modified to shoot identifier tags so that our transporters can lock onto them long enough to beam them out,” Jay said.

“Now that I can build you,” Mark said.

“Great. Let’s do that. As for the ship, how many holes do you suppose we have to make before their force field generator fails?” Hammon said.

"It's hard to say," Mark said. "The only thing we really have to do is prevent them from leaving. If you can cripple their ship, without blowing it up, we can continue sending up teams all day long until we finally capture them all or they surrender. Either way, if you get me enough of their technicians, I am certain we can learn something from them."

"We have ways of making them talk," Jay agreed.

"Alright," Hammon said. "We continue with our original plans of scuttling the next ship, in hopes of preventing its departure. Meanwhile, Jay, I want you to start training a new assault team to go in and try to capture as many of the Feds as you can."

"Yes, Sir," Jay said, and he pivoted and walked off.

Hammon asked Mark to show him more video.



It always surprised Garcia just how Spartan Deanna Troi's office was. The subdued lighting added to a minimalist feeling. Of course, that same lighting had a relaxing affect, and the knowledge that he and Deanna were alone in this setting canceled out the counselor's intentions for the calm environment. Her office offered too few things for him to focus on as a distraction from her penetrating eyes. The votive candle helped. He sat uncomfortably on the couch, waiting for her to start lecturing, or asking questions. He could imagine all the things she was about to say, along with all the things he wanted to hear. She didn't say anything for a long while. She was, however, the first one to break the silence.

"Why didn't you tell me?" Deanna asked. Her voice indicated that she was hurt.

Garcia sighed and looked at his boots. "I don't know."

"I can't accept that," Deanna said.

He nodded. She was right. He did know. "Fear. I have enough issues, don't you think? I don't need schizophrenia on top of everything else. That would spell the end of my career in Fleet."

"Not necessarily," Deanna said. "First off, you don't have schizophrenia, simply a rare case of mind meld induced multiple personality. Secondly, even if you did have schizophrenia, there are treatments for it. It's rare a condition these days, but the success rate on the cure is so close to a hundred percent that most everyone goes on to lead a happy, productive life."

"People already treat me strange, what do you think they're going to say if they think I'm crazy on top of that?" Garcia asked.

"Did you ever read the story of John Nash, a famous mathematician who suffered from schizophrenia?" Deanna said.

"The beautiful mind guy?" Garcia asked. "Yes, I'm familiar with the story, and I don't believe there is a comparison here. We're talking Star Fleet. Who's going to put me in the command chair if I'm sitting there talking to myself?!"

"Did it ever occur to you that maybe you don't belong in the command chair?" Deanna asked. "Star Fleet needs people they can trust. You're not acting like someone who is very trust worthy at the moment."

A micro expression of anger flashed across Garcia's face. It didn't go unnoticed by Deanna. She waited for him to sort through his thoughts.

"I am a licensed medical doctor and psychotherapist," Garcia said. "I didn't see the need to come to you. A brain with schizophrenia has identifiable artifacts, none of which appeared on any of my brain scans. I was unable to find evidence of any type of mental disorder that would be caused by a physical aberration, or any other known condition to explain my experiences. I went to Doctor Crusher several times, and she could not find any evidence of anything wrong. If neither of us could find anything, then..."

"But you didn't tell us what to look for," Deanna said.

"Look, Deanna," Garcia said, picking up one of the cushions and hugging it to him. "I know everything Crusher knows. I know everything you know. I know every question you're going to ask me before you ask, I know every medical line of inquiry, and the answers just all boil up to one thing..."

"Crazy?"

"Yeah," he said, quietly.

"You're not crazy, Tam, but not coming and sharing this with us is crazy behavior," Deanna said. "Maybe I don't have any immediate answers, and at the moment, neither do you. But together, with your

smarts and my smarts, we are more likely to solve this than you or I might as individuals. You know the drill; thesis, antithesis, synthesis. This can only happen through a dialogue, a dialectic process.”

Garcia didn’t respond. Deanna sighed and out of the blue said: “You need to change your theme song.”

“Mph,” Garcia grunted. “Synchronicity. Ray was just telling me the same thing...”

“You’re willing to talk to Ray but not to me?” Deanna asked.

“Ray is a holodeck program,” Garcia offered. That didn’t seem to help his case any.

“You know what song is playing in my head?” Deanna asked. “Desperado, by the Eagles. This is the song I hear as I sit here looking at you.”

“I’m not familiar with this one,” Garcia said, using his implant to retrieve the data from the computer.

“Really?” Troi asked. “I thought you know everything?”

Garcia shot her an angry look. “I don’t know everything,” Garcia said, looking over the file that had downloaded into his implant. “I should know this song, seeing how it was performed by the Eagles, and several other twentieth century artists I’m familiar with.” He could read the musical score and lyrics faster than he could play the song in real time. His response was visceral and immediate. He didn’t try to hide the tears forming in his eyes.

“You don’t have to do this alone,” Deanna said.

“Apparently, I’m not alone,” Garcia said, pointing to his head. “Before, you were just a latent telepathic bond that sometimes whispered to me loud enough to send shivers down my spine, but now, I got this Deanna program running around in my head.”

“It’s not me,” Deanna said.

“You or imagination, it’s all the same to my brain,” Garcia said. “Hell, for all I know the computer program may have been designed to tap into that bond we share to flesh itself out and make it a more credible facsimile. Or better, it might actually be an exact copy of your brain and psyche when you were abducted by the Kelvan, which was then down loaded directly into my head the moment I tapped into their computer system to save Riker.”

“All of that may be true, but since it is in your head, it derives some, if not all, of its energy to operate from you,” Deanna said. “You’re going to have to learn to function with this. Now, one option, obviously, is to ignore it. The other is to interact with it.”

“I hadn’t seen the Deanna program since I rescued you,” Garcia said, musing. He wondered if Data had reactivated it, or it had just been running in the back ground. “The more obtrusive hallucinations are the Duana and Ilona personalities.”

“They’re not hallucinations,” Deanna corrected. “You need to recognize that and decide how you are going to interact with them. They’re as real as I am, the only difference being is that they are sharing your brain. They haven’t attempted to take control of your body, have they?”

“No,” Garcia said. “But I can feel them when they touch me.”

“That’s because they fire off the neurons in your sensory perceptions,” Deanna said.

“So, how do you explain the bruising if my confrontations with them become physical?” Garcia asked.

“Psychosomatic reactions,” Deanna answered.

Garcia forced a sigh. “Duana is strongly attracted to Commander Riker,” Garcia said. “I almost started to think that I had some latent homosexuality in me.”

Deanna laughed, covered her mouth, and continued to laugh through her hand. Garcia shot her a look that suggested he didn’t approve. He threw the pillow he was holding at her. She caught it, set it down, moved to the couch and touched his shoulder. “I’m sorry. It’s very obvious to me that you’re heterosexual, but since you brought it up, it wouldn’t harm us to explore this a little because the number of partners you have gone through sometimes suggest that you are trying to over compensate for some hidden facet of your subconscious that you are keeping suppressed. Obsessive Compulsive disorders are more often than not the symptom of some form of thought suppression, and we have been working on your OCD for a long time. You’ve improved a great deal in controlling your OCD impulses, but I can see just how much energy you employ to keep that control. What would life be like if you didn’t have to work so hard at all of this thought suppression? What do you think you might learn if we were to explore this?”

Both of these questions went right to the back of his brain to sort later. His focused stayed with the Riker tangent. "So, you're saying that I might be gay?"

"No, I didn't say that," Deanna corrected. "What I am saying is that you are not as open about discussing sexuality as you make yourself out to be."

"I would be more than happy to demonstrate my heterosexual nature to you," Garcia offered.

"You might as well get over these childhood fantasies you hold for me, because you and I are never going to be an item. We are friends, and I can help you with any number of issues you may be dealing with, but it will never go beyond a professional friendship level," Deanna said. "Is that clear?"

"I don't see the point of discussing anything with you at all when you're so quick dismiss my feelings," Garcia said.

Deanna shook her head and gently said, "No. I'm not dismissing your feelings. I'm telling you they're not mutual."

Garcia massaged his forehead. In the back ground he could hear Duana singing, "I've been alone with you inside my mind... Hello, is it me you're looking for. I can see it in your eyes. I can see it in your smile. You're all I ever wanted and..." "Shut up!" Garcia yelled at Duana, startling Deanna. Tammias shivered, trying not to loose his train of thought. "You can't lie to me, remember. You're in my head. You have been for a long time. Much longer than the Deana program, and I don't believe that the program has been basing its behavior patterns totally on my expectations or fantasies. I believe it tapped into that bond we share."

"It may have," Deanna said. "And yes, I don't deny having entertained the idea of a relationship with you. But this is not the time or place. I can clearly see that you require my friendship more than anything else."

"I think I should be able to decide what I need," Garcia said.

"Yeah?! Because lately you have certainly done so well at demonstrating you have that ability. You're not being true to yourself. What is it you're hiding? What is about Tammias Parkin Arblaster-Garcia that you don't want anyone else to discover?" Deanna asked, and when he turned his head from her, she gently redirected his face back. "I have wondered if it dealt with the loss of your parents, or seeing the war on your home world up close and personal. I have wondered if it dealt with the fact that you were sexualized too early. I have wondered if the psychic bonds before you developed boundaries contributed to your OCD. But the more I try to get to know the real you, the more I think there's something about you that you don't like and you have to control it so fiercely, spending so much energy on it, that it's preventing you from living as healthy as you could be living."

"You're saying I'm not healthy?" Garcia asked.

"Are you?" Deanna asked.

"Compared to whom?" Garcia demanded.

"I'm not asking you to make comparisons, I'm asking you if you think you are healthy," Deanna said.

"Well, let's see. Other than being an alien in a human body, in a world where I rarely fit in, mixed with OCD issues, attention deficit issues, bouts of depression, pressures of having recently, and single handedly I might add, saved the Universe as we know it, pestered by what I thought were hallucinations, constantly turned down by my first true love, not able to see my second love for fear of death, and consequently unable to see the daughter from that relationship for similar issues, forced to marry a Vulcan who wanted nothing to do with me other than professional courtesy, which ended recently in a divorce by default because my marriage bond was passed off to someone else as easily as trading baseball cards, survived the destruction of the USS Chance, lost a sister and some friends in that, was just barred from the holodeck by Captain Picard, my one source of stress relief mind you, I'm soon to bury a biological parent, who never really wanted to be a father to me but had had his sperm stolen by the same alien invaders I recently condemned to extinction by spoiling their plans to take over the galaxy, and I accidentally mind melded with Data's cat, Spot," Garcia said, taking a deep breath. "I think I'm doing fairly well for today. Don't you?"

Commander Riker's voice broke over Garcia's comm. badge. "Garcia, report to Captain Picard's Ready Room, at your earliest convenience."

Garcia stood, gave a quick smile to Deanna, and headed for the door. "This has been so productive. I don't know why we don't do it more often. Thanks for your time, Deanna."



The door closed behind him. Garcia sighed and his shoulders slumped. He turned to go back and apologize, fought against it, and then headed straight for the Bridge. Shouldn't keep the Captain waiting, after all, or so Guinan had warned. He had no idea what the Captain wanted with him now. Was Picard going to evaluate his performance to date and send his recommendations back to the Academy? Garcia forced himself not to panic. Though Picard had that ability, there was no known animosity between the two of them. Then again, there were only so many ways for Picard to write a report explaining how Garcia incapacitated the crew and stole a shuttle.

Riker glanced over at Garcia as he stepped off the tubrolift and onto the Bridge, nodding and continuing with his conversation with a tech. Worf seemed to sneer a little, but he obviously assumed Garcia knew the way. He did, and he didn't tarry to take in the scenery. Picard didn't look up as Garcia entered, merely asked him to be seated. Instead of taking the seat, as prompted, Garcia went over to the aquarium and took a closer look. Picard set a PADD down, gently on his desk, leaned back in his chair, and studied the young cadet for a moment. Garcia turned and made eye contact.

"I trust you're feeling well," Picard said.

"I'm fine, Captain," Garcia said, suppressing the urge to answer with sarcasm, "Yeah, we're all fine, here." He frowned a little. He wanted to apologize for all the problems he had caused Picard, but he held back, so as not to appear as a babbling fool in front of the man he had immense respect for, respect bordering on idol worship. Was he a Picard groupie the same way some of his music and literary fans were Garcia groupies? Garcia took the seat in front of the Captain's desk.

"Would you like something to drink? Tea perhaps?" Picard asked.

Garcia smiled at the gesture. He had given the Captain headaches and here he was reaching out to him. "Whatever you're having would be nice, thank you."

Picard ordered up two cups of tea, Earl Grey, and carried them over from the replicator. He returned to his chair. In some ways, sharing tea with Captain Picard reminded Garcia of the time he had had tea with T'Pol. Garcia couldn't help but see Picard as royalty, though Picard would probably argue against that comparison.

"I just received a message from Vulcan," Picard said. "Sarek's estate has requested that I notify you that you will be representing them at the funeral."

The Captain's choice of words were not a mistake. He wasn't being asked to represent the Sarek estate, he was being told to. It was pretty much a done deal. Still, Garcia shook his head in protest. "No," Garcia said, almost pleading. "Sarek needs to be present."

"They didn't say it, but I suspect Sarek is not well enough to travel," Picard said, drawing on more than intuition. He had never been quite the same since he had mind melded with Ambassador Sarek of Vulcan, but then, no one was ever completely the same after a mind meld. Of course, no one was ever the same after meeting with Sarek mind meld or no. He was an incredible force for good and peace that influenced everyone that came into contact with him.

"So why haven't they contacted me?" Garcia asked. "This doesn't make sense. What about Spock? He should be here. Have you heard from him?"

"No," Picard said. "I have asked some friends at Star Fleet to help locate him, but so far no one seems to know where he is."

Garcia rubbed his forehead.

"I know this isn't a pleasant thing to do, but it has to be done," Picard said.

"I know," Garcia said, his eyes going to the window, momentarily losing himself in the stars streaking by. "I just really wanted to see Sarek. A security blanket, I guess. I always feel so calm when he's around." It was a statement that wasn't actually true, but that was more than the Captain really needed to know. Besides, Garcia wouldn't know how to explain that his last days around Sarek had been filled with emotional turmoil and frequent episodes of bickering. The bickering wasn't as bad as between Sarek and Spock, but it was conflict none the less.

"Do you remember the first time we met?" Picard asked. "You were in some sort of legal trouble and McCoy made it his duty to attend to you personally."

Garcia was flooded with the memory. He pushed through the conflicting emotions of that chaotic moment in his life, sorting through the people he had barely paid attention to, and sure enough, there was Picard in the back ground. A Picard almost unrecognizable now, speechless before one of his own heroes, Ambassador Sarek.

Garcia chuckled in contrast to the emotions he was re-living by calling up the memories of that day. “Yes,” Tammias said, surprised. It was a time before Picard was even on his radar screen, before the ‘Picard maneuver.’ “We’ve come full circle. Small Universe. Who would have thought?”

“Touched by greatness,” Picard agreed, toasting his tea cup. “Synchronicity is a very interesting phenomenon, which has almost a surreal quality to it that hints at a greater reality beyond that which we understand.”

How does that line go? Garcia thought. Ancient weapons and hokey religions are no match for a good blaster at your side, kid. Would Picard even be familiar with it? “I think I understand what you are saying, but I hesitate to put a supernatural or paranormal spin on events that are probably nothing more than coincidence.”

“In my experience, coincidence happens too frequently for there not to be some influence beyond what are senses perceive,” Picard said. “After all, one scientist suggested that not only is the Universe quierer than we think...”

“It’s stranger than we can think,” Garcia chimed in, avoiding the English word for ‘strange.’ “That doesn’t necessarily mean we should subscribe to superstitious rituals or belief system.”

“Nor rule them out,” Picard offered, enjoying the philosophical banter.

“There’s always been a certain segment of the population that buys into superstition. I’ve always considered superstitious beliefs to be a biological quirk similar to obsessive compulsive disorder,” Garcia said. “I’m hoping one day there will be a cure for that, too, since education and science alone doesn’t seem to be sufficient to eliminate the phenomena completely. At the same time, I recognise that people can find comfort in rituals and traditions.”

“Such as funerals,” Picard said.

Garcia frowned, but nodded.

“If there is anything I can do to be of assistance in this matter,” Picard offered.

You could let me use the Kelvan technology to revive McCoy, he wanted to scream. He forced himself to let go of that tangent. McCoy had forbidden it. Death was a part of life, McCoy had said. He felt McCoy’s hand on his shoulder, and heard McCoy’s voice saying, “It’s okay. I’ve had a good run.” So have I, Garcia answered the voice in his head: “Does that mean I should quit now?” No answer. Even Duana and Ilona failed to comment. He observed Picard watching him.

“Thank you, Captain,” Garcia said, resigned to his fate. He placed the empty tea cup in the saucer. A tiny clink broke the stillness of the room, a subtle quiet. Subtle because it wasn’t complete silent. It was the gentleness of that clink of cup against saucer that made him take inventory of his auditory environment. He identified a slight cycle in the hum of the life support system, almost a melancholy rhythm, like plangent waves of an ocean on a gray day. A beat that said life goes on. There were also the harmonic frequencies of various electronics that were almost imperceptible due to familiarity. “I suppose this is just one of those duties I have to attend to.”

Picard nodded. “It’s never an easy duty,” Picard agreed. “Neither is telling a family member that someone has died under my command. Which brings me to the other reason I wanted to visit with you. I was wondering if you might perhaps escort Captain Janeway to see the Garcia family, to facilitate her duty.”

Picard was referring to the death of Jovet, his sister. Her family, the family that had adopted him before he had been forced to live with Sarek, had yet to be informed of their loss and Janeway would no doubt take advantage of this opportunity to tell them in person. Returning home was going to be bitter sweet.

“Of course,” Garcia said. “I would do anything for her. Did she think I wouldn’t?”

“No, no,” Picard assured him. “She doesn’t even know that I intended to ask you. I just know how difficult this is and I was thinking, since I’ve been on the Enterprise, I have always had Counselor Troi by my side to facilitate these sorts of affairs...”

"I'll offer to introduce Janeway to them as soon as we arrive," Garcia said, standing. "Thank you for your time, Captain. All of this," indicating the tea with his hand, "and our talk means a lot to me."

Picard stood up and extended a hand. Garcia shook it. There was a sudden, noticeable downward shift in pitch coming from below the floor, accompanied by a harmonic resonance in the deck plating that caused it to vibrate, perhaps from an energy conduit that ran below them. Garcia noticed that Picard had observed the same phenomena and that he seemed unconcerned.

"You heard that, uh?" Garcia asked.

"Terminal sequencer," Picard explained. "As we pass down through warp three, it vibrates at 440 cycles per second and actually vibrated the deck plate below my desk. You could tune an instrument to it. It's just an idiosyncrasy of this particular ship. Never heard it anywhere else. It's the most noticeable in my Ready Room."

"You have perfect pitch?" Garcia asked, surprised. "So do I."

"I know," Picard said. "We'll be in orbit shortly. You should go see Captain Janeway."

"Of course," Garcia said.

## CHAPTER THREE

“One hundred and six,” Tammás mumbled to himself. One hundred and six times he had been transported in his life time, as he and Captain Janeway materialized planet side.

It was raining at the Garcia estate as they beamed in. The conversion back from energy to matter was a process that reassembled the humans from inside to out, but it was a process that happened so quickly that it had the appearance of being instantaneous. The energy necessary to reconstitute the human beings was sufficient to force out a significant volume of air and even redirect the rain drops so that there was no fusion of arriving matter with the matter that would have been occupying that space.

Cadet Tammás Garcia wasn't happy that it was raining. It was raining harder than what the sensors had told them it would be. He was one of those who hated transporters and so coming out into a storm only fueled his paranoia of the technology. No one scientist would ever say, with a hundred percent guarantee, that materializing in a storm would not cause “water on the brain” or that his human DNA might be fused with say that of a randomly passing insect. He knew the old movie “the Fly” was just a movie, but he also knew there were dozens of cases of odd things occurring when transporter technology was utilized. Given the current understanding of quantum flux theory, reducing an object to energy and then hoping the conversion back to matter would be flawless every time just seemed ludicrous. Sure, they placed odds on it, like an incident happening one time out of a trillion. The odds were purportedly better for someone to win a lottery or get struck by lightening. Of course, his argument was that those odds increased when you actually buy a lotto ticket, or stand on a golf course in a thunder storm swinging a five iron.

“Are you sure about this?” Captain Janeway asked, unawares that the source of his anxiety was a transporter and not their mission. The rain didn't seem to bother her one bit. Her hair was being blown about by the off shore breeze and she was holding it out of her eyes. “This is completely my duty. You don't have to be here.”

“Yes, I do,” he said. It really was a mission to him, as he had not been home since he was forced to relocate by McCoy and Spock due to his mental health issues.

“So, you grew up here?” Janeway inquired, hoping to reduce the tension in the air.

“Not really. I just spent a couple of seasons here,” Garcia answered. “But I still think of it as home. If you were to follow that ravine over there, you would find my secret cave hideout, from which I launched myself into space.”

“What do you mean?” Janeway asked.

Tammás told her the story as he led the way down the peer. She met the story with some incredulity, but also a bit of humor.

He remembered with exacting clarity the first time his feet had met the wood of this peer. He had run the length of the dock, watching the water rising and falling, entranced by the shadows cast by the sun shining through the space between the slats. He had ended up running off the edge and drowned. It had been the first time he had drowned, and he thought it strange that once he got past the actual breathing water bit, the experience hadn't been too unpleasant. Perhaps it was due to shock. He remembered being surrounded by angels, the water itself had become light. Of course, there hadn't been angels. They had been dolphins that had come to his rescue, but he had never met dolphins before that encounter, and those were the days before he had learned to maintain the boundaries of his consciousness. In rescuing him, the dolphin consciousness had merged with him, and perhaps they would have all been lost had they not had clear boundaries of their own. The dolphins had seemed to him less like separate entities and more like the characters manifested in a dream, fluid and seamless.

There were no dolphins playing here today, which was some relief to him. It was hard to be sad around dolphins, and he felt as if sadness was the appropriate emotion he should be showing. It seemed inadequate simply to be wearing dress uniform. He should be in black. He should be crying. He reached out his hand to ring the door bell just as the door opened.

“I told you someone was here,” Natalia yelled back into the house, drawn to the door by something she couldn't quite put a finger on. Then her eyes locked on Garcia's eyes, and she brightened like the day would have had the clouds parted and allowed the sun to shine through. The sun was still there, shining down on

them, but you'd have to get above the clouds to fully realize that. For just a moment, she was the sun, the mother that had adopted him, and he felt as if he had come home.

Natalia instantly embraced Tammas, laughing and crying out of joy. Her embrace flooded him with a warmth that he hadn't felt since he was last here. The warmth and the smell of her took him back to his childhood, and the memory was so real that he felt small, his arms embracing around her knees, where as now, as an adult, his hands lighted behind her shoulders. Juan was suddenly behind her trying to figure out what all the commotion was and then he saw Tammas. Tammas had a look on his face as if he were trying to comprehend the hug, which made Juan laugh.

"Welcome home, son," Juan said, equally happy.

"Why didn't you call?" Natalia asked, backing up to take in his face. She examined him with her eyes and hands, touching his cheek and then wiping the rain off his forehead. "You are so handsome. If it weren't for those holograms you sent us, I wouldn't have recognized you. Come in. Both of you, come in. Who is your friend?"

"Doctor Garcia, this is Captain Katharine Janeway," Tammas said.

Natalia almost seemed cross. "So formal? Tammas, you can still call me mom," Natalia said.

"Are you coming in?" Juan asked.

"Of course, they are," Natalia said, dragging Tammas by the arm. "I'm just so happy to see you. Why didn't you call? Are you hungry? Captain? Are you hungry?"

"Mom," Tammas interrupted her. "We need to talk. It's serious."

Natalia measured Tam's statement and came up with the only conclusion that her mind could process. "Oh my god," she said, hugging Tammas again, beginning to cry. She surprised Janeway with a hug of equal intensity. "I'm so happy for the two of you. So, when is the wedding?"

"Mom!" Tammas said, shocked, and a little embarrassed. Janeway barely managed to conceal a smile at his discomfort. "We're not getting married. She's my Captain."

"So, they don't let Captain's marry cadets?" Natalia asked.

"Mom, Dad, please, sit down," Tammas said. "Captain Janeway and I are here on serious business."

"Okay, okay," Natalia said. "Can I at least get either of you a drink?"

"No, thank you," Captain Janeway said.

"Mom, Dad, please, let's all go sit down," Tammas said.

"Okay," Natalia said, guiding them down into the living area. She and Juan sat on the couch, leaving the chairs for Janeway and Tammas. Janeway sat on the edge of her chair, almost Vulcan discipline shining through the straightness of her spine. Tammas walked over to the piano. He was surprised they hadn't moved it. He lightly pressed down on the keys, and looked down over the dining area and out through the large plate glass window and into the sea.

"Tam, are you okay?" Natalia asked. "You act like there was a death."

"Admiral McCoy died," Tammas said. "I am here on a funeral detail, per McCoy's last request."

"Oh my god," Natalia said, coming to the edge of her seat. Juan took her hand in his. "How? When? It hasn't been on the news."

"They haven't released it yet," Janeway said. "McCoy didn't want a media stampede at his funeral. A few dignitaries will be arriving over the next couple of days to attend the funeral."

"He wants to be buried next to his wife," Tammas said.

"Of course," Natalia said. "Tam, this is your home. I hope you will stay with us while you're here. And Captain, our home is open to you as well. You may use my daughter's room."

"Mom," Tammas said, a hint of sadness leaking through. "There's something else."

Natalia looked to Tammas for an explanation, and when none came, she turned to Janeway.

"Doctor and Mr. Garcia," Janeway said, not thinking about how difficult a duty this was, but wondering if there were any better way to say what she had come here to say. "I am here to inform you that your daughter, Jovet, was killed while under my command."

Natalia's grip tightened on Juan's hand, but she didn't cry. Not then. The only sound in the house was that of the rain against the dome roof. It sounded like rain on galvanized-steel. Tammas stared out at the sea, not wanting to look at his foster parents. He wanted the dolphins. He wanted them to bring his happiness and

childhood back to him. But there was only the sea, dimly lit by the grey skies above. He could see all the tiny ripples that each drop of rain cast on the ocean surface. Ripples meeting ripples, touching, melding, and passing through the others so it was difficult to discern where one might have started and the other ended.

“How?” Natalia asked.

“Is it not sufficient to know that she’s dead?” Tammias asked, turning back to face his foster parents.

“Tam,” Janeway said, trying to soften him a bit.

“Do you want to torture yourself on the facts?” Tammias asked.

“Tell me what you know, Tam,” Natalia insisted.

Tammias closed his eyes. “Star Fleet hasn’t sent the letters yet, informing the families of their deceased. There will be quite a few letters when they go out. They will be precise and to the point. Just simple, hard, cold facts. Your letter will no doubt be accompanied by a medal or two,” Tammias said. He opened his eyes, and he met Natalia’s stare. “But even with all that, it won’t tell you the story. It won’t tell you about her bravery, her compassion, and her sacrifice. Even as good as I am with words, I will never be able to adequately capture the pure desperateness of our situation. We have recordings of the dialogue between us, official transcripts of everything that transpired on the Bridge. We have the testimony from one of the eleven people she saved. We know that she lingered in an effort to rescue or comfort someone who may have been beyond saving. We know that before the warp core breeched that she had access to a functioning escape pod. And I personally felt her life force extinguish when the ship was destroyed. A part of me literally died that day. And, not just because I failed in some way, but because of the bond that she and I shared.”

Natalia got up and embraced Tam. “It’s okay, son,” she said, seeing how much this pained him, as if she knew he was blaming himself.

Tammias shook his head, trying to push her away a little. “No!” he said, extricating himself from her hug. He didn’t want affection. “No, it’s not okay. I still feel the emptiness and I would do anything to get her back.”

“I believe you,” Natalia said. “Tammias, don’t blame yourself. She chose her career, she knew the risks.”

“Did you hear what I told you? Jovet’s dead,” Tammias said.

Natalia sighed. “I heard. I’m still processing it. I don’t know what to think yet. What to feel. But I see that you seem to be feeling it enough for all of us, so right now, this moment, tell me what I can do to help you?”

Tammias pulled himself up straight. Maybe Jovet had been right. Maybe she hadn’t been jealous just because he came into her life, but rather she hated him because he had been so needy that he had indeed stolen her family. He knew Natalia was sincerely concerned for him, but he had perhaps expected her to be at least a little angry at him as well. He had actually hoped she would blame him or hate him but instead she reached out with kindness to him. He decided he should stand on his own two feet instead of accepting her love.

“I didn’t come here for you to comfort me,” Tammias said. “I came here...” He had to process what he had come here for and found he couldn’t quantify it. He met her eyes, and found the compassion almost unbearable, and he knew it was because he had survived and Jovet hadn’t. This was a clinical manifestation of a psychological process that required time, and perhaps therapy, and something he was going to choose to ignore for now. He had too much on his plate to do.

“I’ll be alright,” Tammias said. “If you’ll excuse me I have a few things I have to take care of. I just wanted to introduce you to Captain Janeway.”

“Tam? Will you be coming back? Dinner tonight?” Juan asked, standing.

“We’ll see. Captain,” Tammias said.

Janeway stood, and he could see that she was angry that he was leaving. He was failing her. He was failing in this mission. It just made it that much more imperative that he flee.

“Tam,” Natalia called to him as he climbed the stairs towards the door.

“I’m feeling a bit overwhelmed at the moment,” Tammias said. “But I’ll come back. I’m just going to take a walk along the beach.”

“Tammias, it’s raining,” Natalia pointed out.

"It's okay," Juan said, patting her on the shoulder. He accompanied Tammas to the door. "May I walk with you?"

Tammas shrugged and went outside. The door closed, blocking out Janeway and Doctor Garcia. The door opened just long enough to reveal the quiet inside as Mr. Garcia exited the house to join Tammas on the pier. He had paused only long to get a slicker. They walked together for a ways in quiet, taking in the sound of light rain on the sand and a gentle ocean surf. Wet sand clung to their boots. The rain had subsided enough that it wasn't unbearable to walk through, but it made the day seem cooler than it was. Tammas picked up a shell and skimmed it across the water. It skipped seven times before giving in to the water and sinking.

"Haven't lost your touch, I see," Juan said.

"It's a game. I'm good at games," Tammas said.

"Yes, you are," Juan said, hoping Tam would bite at the double meaning.

Tammas didn't bite. "Where are the dolphins?"

"Oh? They're exploring the south part of Edson reef," Juan said.

"Star?" Tammas asked.

"Yes, she's out there," Juan said. "I know she'll be happy to see you. She asks about you frequently. The holograms are simply no replacement to seeing you in person with echolocation. If I'm not mistaken, Star is giving a reading tomorrow at the University. Her essays have become quite popular, you know."

"What time?" Tammas asked.

"Fourteen hundred," Juan said.

They walked around a pile of seaweed that had been brought in by the tide, and had been drying over a couple days, judging by the amount of green lost. Several crab like creatures scurried to and fro, as if protecting their dinner.

"So, what's your next move?"

Tammas paused. "I don't understand."

"Are you through with Fleet? Would you like to come home and rest? Maybe go to Vulcan and try to purge your emotions?" Juan asked.

"My emotions are just fine, thank you," Tammas snapped.

Juan laughed. It was a good natured laugh. "Do you realize, this is the first time we have had a conversation, and the first time you have ever raised your voice to me?"

"Sorry," Tammas said, looking down.

Juan shrugged. "I like hearing your voice, and hearing you stand up for yourself. Now, answer the question."

"I'm not going to quit Fleet," Tammas said. "I can't quit. As bad as it got, I performed my duties, and people depended on me. I depended on them. It was a mixture true interdependence. I owe it to the people who didn't make it out alive. I owe it to the people that did make it. We got out of there because we were a team. I like that feeling of belonging. I just wish..."

"That you could have saved everyone," Juan said, nodding. He understood that feeling very well, having served in Star Fleet. "Even James T Kirk lost people."

Tammas nearly said, "Never anyone important to him." Instead, he simply nodded.

"You got to ask yourself: Would you do it all again? Exactly the same?" Juan asked.

Tammas sighed. "Yeah," he said. "I probably would. Unless, knowing what I know now, I could go back and change it."

"You're not thinking..."

"Of going back in time and changing it all?" Tammas asked. "I've entertained the idea, yeah. But this is when I decide I have to let go and trust in a higher power. I don't know enough. The repercussions for changing the past is too dangerous."

"Great answer. Text book perfect. That will get you past the Star Fleet exams," Juan said, with just a touch of sarcasm. "I expect you'll do well."

“If I had the power, right now, I’d go back in a heart beat and rescue her,” Tammass snapped. “And I would do the same for Admiral McCoy. Damn the consequences, full speed ahead. God, I hate being human.”

Juan hugged him. “But that’s what makes you so interesting.”

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“There is no more difference in the reasoning capabilities between humans and dolphins than there are between human males and human females. There are categorical variations in any intelligence, slightly different ways of storing and retrieving information, and dolphins have access to some specialized capabilities like echolocation, but we can still reason. In the dark ages, before humans gave us computers, we were just as primitive as any human tribe of hunter gather status. We had wars between pods. We stole females from other pods. We even excommunicated members of our pods for going against group think. So if you have an idyllic ‘Flipper’ model in your head, then you’re still projecting on my kind as you have in the past.

“One of your philosophers, Karl Marx, said that life determines consciousness. He was very clear that it was not the other way around. Being raised an American gave you a certain perspective on life, just as being raised in China or Russia gave you an opposing view on life. Just as being born male and female gives you a different perspective on life. Life determines consciousness. In the same breath, Marx also noted that the essence of what separates human from all other animals was his industry. Well, if his first maxim is true, then the second can’t be. Biological constraints prevented dolphins from having industry. You can’t smelt ore or develop writing in an aquatic environment. We haven’t hands or feet, so our consciousness was quite determined, as we were stuck in a generational mode in the transfer of knowledge.

“Life determines consciousness, consequently, it determines culture. Hands and opposable thumbs have facilitated the ability to write, a skill that dolphins would have never acquired in their natural state. Because of this ability to write, to suspend abstract ideas of culture through out time past the limitations of oral histories, humans have fared better than the creatures that could not pen their knowledge to paper. The ability to write, sharing vast wealth of knowledge, is what raised the human IQ higher than the dolphin’s IQ, not a deficiency in dolphin intellect. So, because my ancestors couldn’t read “Of Mice and Men,” we were considered lesser beings. Because we couldn’t form your speech, or you emulate ours, we were considered barbaric, incapable of communicating or comprehending even basic concepts of wants and needs. Because we didn’t build cities, and construct weapons to better fight our wars, we were just animals.”

There was a dramatic pause as Star sank to the bottom of her tank. She rested at the bottom for a moment and then surfaced to take a breath, spraying more water than necessary from her blow hole just for effect. The tank she was in was hardly bigger than a hot tub, and was transparent so that the audience could see her. The dolphin continued its reading, the computer translating for her.

“Imagine with me. In your mind, go back to a time before man could write. You would find humans no better off than any other primate, if not a little worse off. Until the invention of clothing, humans were just as restricted by their environment as any ape. Restricted to temperate climates with an abundance of food and water. The gorillas and chimps all teach their young which plants to eat and which plants to avoid. A baby chimp reaches for the wrong plant, the mother chimp slaps its hands. The human child reaches for the wrong plant, the human mother watched. If the kid didn’t die, the mother would probably eat the plant, too. If the kid did die, the mother and the clan would cry to the gods, lament, and blame a mystical adversary... which when you think about it, makes the chimp a much more practical beast than man, and a damn shame they never learned to write. Had the chimps developed writing, we might have a better appreciation of the raw pharmaceutical vale of nature today. Humans observed and recorded chimpanzees using various plants to medicate various conditions, but until 1998 AD no one had considered bringing the plants into a lab to see what sort of medical value it might have.

“On Earth, in the year 2005 AD, using sophisticated recording devices and computer studies, scientist actually discovered that dolphins had names for each other. Now, they didn’t use the word NAMES, for that would have been anthropomorphic. They called it, audio identification labels,” Star paused because of the chuckles from the audience. The laughter created an interesting three dimensional image in her mind. “I’m not making this up. Go and read the journals of that time. It would tell you that each dolphin could discern the blips and clicks and respond accordingly. If they were hunting in groups, and the formations needed to



tighten up, a general call could be made and the group would respond accordingly. If an individual dolphin was called on for a specific task, the leader could call it by name, designate the task, and it was done. And that dolphin would always respond to its audio identification label, regardless of which dolphin uttered it. Humans witnessed this. They recorded it. But it was insufficient evidence, at that time, to suggest that dolphins might be sentient.

“The interesting thing is, though dolphins and whales have been deemed sentient by the new definitions and criteria that humans today observe, nothing much has changed in our relationship to each other. Computers have opened up new worlds to dolphins, giving us the ability to record our histories, our thoughts, our hopes and dreams, but still we live on the fringe of society. There are a few humans who work closely with us, who understand us, but most people who come to the waters are just tourist, passing by. We’re cute, we’re a novelty, a passing fad. I think the best example that demonstrates that we’re not social equals is when we hear your children say, ‘Can we get one as a pet? We can keep it the pool...’ Sure, kids love us, they want to be around us, but rarely have we heard a parent explain to the child that we’re sentient beings and are entitled to the same liberties that all sentient beings are afforded, as outlined in the United Federation of Planet’s Charter, and our local Constitutions. Because we can not speak without the aid of computers, because we can not travel on the land, and intermingle with you, and write, and quarrel and play, we are denigrated to second class citizens. We must wait on you to repair our computers when they fail. If we have medical needs, we must rely on you to administer aid. And mind you, I understand well the practicalities of not having hands and opposable thumbs. But this goes beyond not being equipped to perform surgeries, or to help do maintenance on a Star Ship. When the call for interstellar war goes out, do you consult the dolphins? Do you consult the whales? When was the last time the Federation Ambassadors held a pow wow on the beach, or in the waters where we might participate, allowing us to contribute in real time, as opposed to seeking our input after the fact, after the decisions have been made?”

“Don’t think that I’m complaining. Our lives have greatly improved since the invention of the Universal Translator, and the computers that help mediate our two people’s social exchange. It just isn’t enough to say our cultures are different. It is true that we don’t care as much for your politics. It is too serious most of the time, and too empty of meaning and intention the rest of the time. But we love games and we love your company. I only want to suggest to you that we were meant to be together, interdependent on each other. We have learned from you and you can learn from us. Take more time to play together, to swim, fish, and love more. Our cultures and paradigms are strengthened through communication, through sharing. Make no mistake, we are dependant on you to maintain our current world view, for the technology is not yet at the point where it completely maintains itself, and replicates itself, and guarantees equal representation and mediation under the law, and equal distribution of resources. If you pollute the waters, we are at your mercy. If you hunt us, or hunt the fish to the point of extinction, we are at your mercy. If you leave the world and never come back, we are at the mercy of nature, for we can no more rise to the stars without human intervention than humans can appreciate the depths of our songs and souls that we openly lay bare to you without us to guide.

“We have always come in peace to you. We understand our limitation and our place, but by no means are we lesser beings, or any less favored by nature or god. We are dolphins. We are what we are, just as you are what you are. Together, though, we become more than the sum of our parts.”

Pandemonium. Standing ovation. It was one thing to read dolphin transcription, but another to hear the dolphin in its own language, while the computer translated it. The University President came on stage and thanked Star. He then opened the floor up for questions. A person in the third row was acknowledged. He stood.

“My name is Mike Cordo,” the student said. “Anthropology major. You mentioned in the previous essay that standard evolution theory no longer applies to humans. Can you explain what you meant by that?”

Star took a moment to hear the question translated into dolphin speak. She nodded, a human gesture. “Hello, Mr. Cordo,” she said. “As you know, Darwinian Evolution is survival of the fittest. As a species, humans are no longer subject to that rule. Every member of society is now guaranteed a minimum level of subsistence. Food, medicines, clothing, shelter, education, and even entertainment. You have laws that guarantee equality so those who are stronger or smarter can’t dominate. Economics is no longer a measure of a person’s status. Procreation goes unhindered by the forces of nature that once dominated your species.

Biologically speaking, human evolution has slowed so much it might as well be at a stand still. What is evolving is society. More people and cultures are interacting, alien races are contributing to your social knowledge. Consciousness is evolving.”

“But Darwinian rules are still in effect,” Cordo protested. “I completely disagree with you that economics is not a factor in reproduction and suggest to you that there is still a class divide. For example, the smarter people tend not to reproduce as fast as the people with lower standards or lesser education. People are not equal. As for procreation being unhindered, I would suggest you haven’t been to a bar and seen natural selection in process. Even sociologists, such as Tammias Garcia, have confirmed the old cliché that all we’re doing is breeding mediocrity, continually lowering the standards of human potential. De-evolution can be measured in human populations.”

Tammias Garcia winced. His first impulse was to feel empathy for the man, who was obviously very smart, but probably lacking in female companionship, suggested by the bitter tone. Tammias wanted to believe he was reading more into the man’s speech than was warranted, but then again, his first impressions were usually correct. But his second impulse was anger for being misquoted so badly and he decided to let the man sink or swim on his own arguments

“I don’t believe Garcia was arguing for mediocrity as much as suggesting that people are capable of accomplishing much more than what we see in society,” Star said. “The average citizen on Earth in 2005 AD had a third grade reading level. The average American and European had an average of sixth grade. The average reading level of citizens today is 11<sup>th</sup> grade. That’s an improvement and we continue to improve in stride. But the best evidence that we’re not simply producing mediocrity is Star Fleet. Never has a finer group of people been assembled in the history of humanity, and, I want to remind you, it isn’t limited to humanity. We really need some new terminology to discuss the gestalt of intelligences that comprise our society.”

The next person asked what sort of improvements would dolphins like to see in computers. That was easy. More automation and more artificial intelligence. He expressed wonder at why humans are so reluctant to allow computers to take over more functions than they currently do, and asked why hasn’t Artificial Intelligence blossomed. Technically, Artificial Intelligent machines should be as plentiful as humans, and their absence suggested something curious. Further, Star speculated that the day that computers become so advance that a dolphin could go up to it, order up a starship that is dolphin friendly, and go to another planet, all without human participation, is the day that dolphins will be on equal footing with the humanoids. And the mediator of that eventuality, the true liberation of cetaceans, would be computer intelligence.

“Or your enslavement,” someone protested.

“Some would say you are enslaved to your technology right now,” Star pointed out. “Without today’s technology, you couldn’t maintain the populations that you do. You can not return to the original state of hunter and gatherers and expect to escape extinction. Humans still suffer from egocentrism to some degree. It is no longer man against nature. I would say, it was never man against nature. To prosper, one has to recognize interdependence upon ones ecosystem and ones technology. It is man with man, man with nature, man with machine, and man with alien that has made it not only possible to survive, but to prosper beyond anything once imagined. And, if I might be allowed to quote Tammias Garcia as well, we, everyone not just humans, have only scratched the surface of what is possible.”

Why did they keep bringing him into it, Tammias wondered. Of course, Star was his friend, so it would not be surprising for the dolphin to quote from Tam’s work. Hell, Garcia was always quoting someone else, so he could hardly complain. He just wished the quotes would stay in context. The next person actually got booed. He had made the point of saying if it hadn’t been for zoos, and traditions of keeping dolphins in research facilities and theme parks, such as as Sea World, that dolphins might have become extinct, just like the hump back whale. There was some tension that followed that statement, but Star handled it well. She nodded with agreement, but then pointed out that it is a known fact that humans would be equally extinct had it not been for alien species like the Preservers who reportedly captured and relocated people.

Star added, “And there is evidence suggesting that it may not have always been with human consent. But, as you point out, if it’s for the benefit of the species being relocated, that makes it alright to do with them

as you please. You might as well let the Borg have you because they only want to improve the quality of your life.”

Garcia’s impulse nearly caused him to contribute to the conversation, but he decided against it and simply listened to it as it played out. Star entertained several more questions. One of Star’s best responses was, “What’s so great about being human? You didn’t see the Borg chasing after us, now did you?” That drew some laughter. Star was always polite and still assertive of her point. When it was all said and done, Garcia quietly made his way towards the stage, through the crowd of people that briefly gathered there to offer thanks, or just say “hi.” Star welcomed everyone. Garcia waited for the remaining stragglers to get their fill of Star before finally approaching. On recognizing him, Star nearly came out of the tank, shouting joyously as only a dolphin could. Tammas hugged Star.

“I’m surprised you didn’t quote from, ‘So long, thanks for all the fish,’” Tammas said.

“Oh, that would have been too cliché,” Star said. “Come in the tank and let me see you!”

Tammas kicked his boots off and jumped over the tank wall. It was good to be in the cold, sea water, even though it was a confined space. The University director nearly came unglued and started to protest but then he realized who it was and that Star wasn’t complaining. He continued his conversations with the department chairs.

“The others would be happy to see you? Shall we return?” Star asked.

“Absolutely. May I?” Tammas asked, hitting his comm. badge. “Garcia to Enterprise. I’d like to request a site to site transport...”

O’Brien did the honors. In less than a heart beat, Garcia and Star were in the ocean, in sight of the Garcia’s estate. It was a good thing he came prepared to get wet, he decided. Star was so happy to “see” him that Garcia could feel his body pulsing with the echolocation, a dolphin sense that was better than vision. It felt almost like being in a night club with the base turned up too loud. Suddenly, the sensation increased seven fold, and then he realized it was because he was surrounded by dolphins. They surfaced, sprayed water, pushed up against him in the same manner a cat would display affection by brushing up against a leg. He dived with them, swam, twirled, danced, and he suddenly felt renewed in spirit, able to face the world. After an hour of hard swimming, he accepted Star’s invitation to drag him back to the dock. Once there, he pulled himself up and sat for a moment, his clothes hanging heavy on his body as the water drained.

“How long will you be staying?” Star asked.

“I’m heading for Vulcan after the funeral,” Garcia said.

“Funeral?” Star asked.

Garcia told him the news that had gone public earlier that morning. Apparently Star had had a valid point about being on the fringe, for no one had informed them of the Admiral’s death. The Garcia’s hadn’t even informed him about their daughter’s death. Tammas hated being the bearer of bad news. Star and Jovet had been just as good of friend’s as he and Tammas. Jovet had certainly spent more time with Star than Tammas had.

“I will remember her,” Star said.



Garcia approached the podium and looked out at the people in an attendance. He was surprised at how bright the sun and how clear the sky was. He was hoping the rain would last, mirroring the way he felt. His eyes met Deanna and he felt her sending him love. He looked away, swallowed, and started reading from an item that McCoy had sent him, long ago.

“The Station, by Robert J Hastings,” Garcia began.

“Tucked away in our subconscious minds is an idyllic vision. We see ourselves on a long, long trip that almost spans the continent. We’re traveling by passenger train, and out the windows we drink in the passing scene of cars on nearby highways, of children waving at a crossing, of cattle grazing on a distant hillside, of smoke pouring from a power plant, of row upon row of corn and wheat, of flatlands and valleys, of mountains and rolling hills, of biting winter and blazing summer and cavorting spring and docile fall.

“But uppermost in our minds is the final destination. On a certain day at a certain hour we will pull into the station. There will be bands playing and flags waving. And once we get there so many wonderful dreams will come true. So many wishes will be fulfilled and so many pieces of our lives finally will be neatly fitted together like a completed jigsaw puzzle. How restlessly we pace the aisles, damning the minutes for loitering ... waiting, waiting, waiting, for the station.

"However, sooner or later we must realize there is no one station, no one place to arrive at once and for all. The true joy of life is the trip. The station is only a dream. It constantly outdistances us.

"When we reach the station, that will be it!" we cry. Translated it means, "When I'm 18, that will be it! When I buy a new 450 SL Mercedes Benz, that will be it! When I put the last kid through college, that will be it! When I have paid off the mortgage, that will be it! When I win a promotion, that will be it! When I reach the age of retirement, that will be it! I shall live happily ever after!"

"Unfortunately, once we get it, then it disappears. The station somehow hides itself at the end of an endless track.

"Relish the moment" is a good motto, especially when coupled with Psalm 118:24: "This is the day which the Lord hath made; we will rejoice and be glad in it." It isn't the burdens of today that drive men mad. Rather, it is regret over yesterday or fear of tomorrow. Regret and fear are twin thieves who would rob us of today.

"So, stop pacing the aisles and counting the miles. Instead, climb more mountains, eat more ice cream, go barefoot oftener, swim more rivers, watch more sunsets, laugh more and cry less. Life must be lived as we go along. The station will come soon enough."

Silence followed the reading. Garcia closed his eyes, orientated his face towards the sun, and took a moment to absorb its warmth, breathing in through his nose, and exhaling through his mouth. He turned back to the audience and came around the podium, throwing off the props of a professional speaker to speak to the audience as a simple human being to another fellow human being, or sentient to sentient. He folded the paper he had read from and handed it to an adolescent in the front row.

"Admiral McCoy gave me that when I first entered Star Fleet Academy. I understood the message, philosophically, but I must admit, I didn't really understand it, emotionally, not until this moment. Now. Now that all the opportunities to get to know him better, in person, are forever lost to me. Out of all the Universe, out of all the galaxies, out of all the stars and planets and moons there is, there was, only one McCoy. To echo the others who have spoken today, up here, and in private conversations all across the Federation, Doctor, Admiral, Husband, Friend... Father... You will be missed."

Garcia paused for a long moment, brooding up at the crisp blue sky. "That's all I intend to say," he said. He concluded the proceedings and walked away.



Captain Enedelia Munoz edged a little closer to Tammas Garcia, waiting for an opportune time to rush in and speak with him. While she waited, she watched the high profile individuals that came to offer their praise and or condolences, while she sipped her mimosa. She took another cheese filled celery from a passing tray and decided now was as good a time as any to make her move. As she maneuvered herself in, two others swooped in towards the same prey. She recognized them both immediately as Captain Jean Luc Picard and his ship's counselor, Deanna Troi. She knew them by reputation only, but was no less honored to meet them.

"How are you holding up?" Deanna Troi asked Tammas.

"Fine," Tammas said.

"Captain Munoz?" Captain Picard asked.

"Captain Picard," Captain Munoz said, putting the celery stick in her mouth so that she could shake hands with the man. She was flattered that he knew her.

Captain Picard was amused and quickly introduced Deanna Troi and Cadet Tammas Garcia to her so that she could shake hands with his two companions while her hand was free. She did so, and then removed the celery stick, with a bite missing. She chewed it, covering her mouth, and swallowed.

"Sorry," Captain Munoz said. "It's really a pleasure meeting you, Captain."

"Pleasure's all mine," Captain Picard said. "I've heard a lot about you."

"And I've heard a lot about you," Captain Munoz said. Who hadn't heard of the man who was Borg? "I thought you were supposed to be heading to Doruf One."

"I have my suspicions that that particular terra-forming project will be delayed, or canceled completely," Picard said. "If you aren't too busy, perhaps you'd like to volunteer. We can turn the supplies over to you," Captain Picard asked.

"Actually, I'm here to collect Garcia and head in the opposite direction," Munoz said.

"Excuse me?" Garcia asked.

"I suppose I can tell you with present company listening in," Munoz said. "Star Fleet has lost contact with the USS Minnesota."

"That was Captain Heller's ship," Captain Picard said, concern evident on his face. "It would be out of character for him not to report in at regular intervals."

"I know," Captain Munoz agreed.

Tammas flashed back to a meeting with McCoy, Thalyum, Admiral Ventox, and Captain George Heller. They were discussing a mission to the Iotian planet based on a sociological paper he had written. That was only a few months ago, and now, McCoy was gone forever, sleeping next to his beloved wife, Natira.

"I've been ordered to go and investigate and Star Fleet wants me to take you, Garcia," Captain Munoz said. "I will provide you with more information once we're on our way."

"No disrespect intended, but I'm not going with you," Tammas said. "I'm going with the Enterprise to Vulcan to clear up... um, some issues I have with T'Pau and family."

"Star Fleet said you might balk," Captain Munoz said. "But I need you. Star Fleet needs you. I'm prepared to offer you an in-field promotion to the rank of Ensign."

Picard grinned. Troi merely observed Garcia's reaction.

Tammas turned to Picard. "Is this your doing?" Tammas asked.

"Captain Janeway and I made some recommendations on promoting you," Picard said. "But I have nothing to do with this assignment, if that's what you're asking."

"Iotia is four weeks away at warp nine," Tammas protested. "Don't you have any closer ships? If it is an emergency, I would think closer and faster is paramount."

"It will take us six weeks," Munoz said. "And the only thing Star Fleet has made paramount is that you come with me. The fact that you're one of the Federation brightest, up and coming sociologist, and the fact that you're familiar with the Iotian culture, and the fact that Star Fleet technically owns you, makes you invaluable to this mission."

Tammas didn't look at Picard or Deanna. He had to make this choice, not them. He just focused on Captain Munoz's eyes, wondering if he refused if she'd pull rank and make him go anyway. He believed she would indeed abduct him and take him against his will. But he would go willingly. This is what he had joined Star Fleet for.

"Very well," he said, finally. "I'm ready when you are."

"Congratulations on your promotion," Picard said, offering his hand. "I'll have the Enterprise send your things over right away."

Counselor Troi was still in observation mode, neither commenting nor questioning. He saw more in her eyes than her voice would have offered anyway.

"I have no personal affects," Tammas said. "Thank you, Captain, for everything. Counselor, I suppose we'll have to reschedule my next appointment."

"I'm sure the Philadelphia Freedom has a Counselor," Deana said.

"The best," Captain Munoz said. "Are you finished here? Do you need to say good bye to anyone?"

"No," Tammas said. "Let's go."

Captain Munoz and Tammas stepped away from the Enterprise Captain and Counselor and then she called her ship. Deanna read Garcia's lips as he mumbled something as the beam took hold. She wondered what one hundred and ten meant. She'd have to remember to ask him.

"One hundred and ten what?" Captain Munoz asked as she stepped down from the Transporter alcove.

"Transports," Tammas said.

"I'll show you to your quarters if you like?" Captain Munoz offered.

"It would be better if I familiarized myself with the ship," Tammas said.

"Very well, consider yourself on active duty," Captain Munoz said. "I'll have the duty master slot you into the rotation. You have access to the Iotian files. There's a lot there, so the sooner you get started the quicker you can advise me on what we're getting into. I'm holding a conference in one hour."

Conference in one hour? He thought. What's the hurry? We got six weeks to think about this mess. But he kept it to himself. No need to unnecessarily antagonize the Captain this early in the game. After all,

six weeks was a long time in space. Especially for this small of a ship. He would have plenty of time to be antagonistic later, after he got to know everyone.

The Philadelphia Freedom was an Oberth class starship, named after the 20<sup>th</sup> century rocket scientist, Herman Oberth. It was primarily used for scientific research, but could easily be converted to a cargo carrier in a pinch, should the need arise. The decks were not as computer friendly as the Enterprise D. He couldn't just go up to any wall and ask for internal navigation information. This ship required you to carry a Personal Access Display Device, or PADD, if you wanted specific information. Or, you could have a neural implant, which he did. Finding his quarters was a cinch after he grew bored of wandering aimlessly and decided to access the computer via his implant. At any time he could have asked one of the crew members passing him in the corridors. Some of them had even seemed interested in engaging him in conversation, but he detoured around them.

Once in his quarters he found himself being hailed, a call from the Enterprise. He took it. Had he placed a bet that it would be Simone, he would have won. She didn't look happy.

"I don't understand this," Simone said. "You and I must return to Vulcan. Together."

"I'll meet you there right after I finish this mission," Tammias said.

Simone seemed to pass through several emotions, including anger, before returning to her neutral expression, with maybe a hint of sadness if you were human and inclined to such interpretation. "You didn't say good bye."

"Goodbye?" Tammias said, pretending to be hurt. "When we're parted but never parted, goodbye seems a bit queer."

Simone put her hand against the screen, her fingers spread in the familiar Vulcan gesture. Tammias sighed, approached the screen and mirrored her gesture.

"Be safe," she said.

"I will," Tammias assured her. "Garcia out."

Simone's image vanished and was replaced by the screen saver, a star field where the stars blew like glitter across a felt background. Before he dropped his hand, the screen alerted him to another incoming call. He guessed it was Jaxa. He was right.

"Oh my god! I heard you just got promoted to Ensign," Jaxa said.

Tammias responded: "I'm always amazed at how fast gossip travels."

"It couldn't have happened to a better person," Jaxa said, genuinely happy for him.

"Thank you," Tammias said. What else could he say?

Jaxa frowned. "I only wish you had come to say good bye."

"I'll ask Captain Munoz to turn the ship right around," Tammias offered.

Jaxa smiled. "Silly. I'll see you when you get back to Earth."

"Promise?" Tammias said.

"Promise?" Jaxa asked. "Are you kidding me? A battalion of Cardassians couldn't keep me away from you! Tam? You know I love you, don't you?"

Tammias thought about it, never dropping his gaze from her, and then finally nodded. "I know," he said.

Jaxa pouted. "That's all?" she asked.

"Is what all?" Garcia asked.

"Aren't you going to return the sentiment?" Jaxa asked.

"Whether I love you or not doesn't change my situation," Tammias told her, trying not to sound too cold. "We did talk about this before..."

"I know," Jaxa said. "But would it kill you to say it?"

"No, it wouldn't kill me to say it," Tammias said.

"Well?" Jaxa asked. After an uncomfortable pause she decided to push on, not wanting to dwell on her hurt. "The Enterprise should be at Starbase 234 by Stardate 45233 if you need to get in touch with me for anything. I and some of the other cadets will disembark there and take a long range shuttle back to Earth. You'll be gone for three months I take it?"

"I really don't know. Roughly six weeks to get there from here," Tammias said. "A proper analysis of the situation could take several months. I'll probably have to change my graduation date. I really don't have any idea how this is all going to play out."

"Well, just play it by ear," Jaxa said. "You're good at that. Jaxa out."

The screen saver returned. Tammias wondered if there was a jab in that last bit, but decided even if there was, he probably deserved it. He stared at the blowing glitter of a screen saver, waiting for another call. It didn't come. He turned to the sound of a door opening, only it wasn't a real door. Duana walked in and plopped herself on the couch.

"So, how's the new pad?" Duana asked.

"It's alright," he said, frowning. "Where's your other half?"

Duana shrugged and picked up the coffee table book. Garcia left his quarters and was halfway down the corridor when he realized he didn't have a clue where he was going or what he wanted. Technically Duana was in his head, not his quarters, so leaving wouldn't provide him with any more privacy. Was that what he wanted? To be alone? Was that the message he was giving Jaxa? He called up the ship's map and searched for a holodeck. Nothing came up. He stopped a crew member.

"Um, excuse me," Tammias asked the man. "Where's the holodeck?"

"There isn't one," the man answered, pausing in his stride only long enough to give a reply.

"Recreation rooms are on decks four and ten."

"No holodeck?" Tammias asked, feeling a slight tinge of panic. Six weeks on this tub and no holodeck?

"No holodeck," a familiar voice confirmed.

Tammias turned to discover Tatiana Kletsova directly behind him.

"Tatiana!" Tammias sang, surprising her with a hug. "You're here!"

"I'm here," Tatiana said, staring at him queerly because of that hug. "Our training mission just got extended, that's all."

"Our training mission?" Tammias asked.

"There he is," came another familiar voice. It belonged to Afuhaamango, but everyone that knew him just called him Afu.

Tammias reached for the Tongan but before he could shake hands the girl to Afu's right pushed herself inside his reach and hugged him fiercely.

"Yuh have ah gyal rush me haircut o' what?" Trini asked, laughing and kissing him quick on the mouth. Her name was Indira Sookanan, but everyone called her Trini, short for Trinidad. The question that she had greeted Tammias with was broken English, a Trinidadian dialect. The direct translation was: "You have a girl rush me haircut or what." Or trimmed down, "Is it your hair cut that brings you all these women?"

Tammias hugged her, picking her up off the floor. "I'm so happy to see you, Trini," Tammias said.

"And you actually seem happy to see us," Afu commented. "You're always so stoic, Tam, while Trini's perfervid mannerisms are so loud by comparison."

Garcia dropped Trini and hugged Afu, knowing full well that the man hated public displays of affection as much as he did, especially from a fellow male. He just couldn't resist hugging Afu. "I'll show you stoic," Garcia said. "So, is there anyone else on board I know?"

"Lenar," Tatiana said. "He's on duty right now, though."

"We're all sorry about your losses," Trini said.

"You guys know?" Tammias asked.

"We were told the moment we were diverted to go pick you up," Afu said. "You're a very popular guy all of a sudden."

"He was always popular," Trini corrected.

"So, are you saying when I save the galaxy I won't be equally as popular?" Afu asked.

Trini slapped him. "You'll always be popular with us," she said, and then back to Tammias. "Rivan sends her love."

"How is she?" Tammias asked.

"She's been a bit moody since you've been gone," Afu said.

"I'll send her a letter," Tammias said.

"It isn't a letter that she wants," Tatiana said.

"So, where were you off to?" Trini asked, not giving Garcia time to respond to Kletsova's snide remark.

"He was looking for a holodeck," Tatiana said, crossing her arms.

"But this ship doesn't have one," Trini said.

"No doubt that was something Captain Munoz failed to mention in her recruitment speech," Tatiana said. And then, rich with sarcasm, she said: "What ever are you going to do?"

"I guess I will just have to spar with you," Tammias said, feigning grumpy.

"Cadet Kletsova, report to security," a voice called over her comm. badge.

"Work calls. Spar with you later," Tatiana excused herself.

As she was departing Afu declared his hunger. "Are you with me?"

"No. I don't feel like eating right now," Tammias said.

"Alright, then I'll catch you later. I need to eat before my shift starts," Afu said. "Later, Trini."

The explosion of friends and happiness was short lived. Though he was still with Trini, he felt himself sinking again. Trini smiled at him.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Trini asked. "You seem sad."

He wanted to say, "Nay, I know not seems," quoting Shakespeare's Hamlet. Instead, he just affirmed, "I'm fine."

Trini touched his face. "I'm here for you. We all are."

"Ensign Garcia, report to the conference room." The voice belonged to that of the Captain.

"Are you going to respond, Ensign Garcia?" Trini said, emphasizing the "Ensign."

Tammias shook his head in disbelief that he had already forgotten about his promotion. He didn't feel any different. He touched his comm. badge. "On my way," he said, and closed the channel. "I'm glad you're all here."

She hugged him. "You better not keep the Captain waiting," Trini said.

"That appears to be true of all Captains," Tammias speculated.



## CHAPTER FOUR

What the Federation knew about the Iotian culture and situation could fit in a nut shell, Garcia thought, and that wasn't a quip on the state of the electronic medium storage capacity. Information starts with a report from the USS Horizon, before it was lost. The Horizon's report described a race of humanoids that were extremely intelligent, peaceful, and living in an agrarian society. The Horizon went on in detail describing the Iotian's, amazed by how human they were. They could not stress the human factor enough, and it was because of their human qualities that the Horizon's Captain was more than happy to share technological ideas with them. It was a time before the Prime Directive. Their intentions were good, but the results were disastrous. The Iotians were doing well enough, but he believed they had needs that could be easily met with very simple technologies. It was without hesitation that the Horizon adopted these people, taught them to read and speak English, and left them books on agriculture, medical care, and engineering.

The next recorded entry on the Iotian came from Captain Kirk. He had received an emergency distress call from the Horizon and he was going to investigate. He was compelled to investigate, even though the transmission he had intercepted was a hundred years old due to the distances involved. This was due to the fact that the message was sent by standard radio waves as opposed to subspace radio. Something really bad must have happened to the Horizon for them to have lost their subspace radio and their ability to fix it. From the time the signal was received to the time the Enterprise arrived at the Horizon's last known position, it had taken less than a week at warp seven. Kirk really hadn't expected survivors from the Horizon, but he had to find out what had happened to the ship. Part of that was training, and the other part was loyalty; a 'leave no one behind' sort of motto. He would expect the same thing from Star Fleet if his ship were ever lost. The best case scenario was that the crew of the Horizon made it safely back to Iotia and Kirk could rescue their descendants. The best case scenario also meant that Kirk would have to evaluate the Iotian culture to determine whether or not the Horizon's crew had had a negative impact on the Iotian's culture and make repairs if need be.

The Horizon was never found. Kirk reported to Star Fleet what he did find: a world modeled after the gangsters of twentieth century Earth. Flying by the seat of his pants, Kirk put together a solution, hoping to unify the Iotian people into one nation. He informed Star Fleet of solution, and, in the manner typical of large bureaucracies, Star Fleet puzzled over the situation for nearly a hundred years before sending another ship to see about the well fare of the Iotian people. Part of the difficulty lied in the fact that Kirk's solution was "intolerable" to most of the Federation Congress. Kirk had bluffed the Iotians into believing that Star Fleet was taking over their world and that when Star Fleet returned they would want "a piece" of the action. The percentage of that "piece" was beyond reasonable taxation, but Kirk had felt had he not taken such a high percentage the Iotian's profits, they wouldn't have bought his bluff.

Just this alone spelled trouble to Tammias and he had written as much in his essay that outlined the research proposal he had submitted. Because of Kirk's solution, the Iotian's belief system hadn't been changed, but rather reinforced. They, the Iotians, would be even more territorial, more aggressive, and now that they were unified under the central theme of Big Brother, Star Fleet, they would no doubt be fanatical in their resolve to move out into the Universe with conquest on their mind. This had been the latest debate since Garcia's paper "resurfaced," and was the current subject at hand in the conference room as Tammias entered and sat down. The problem was that Star Fleet hadn't been prepared to go in and try to explain to a radical culture that they had truly misunderstood their first contact with aliens. The Iotians weren't meant to be gangsters, especially Americanized gangsters. They were meant to be something else. What that something else was, well, was anybody's guess. No one could say with any amount of certainty how the Iotians would have developed had the Horizon never visited, but they were ninety nine point nine percent sure that it would not have followed a gangster socio-evolutionary path.

The only face Tammias recognized was that of the Captain's. As Garcia took one of the two remaining seats, he took inventory of those sitting around him, pulling up the ship's personnel profiles via his implant and matching faces in order to quickly learn their names. Perhaps had he been on time he would have been introduced to Captain Munoz's Command Staff. He could see that the Captain was not pleased by his late arrival, but she did not openly chastise him.

“The most recent ship sent to investigate the Iotian situation was the USS Minnesota, Captain Heller in command,” the man to the Captain’s right said. He was the First Officer, Lt. Commander Osaka, and he summarized the details they knew to date. Captain Heller had brought his ship out of warp, nine billion miles from the Iotian sun, at the boundary known as the heliosheath where solar winds give way to interstellar gases. Before passing through the terminal shock into the solar system itself, Captain Heller had scanned Iotian space. He had found nothing out of the ordinary. There were seven planets, one of which, the furthest from the sun, was a gas giant. Iotian prime was the second planet from the sun. Even if it hadn’t been a class M planet, it would have been easily noticed by the Minnesota because of the number of artificial satellites in orbit, and the fact that the radio and television broadcast that were being beamed into space lit the planet up like a small star. Captain Heller had sampled the media and sent it via subspace to Star Fleet command. He had then notified Star Fleet that he was going in. That was his last broadcast.

Some of that media played in the back ground on several monitors in the conference room. Having not taken time to study the materials, Tammias was not prepared to comment at this time, but he was not surprised when the inquiry was presented to him anyway.

“So, Ensign Garcia, what do you expect us to find when we arrive?” Captain Munoz asked.

“Judging by some of the media content, which appears to be commercials,” Tammias said off the cuff, using a skill called “Fast and frugal” which tapped into the adaptive unconscious mind. He had enunciated everything slowly, and carefully, as if he was being thoughtful, but really he was just thinking through possible answers before committing. He made a prediction based on his first impressions of the media files being displayed: “I would say that the Iotian culture is probably on the verge of collapse.”

Lt. Osaka frowned, ingoring the commercial about guns, apparently machine gun type weapons, fully automatic, and the women displaying them. “How did you come to that conclusion?” he asked, not bothering to conceal his skepticism. “The broadcasts appear no different than what Earth was producing in the twenty first century.”

“And if you recall your twenty first century history,” Tammias explained. “It was an extremely unstable era. No matter which angle you approach it on, philosophically, politically, or economically, Earth barely made it through that time period alive, and not without several wars. The Iotians have become even more aggressive than Earth of the equivalent time period, and, if they have not found a way to curve their population growth, which I believe put them in their initial crisis and, consequently, the reason for their adopting the gangster mentality, then they will be on the verge of a global war, and or exhausting all of their natural resources. This commercialization agenda we see here suggest that they are entrenched in a consumer society and, as you recall from history, it is practically impossible for a materialistic society to expand continuously, providing every citizen with an equitable level of material comfort. The demand for status, demonstrated by a certain level of materialistic gain and power, coupled with dwindling resources, guarantee conflict. The society will eventually implode, due to typical market forces of seeking to provide products and services for the least amount of cost by means of reducing employee pay and benefits to finally having only a few who can actually afford to buy the products or services. You end up having one percent ownership of wealth, ninety percent abject poverty, and nine percent privilege class, if you consider sucking up to the one percent a privilege.”

“It can’t be all that bad,” First Lt. Simmons objected. He was the ship’s Doctor, and from all appearance, a man who enjoyed to eat. “America had the lowest poverty rates of any nation...”

“Of any nation,” Tammias emphasized. “It still had poverty. The interesting thing about America though, was not the fact that it was wealthy, but that they were using almost seventy percent of the world’s resources to maintain that level of comfort. It was out of balance and because of that there were wars. Everybody wants a piece of the action.”

“You’re forgetting how bright the Iotian people are said to be,” 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Carl Lester said. He was the ship’s counselor. “Surely they have managed to solve their psychosocio problems by now.”

“Anything is possible,” Tammias agreed. “And bright is relative. They’re bright in the same way Idiot Savants are brilliant. Sure, they can give you instantaneous results to large numbered equations, but if you ask them to make something meaningful out of the data, you might as well be asking a child to explain the complexity of Shakespeare’s A Midsummer’s Night Dream.”

Lt. Anson, steepled his fingers. Even without technological assists, Tammias knew right away that the pure blooded Vulcan was the ship's Science Officer. "I find you to be unduly adversarial and biased against their version of capitalism."

Tammias stiffened, partly because of the jab and partly because Admiral Leonard H McCoy was taking a seat next to him.

"Are you going to let that pointy eared, devil get away with that?" McCoy asked.

"I am," Tammias began, shooting a quick glance at McCoy that he hoped no one else saw, "not being adversarial. I consider myself to be participating in a lively discussion about what we're most likely to find."

"Perhaps you should stick to writing fiction and leave the hard science to those better capable and better trained," Anson vituperated.

"Why you little..." McCoy snapped.

"Captain Munoz," Anson pressed on, oblivious to the berating he was getting from the Good Doctor. "We've all read Garcia's paper on the Iotian culture. His suggestion that they adopted the gangster mentality as a means of population control and resource management is highly speculative at best."

"But it does explain the why of it all," Counselor Lester said. "That was something the Enterprise crew failed to do. Why else would a peaceful society become barbaric? If we assume that they resorted to violence because of limited resources and adopted territorial regimes to control population, then the measures Kirk took would be insufficient to change that mind set."

"Which Garcia bases completely on a data set that is now over a hundred years old," Anson pointed out.

"All the data still fits the parameters I've outlined..." Garcia began.

"Which is meaningless dribble," Anson argued. "With out reliable data..."

"And that is no doubt the reason why you collected me," Tammias offered. "I'm going into the field to collect a new data set, evaluate it, and make a recommendation to Star Fleet based on that research."

"Which will no doubt be in direct conflict with the analysis provided by Spock, who observed the situation first hand," Anson said.

Tammias started when McCoy slammed his hand down on the table. "So, that's what this is about!" McCoy shouted. "Why, I don't have enough fingers and toes to count all the time Spock has been wrong over the years."

"You forget that the program that Spock utilized to make his assessment was faulty," Tammias said.

There was a collected gasp. "You're saying Spock and his computer were in error?" Doctor Simmons asked.

"Not only was the computer program not up to the task, but there were insufficient variables entered to make a proper quantitative evaluation," Tammias said. "And that was Spock's first error. His second error was accepting Kirk's qualitative analysis as fact. And his third mistake was validating Kirk's solution as a reasonable course of action."

"A course of action that did unify the Iotian government..." Anson pointed out.

"Hitler nearly unified the Earth, would that have justified his solution?" Garcia asked, throwing the Hitler trump card on the table. "Kirk may have unified the population, but he didn't change their hearts and minds. Kirk left them believing the Gangster Book was still gospel, the end all be all of moral teleology."

"Alright," Captain Munoz interrupted. "That's enough for now. We still have six weeks in which to discuss this."

Tammias and Anson exchanged glances. McCoy leaned over to Tammias. "Bet he wants to correct her," McCoy whispered. "It's actually more like five weeks, six days, twenty two hours and forty three minutes..." Tammias bit his lower lip in an attempt to suppress a smile. It was going to be a long six weeks.

"Dismissed," Captain Munoz said, and everyone stood up. "Except you, Ensign Garcia."

Garcia and McCoy sat back down. The conference room was smaller than the one on Enterprise D, and he had to scoot in to let the Counselor and Doctor pass comfortably. The counselor patted Garcia's shoulder. It was probably a friendly gesture, but Garcia felt it was a violation of personal space given he had not officially met the man. The wall opposite of where he sat had two large windows. Stars streamed by.

Captain Munoz indicated a chair nearer hers. "Come closer, Ensign," she said.

Garcia complied. So did McCoy. Garcia wanted to wave him off, but only gave him a passing glance.

“So,” Captain Munoz said. “Are we alone now?”

Garcia looked around the room, puzzled. McCoy smiled at him and suddenly he understood. “She knows,” McCoy said the obvious for him.

“Relax,” Captain Munoz said. “Only Doctor Simmons, Counselor Lester and I know about your condition. Are you presently stable?”

“Fairly stable,” Garcia said, not sure what she meant. “For a crazy man.”

Munoz chuckled. “You passed Troi’s psyche evaluation. The problem is, I believe these manifestations of yours might be too much of a distraction to allow you to accompany an Away Team planet side.”

A perplexed look came over his face. He wanted to tell Troi he was right: he didn’t even need to be labeled schizophrenic to be discriminated against. They only needed to know you were talking to people that weren’t there, whether it was a legit thing or not. “My understanding is that you’re bringing me along as an expert, and as an expert I need to be in the field in order to provide you with a reliable analysis,” Tammias said.

“You’ll have to rely on second hand information to make your assessments,” Captain Munoz said.

“If you’ll permit a protest, that’s what got us into this mess to begin with,” Garcia said.

“Protest noted and logged,” Captain Munoz said. “It doesn’t change my perspective. You’re a liability.”

“That wasn’t the song you were singing when you picked me up!” Garcia pointed out.

“Well, that was before I learned that you were having hallucinations,” Captain Munoz said.

“They’re not hallucinations,” Tammias said. “They are fully formed personalities that happen to be sharing my living space, if you’ll permit the analogy. Look, you have Trills on board. They’re blended personalities. It’s not much different than that!”

“It’s not the same and you know it,” Captain Munoz said.

“She should be happy for getting six for the price of one,” McCoy said.

“So, why don’t you just relieve me of duty,” Garcia asked.

“I would,” Captain Munoz said. “Only, Star Fleet has advised me against it. Apparently you have guardian angels in high places. That, or there’s a precedent for your condition that I just haven’t been able to locate. This is all new territory for me, and I don’t know what to expect. It doesn’t ease my mind knowing that because of these psychic manifestations you incapacitated the entire Enterprise crew, stole a shuttle, and went off on a suicide mission.”

“I was unduly influenced,” Garcia began.

“My point exactly,” Captain Munoz interrupted. “It doesn’t help any that you’re still just a cadet with delusions of grandeur. You have a reputation for being an arrogant know it all that scoffs at tradition, likes to grand stand, and argues contemptuously with authority figures.”

“I wouldn’t say that it’s with contempt,” Garcia argued.

Munoz made a gesture as if he had just proven her point. “You don’t play well with others, and, quite frankly, I don’t fully trust you. I will, however, provide you with opportunities to succeed and build some trust with me. And at anytime I feel that your performance is less than perfect, or that you are endangering my mission, I’ll relieve you of duty so fast your head will spin.”

Garcia checked his anger. “I would expect nothing less,” Garcia said. “Is there anything else you’d like me to know?”

“I told the Quarter Master to give you three days off before slotting you in, to give you time to mourn your losses. Will that be adequate?” Munoz asked.

“I can start work now,” Garcia told her.

“Take the three days, my compliments,” Munoz told him. “Dismissed.”

McCoy followed Garcia, saying, “I think she likes you.”

Before thinking about his action, Garcia turned back to scowl at McCoy’s for his comment, only to realize too late that Captain Munoz was scrutinizing him. He sighed, believing that she no doubt assumed that the glower was for her. He didn’t bother to correct her assumptions, but only because the explanation would

only add to the concerns that she had just revealed. His career was certainly not going the way he had imagined.



Back in his quarters, Tammias Parkin Arblaster Garcia paced. “This is unacceptable,” he complained. His complaint didn’t fall on deaf ears. Duana, McCoy, and Ilona sat on the couch watching him exhaust himself. Lal was examining the paintings in the room. Troi was talking to Lal, explaining the details in the painting, which was distracting. He kept looking over to hear if he had heard her right.

“Her position is completely untenable,” Garcia continued. “Why even bring me along if she doesn’t intend to use me? My entire class schedule is now off, so I won’t be able to graduate with my friends, I have a choir and an orchestra that needs my attention, and I’m supposed to be flying with Sierra Squadron next month in the pre-qualifying race for the Rigel cup. Even going to Vulcan and completing my civil responsibilities with Simone would be more enjoyable than this.”

“I really like it when he’s angry,” Duana said.

“I wonder where he gets his temper,” McCoy mused.

Ilona and Duana looked to McCoy to see if he were being funny. They determined he was serious. He really didn’t know where Tam’s temper came from. Neither volunteered suggestions.

“I’m sure that whoever is on the Away Team will be qualified to make detailed reports,” Ilona said.

“Reports are insufficient,” Garcia said. “I need to experience what life is like down there. My eyes need to be there.”

“Aren’t you the one that was just complaining about Kirk’s qualitative response?” McCoy asked.

“Your point?” Garcia asked.

“Well, what makes your qualitative assessment any better than Kirk’s?” McCoy asked. “If you’re thinking of using cowboy diplomacy, relying more on instinct than contemplative thought and statistical analysis, flying by the seat of your pants, then you should be less critical about people who operated by the same instincts. Quite frankly, I don’t want to hear you disparage Kirk in public again. He was my Captain and you were out of line in there. Throwing the Hitler card, indeed! Where do you go from there? You better not have been comparing Kirk to Hitler.”

“I wasn’t,” Garcia said, and resumed pacing.

“If you didn’t want my opinion, you should have left my Katra alone,” McCoy snapped. “I told you not to do it and you went ahead and did it anyway, so now you’re just going to have to listen to me. I’m getting too old and tired to be having my mind tampered with by every Tom, Spock, and Harry who thinks he has the right to do with it as he pleases just because he can.”

“I did not violate your last request,” Garcia pointed out. “The way I see it is when the bell started to toll, you jumped ship because you didn’t want to die.”

McCoy stood up. “Now, you get this straight. I put my life on the line too many times for you to be suggesting that I am afraid of death. I’ve sacrificed myself more than once for the well being of my crew and people I didn’t even know.”

“Well, you didn’t have to sacrifice yourself this time,” Garcia argued. “I could have saved you. With the Kelvan technology, I could have healed you.”

“It was time to let me go,” McCoy said, softer. “All my people are gone, don’t you get it? You need to let me go.”

“Your people aren’t gone,” Garcia said. “I’m your people. And you taught me that as long as there is a fighting chance, and there is dignity in life, then you have to do all you can to save your patient, to save your own life. You quit. You gave up. And I think it was because you wanted me to experience what you experienced with the passing of your own father.”

“So help me, if I were physical I’d kick your butt,” McCoy said.

“I wish you could,” Garcia said.

“Tam, why don’t you just send down an ROV in your place?” Ilona asked, still musing on the seemingly dilemma about Garcia not being able to join an Away Team. “That way you still can experience Iotia, at least virtually. You still meet the Captain’s parameters of not leaving the ship, and if she feels the need, she could always pull the plug.”

“An ROV,” McCoy mused, sitting back down.

“A Remotely Operated Vehicle,” Garcia mused, aloud.

“I know what it is,” McCoy snapped. “I am a doctor, you know. Not an idiot.”

“I wonder how the Iotians would react to such a device?” Duana wondered

“Surely they have robots,” Ilona said.

“They don’t have robots,” Garcia and McCoy said, simultaneously.

“How do you know? Ever been there?” Ilona asked.

“They don’t have robots!” Garcia repeated, over McCoy’s “Yes.” “And I don’t have time to build a remote controlled android. Not in six weeks.”

“Maybe you don’t have to build an android,” Duana said. “Surely there are ROV’s patterned in the replicator. Maybe we can modify one or camouflage it to look like a normal terrestrial object that an Iotian would naturally encounter.”

“I like robots,” Ilona pouted. “I was kind of hoping that we could get Garcia to build a robot and download our minds into it.”

“Actually, a robot might not be a bad idea,” McCoy said.

“What I need is a class one probe that can defy gravity and can be cloaked,” Garcia said.

“Nomad,” McCoy said, reminiscing. “That’s what you need.”

“Nomad?” Garcia asked. He linked to the main computer via his neural implant and downloaded the specs as McCoy rambled about the machine. In his mind, the details of Nomad became available in three dimensions, with text. Nomad was an Earth probe that had been in an accident with an alien probe called Tan Ru. Their programs merged, and Nomad went on a killing spree, not too dissimilar from the V’Ger incident. Funny how both of those probes ended up with Kirk. The important detail about Nomad, though, was that it was about a meter in length, and weighed only five hundred kilograms.

“Of course,” McCoy continued to muse. “Flint had a pretty good floating robotic servant, which was similar to Nomad in many respects.”

“Flint?” Ilona asked.

“Flint, Methuselah, Brahm,” McCoy said. “He had many names before he departed Earth. Built some pretty attractive androids, if I remember correctly. What was her name? Give me a moment. On the tip of my tongue. Oh, yeah. Rayna. That was it. Nothing wrong with my memory. She was one beautiful piece of sculpture.”

“You mean Tam’s memory?” Duana asked.

“What’s that?” McCoy said.

“You said your memory,” Duana said. “You mean Tam’s memory.”

“It’s all the same,” McCoy waved.

“I wonder if Flint’s androids are still laying around,” Ilona mused. “Maybe we could download our minds into those.”

Only Duana seemed to notice that Tam was staring at the wall, completely zoned out. “Tam?” she asked.

Though Garcia was indeed staring at the wall, no longer pacing, he wasn’t just zoning out. He was running through a series of calculations, shifting through blue prints, and assessing material requirements. He smiled. “I can build a comparable device to Nomad, half the weight and half the size, and I can use one of the ROV body design, already patterned in the replicator. A floating robot. Necessary components: antigravity base, discreet propulsion unit, an atom laser gyroscopic device for stability and navigational aid, micro processor array with simulated AI capabilities, audio interface, miniature sensor array...”

“Hell, just drop a tricorder in it,” McCoy offered.

“Yeah!” Garcia agreed, shaking a finger at McCoy. “Force field generator, miniature tractor beam, mobile field replicator, power supply, portable fusion generator...”

“Want to throw in a kitchen sink?” McCoy chided.

“Oh, my god,” Garcia stammered, resuming his pacing. “Why didn’t I think of this? Oh my god! Of course it will work. This would so work.”

“I think he’s losing it,” Ilona said.

“No,” Garcia said, speaking to the computer, trying to construct a virtual model in his mind. “The RF modulator has to be smaller. Find a comparable component from another pattern and swap it out. Hold. Rotate it to the left. No. Try another.”

“You’re crazy,” Ilona told him.

“You may be right,” Garcia said, part of his mind drawing on a song as the other part continued to work out the technical details of his ROV. “I may be crazy. But it might just be a lunatic you’re looking for.”

“Turn out the light,” Duana sang with him. Garcia stopped the song and gave Duana an angry look. “Oh, come on. You never sing for us any more.”

“Stop trying to distract me with music,” he said, and resumed his pacing. He was reading through four screens in his head at one time. One of the screens was responding to his voice command, the second screen was responding to the movement of his right hand, as if he were interfacing a holographic display that only he could see, and the third was being controlled simply by thought, while the fourth one was responding to his pacing. He was literally walking through a blue print, his circling, reversing, left or right, back or forth, correlating to a change on the screen. He highlighted the chip alignment on the third screen in order to copy and paste it into a new location, which would make it easier to swap out the Isoliniar chips should the need arise. “Try a different capacitor. That will work.”

“What?” his three mental companions asked as they watched him circling like a hamster in a cage. “What will work?”

“No, that won’t work. Change, change, no delete that, computer, try reversing the coupling energy manifold, smaller, no, change... Alright, hold that. Run a virtual diagnostic. I don’t understand why no one has thought to do this before. It’s so simple. More simple than the one I built as a kid, and that took up twenty times more space. Computer, what just happened to my simulation? Okay, okay, okay, that’s why we’re running the virtual sim. Relax, Tam, you’re okay. Try again. Replace the power supply and go with higher terawatt... Use two of the type 4 phaser battery with two back up capacitors. Run the virtual program again please.”

“Tam, maybe you should take a break. When was the last time you ate something?” McCoy asked.

Garcia didn’t take a break immediately, but kept working until he was too exhausted to continue. It took him nearly a day and half to get the virtual model working to his satisfaction. Only then did he lie down to take a nap, but he continued his work from a lucid dream state, so that all in all, it took just over four days to complete his project. During that time, he took no calls, and didn’t answer the door. He left an automated note that said he was meditating, please leave a message.

“You really should take time out from this,” McCoy said.

“Later,” Garcia snapped, having finished his latest rounds of virtual testing. “Excellent. Alright, computer, create a replicator pattern for the ROV schematic I just created. I know my replicator isn’t big enough for the whole unit, so we’ll just replicate it in parts. Reorganize the components within the framework provided in such a way as to make it possible to replicate the whole functioning device in the least number of replications and the least amount of reassembly. That will be fine, computer. Replicate the first piece now,” Garcia said, and altered his pacing to go right to the replicator in his quarters.

The three mental companions went to the table to watch as he assembled “the greatest advancement in robotic science since Arthur C Clarke,” which came in six, semi easy to assemble pieces. They simply snapped and twisted together so that what remained of the finish product was a sphere the size of a soccer ball. He then replicated seven isolinear chips, opened a compartment by depressing a panel on the sphere, and began to insert them. Each chip lit up as it fitted into its slot. Garcia closed the panel. Nothing happened. His companions looked at him as if to say, “We waited five days for this?”

“Someone should have thought of this before,” Tammias said, opening up a second panel and activating the unit for the first time. “This could totally change the face of robotics.”

“So you keep saying,” Ilona said.

“What is it?” Duana asked.

Still nothing happened.

“A disappointment,” Ilona said.

“Give it a moment,” Garcia said. “The AI simulator is booting up for the first time and it has to recognize all of its components, virtually integrate them, then it will probably take inventory of its surrounding...”

The sphere rose from the table. Two antennae, one at the sphere’s north and south poles extended two centimeters, and flared at the tips.

“It just astounds me that this hasn’t been done somewhere before,” Tammias mumbled.

“What, floating soccer balls?” Ilona asked.

“The problem with building androids, such as Data, is it takes parts. No offense, Lal. In one sense, it’s really a waste of resources, and it’s extremely inefficient, when all you really need is a brain and a holographic interface,” Garcia said, and paused to observe what his glorified soccer ball was doing. He was receiving telemetry from the probe, now. He could see exactly what it could see. “Its sensor array is fully functioning. I can access it with my neural implant and see what the ROV sees, and hear what it hears, and even smell what it smells. Of course, it can sense things beyond human capabilities, so I have access to information like the entire electromagnetic spectrum. I can maneuver it around the room...”

“Very impressive,” McCoy said. “But how is this revolutionary?”

Using his neural implant, Garcia connected his creation to the ship’s computer in order to download the Terra Tarkington program from his gaming files into the ROV to give it a personality. Garcia’s rogue Troi program interrupted the process.

“Here,” she said, walking up to interface, as if she intended to mind meld with it. “Let me help you with the final programming...” and before he could stop her, she disappeared into the ROV. Technically, she hadn’t touched the device or been anywhere near it, but she was able to access it through Garcia’s implant the same as he had.

The sphere illuminated, shooting beams of light straight up and down. At the ends of the beam, light pooled and spilled outward, as if coating the surface of a ball. The light began to wrap around the ROV sphere, creating a secondary sphere of light that encapsulated the ROV. The light began to divide into shades, pulling and stretching. It was as if they were witnessing a human egg dividing for the first time under a microscope. It continued in this manner at an ever accelerating rate, mixing colors and textures, folding and wrapping in on itself until a glowing silhouette of a person stood before them. There was a flash of light and suddenly a fully formed, three dimensional, person appeared. She was female and she was wearing an old style, blue uniform, skirt and boots, with textured hose. It was the dress McCoy was most familiar with, since Nurse Chapel wore an identical uniform.

Deanna Troi walked right up to Garcia and kissed him hard on the mouth. “I know you’ve been waiting for that for a long time.”

“Whoa,” Duana said. “Hey, I want a turn.”

Ilona gagged. “This makes me sick,” she said, and left the room.

“But this was your idea!” Duana called after her.

“I wish they had made toys like this when I was a kid,” McCoy said.

“You would have never left the holodeck,” Duana smirked.

“Holodeck?” Garcia asked. “Who needs a holodeck when you can have a Holographic Remotely Operated Vehicle?”



## CHAPTER FIVE

Outside the door to Garcia's quarters, Lenar directed a question to the girls. "So, are you two going to draw straws to see who saves him?"

"What do you mean by that?" Tatiana asked.

"You know," Lenar said. "Without a holodeck he's going to go crazy."

"Please," Tatiana said. "He'll do what every grown man does in his situation."

"Go without?" Afu asked.

"It's not like it would kill him," Kletsova said.

"It might kill me," Lenar said.

Trini pushed the door chime to Garcia's quarters. A moment later, the door opened.

Because Garcia was not ready to share his invention, he closed out the Troi program, made the sphere invisible through holographic trickery, and sent it to its designated corner, hovering just one centimeter from the ceiling. His friends entered never suspecting a thing. In fact, as far as they knew, he had been engaged in work the whole time he had been shut in his quarters. Indeed, it had not been all play, for he was in the process of reviewing the media files that had been captured by the USS Minnesota, and Troi had been adding her own observations to the material. The wall monitor was divided into four parts and was displaying news from various cities. The sound that went with these images was muted, but there were subtitles for each. What played over his room's speaker system was a thing called talk radio, which had various political discussions in process where regular citizens could participate by calling and offering their opinions.

On entering, they found Garcia exercising while watching the Iotian news footage. He was throwing quick punches at an invisible opponent's nose with five pound weights and silently counting the number of reps.

"Tam, we've been worried about you," Kletsova said. "You haven't answered any of our emails or pages."

"Busy," Garcia said.

"Have you eaten?" Trini asked.

He thought about it. He was hungry, but he couldn't remember the last meal he had consumed. Had he been that engaged in his project? He increased the frequency of the punches.

"What are you listening to?" Lenar asked.

"They call it talk radio," Garcia offered, setting the weights down in the Replicator. He recycled them into a glass of water. "Can I get any of you something to drink?"

"We're alright," Lenar said. "But we're worried about you."

"You haven't eaten, have you?" Trini asked, joining him by the replicator. "Computer, roti and mango chutney."

"I'm alright," Tammas said.

"This is the Iotians?" Tatiana asked, indicating the screen. She was, at least, interested in the project at hand.

"Yes," Garcia said, actually enthusiastic about the work. His passion was revealed by the inflections in his voice. He was not his usual, stoic self. "The USS Minnesota recorded for over a period of twenty four hours, collecting material from a range of spectrums including AM, FM, VHF and UHF signals, coming from a number of broadcast regions planet side. Even though they had only recorded a seventytwo hour sample, they captured over two thousand channels or frequencies if you will, which means I have more material to examine than I have time for. It would take years to digest all of this. Different regions, different dialects, variations in fashion and cultures. There is a much more dynamic and complex society here than I was first led to believe."

"Come and eat," Trini ordered.

The food actually smelled so good that he couldn't refuse and because Indian food was best eaten with hands, he had to sit down and pay attention to what he was doing. The food was served on a leaf that acted as the plate. The first time Trini had served it this way, Garcia had rolled the leaf up like a big burrito and started to eat the whole thing, leaf and all, and she had literally slapped it out of his hands. He had made sure he was more familiar with her customs after that. Even so, he still spilled food on his shirt.

He noted something on the screen and got up and walked over. "Freeze four," he said. "Look at the fashion. If I didn't know any better, I would say that was LA in the early eighties. Computer, tag this scene. Proceed, normal speed."

"Sit down and eat," Trini insisted.

"But there's so much material..." Garcia said.

"Sit!" Trini said, using her command voice.

"You'll just have to sample the material," Tatiana suggested, wanting to help him with his work.

"That's what I've been doing," Garcia said, pushing more into his mouth. These were his friends, so he didn't mind speaking with his mouth full. "This is great. You're going to have to give me your secret recipe, Trini."

"Are you kidding?" Trini asked. "I would never see you again."

He laughed. After finishing the meal, he requested a hot, wet towel to clean his hands and face. There was just no clean way to eat Indian food. The girls had made themselves semi comfortable on the couch, but there seemed to be something bothering them. Afu crossed his arms, standing in the center of the room. Lenar leaned against the wall near the door. It almost looked like an intercession.

"Okay, what's going on?" Garcia asked.

"We're concerned," Afu said. "We've been leaving you alone so you can grieve, but, enough is enough already."

"You haven't left your room in six days," Tatiana said. "It's not healthy staying cooped up in this room alone."

"As opposed to staying cooped up on a ship?" Garcia asked.

"The operative word was 'alone,'" Afu said.

"You have to get out and mingle with the crew and with us," Trini said.

"Why?" Tammias asked. "What difference does it make which end of this ship I'm cooped up in. The galley or my quarters, it's all the same."

"You turned down two duty shifts," Tatiana said. "That looks bad."

"No, I gave my shifts away," Garcia said. "Not showing up for my shift would be negligent, giving it away is responsible. I have work here."

"Either you come out and play, or we're going to force you out," Afu said.

Garcia gave them each a once over, and then decided they weren't joking. "Computer, freeze and save my work," Garcia said. "Alright, what would you like me to do?"

"Come with us to the recreation room and have fun," Trini said.

"It's actually an order," Tatiana said. "Captain Munoz sent us."

"Alright," Garcia agreed, throwing his hands up to surrender.

They made their way to the rec. room on deck ten. It was more spacious than he had imagined, but a complete waste of space when one considered that a holodeck took up much less room and offered so much more. Then again, four holodecks wouldn't have accommodated all of these people at the same time, so there were always trade offs. At the far end there was a small stage and a theatre, with seating for about ninety people. On the stage two people were rehearsing a sword fight. There was a lap pool with a volley ball net stretched across it and a group engaged in a serious competition. There were two enclosed racket ball courts, transparent walls, and they were both occupied. A row of game stations lined the wall that could play practically any known board game available, seating anywhere from two to six people comfortably. Even that didn't limit games since each station could play in tandem with any other station. Most of these were empty, but there were two guys playing chess. There was a bar with someone playing waiter, and several people sitting or leaning on the bar chatting and laughing. There was exercise equipment, a quarter of which were being utilized, and a three lane bowling alley. As strange as it was to see the whole assortment of entertainment opportunities, it somehow worked well enough that it wasn't uncomfortable to see people in swimming suits, or exercise clothes, in uniform or even casual wear. People were here to relax, and for a couple of those people, relaxing meant arguing about work. On seeing the free lane, Trini jumped and clapped her hands.

"Look, one of the lanes is open," Trini said, tagging Tatiana and sprinting over to acquire the lane.

"I guess that decides that," Tatiana said, and she grabbed one of Tam's arms. Afu grabbed his other arm, and they both dragged him towards the lane.

"You don't have to drag me," Garcia complained. "I already acquiesced to being here."

"Let Trini win," Afu whispered.

"Let her win?" Garcia asked, and then looked to Tatiana to confirm he had heard this correctly. "How about we settle for a tie?"

"I would be interested in seeing you pull that off," Lenar said, hoping to engage him in 'play' sufficiently to hold his interest.

Trini started the game, girls against the boys, with Trini taking an extra turn to balance the players. No matter how many pins Trini knocked down, Garcia knocked down an equal number. After about his third turn, though, she became suspicious because the pins left standing were in the exact same position as hers had been. On the fourth turn, when he missed the same spare, she pushed past suspicions.

"I'm going to go get a drink. Anyone else want anything?" Garcia asked.

"Beer," Afu said, stepping up for his turn.

"Same," Tatiana echoed. "Room temperature."

"That's really disgusting," Afu told her.

"You're too Americanized. Civilized Europeans do not ice or chill their drinks," Tatiana argued. "And we don't eat the eyes out of fish."

"But that's the best part..." Afu went on.

"Tea," Lenar said, amused by his friends' determination to civilize each other.

"I'll help you," Trini said, and followed him to the replicator. The replicator was beside the bar. The bar tender nodded at her, but she turned to Tam. "You're not throwing the game, are you?"

"Me? No, I wouldn't do that," Garcia assured her, ordering their drinks via his implant so he could continue the conversation. The bar tender was puzzled by his method of ordering, but didn't intrude: he could see very well that Trini was upset. "I find it very challenging to leave up the same number of pins in the same position as you."

Trini punched his arm. "That's what I mean. You are throwing the game," Trini said, not hiding the fact that she was angry. "I don't approve."

"What do you want?" Garcia asked.

"I want you to play right," Trini said.

"Let me clarify: what do you want to drink?" Garcia ask.

"Stop being difficult," she said.

"How is asking you what you want to drink being difficult?" Garcia asked.

"I'm talking about how you're throwing the game," Trini said. Garcia waited. "Water. With a hint of lemon."

"As to playing right, you're making several assumptions that we're playing the same game. If everyone's goal is to bowl a perfect game, then, yes, I'm technically throwing the game," Garcia agreed with her, handing her Tatiana's warm beer and Afu's cold beer. He didn't have to tell her which was which. "However, my goal is not to bowl a perfect game. I already know I can do that. There is no challenge in it for me. Trying to emulate your performance is, however, a challenge."

Trini didn't know what to say.

"Besides, I thought that our mutual goal was to spend time together, not to try and win by traditional bowling rules," Garcia reminded her. He collected his, Trini's and Lenar's drinks and accompanied Trini back to the lanes.

"Thank you," Afu said, taking a beer from Trini. Tatiana agreed, relieving Trini of the second drink.

Garcia set the three drinks he was carrying on the table and Lenar collected his tea. The sound of pins being knocked over carried from the second lane was accompanied by the cheers of the neighboring party.

"Your turn," Tatiana told Trini.

As Trini went to collect her ball, she paused at the score terminal to reset the board. She turned to her friends. "Tam said he could bowl a perfect game if he wanted to and I bet he couldn't. So we're starting over."

“What are the stakes?” Afu asked.

“If he can bowl a perfect game, I have to sleep with him,” Trini said.

Tatiana choked on her beer, spraying it on Lenar. She gave Garcia an evil look. Afu merely grinned, appraising Garcia. No one seemed to be pitying Lenar, who had just been sprayed with luke warm beer. Trini smiled with her eyes.

Garcia stoically raised an eyebrow. “I don’t recall making such a bet,” he said, knowing full well that Tatiana believed otherwise, judging by her face.

“You’re not going to back out of it now, are you?” Trini challenged.

Garcia sighed. This was a trap if he ever saw it. If he said “no bet,” Trini could be offended because she would believe that he wasn’t interested in her. Of course, if he took the bet, it would show an obvious interest, and his friends, especially Tatiana, might think the worse of him for taking advantage of her. It was the Kobayashi Maru all over again.

“What do you get if he loses?” Tatiana asked.

“Weekly massages for the four of us, for the duration of this voyage,” Trini said.

Garcia swiveled his chair back and forth, still uncommitted. “You know, I never lose,” he said. It wasn’t bragging. He wouldn’t lose at this game.

Trini smiled, fluttering her eye lids. “So, are you game?”

Tammas did the math. If he won, he had no doubt that Trini would follow through with her end of the deal. She had hinted at a relationship before, so even if he lost on purpose, it was a fairly good bet that she would attempt to hook up with him regardless, especially factoring in the limits of recreation and the amount of time they were to be coupled up in a confined space. Sex was a natural stress relief, so the longer the duration of travel, the more likely people were to hook up. So, this really wasn’t about her wanting to hook up with him, per say, but it left the doors open if she chose to pursue it. It was possible that she simply wanted him to prove that he could bowl a perfect game. Maybe she was just trying to get him to perform at his best, believing it would bring him out of his depression. If he lost, he would have to do the massages, which really wasn’t a loss, since he would do that on request anyway. And, maybe that was the point. Maybe it was more fun to have the massages because they earned it as opposed to him giving it to them freely. And perhaps it was just the playful bantering that comes with friends and the illusion of some risk that made this “fun.” He could analyze the sociological themes all day, he realized, but actual joking and playing didn’t come as easy to him as it seemed to come for the others.

Afu hit his arm. “So, is it on?”

“I don’t think it’s a fair bet,” Garcia said, still rocking back and forth.

“Alright, how about three perfect games in a row,” Trini offered. “And I have to make a 200 average of my three games combined for it to be valid.”

Garcia stood up and reached out his hand. He and Trini shook on it. “I get to pick your outfit,” he said.

“Who said anything about wearing an outfit?” Trini asked, and turned to start the game.

Garcia’s turn fell after Trini. When he returned to his “camp site” at the table, he found a newcomer had taken his seat. She was a human female about the age of thirty seven, and Lenar appeared to be chatting her up.

“Tam, I want you to meet my friend, Nancy Carter,” Lenar said. “Sorry. 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Nancy Carter, engineering section.”

“Nice to finally meet you,” Carter said, as she shook his hand. “Where have you been hiding?”

“In my quarters,” Garcia said. “I’m being abducted, can you help me?”

“Don’t listen to anything he says,” Lenar warned her. Tatiana called for Lenar to take his turn. He excused himself.

“So,” Garcia said, taking the seat across from her that Lenar had just vacated. “How is life in Engineering, Lt. Carter?”

“Please, call me Nancy,” Carter said.

“Your turn again, play boy,” Afu called.

"Excuse me," Garcia said, taking his turn. He didn't even pause to aim. Strike. After his turn, he returned to the table, passing an unhappy Tatiana. "You could at least make it look like it's difficult," she mumbled as he passed. Lenar was back in the seat across from Nancy.

"Nancy, can I get you anything to drink?" Garcia asked.

"Oh, let me," Lenar said, jumping up. "Cranberry juice, hot, right?"

"Thank you, Lenar," Carter said. She watched him go and then turned her attention back to Garcia. "I've been wanting to talk to you ever since I learned you were aboard. I know a lot about you."

"From Lenar? Oh, dear," Garcia said, sitting back down.

"No, actually. From my daughter," Carter said. She seemed a bit hesitant, but she pushed on through her discomfort. "She's one of your biggest fans. Even has an official web site. Let me tell you, the day you approved her site, and gave her original songs to keep there, was probably the most exciting day of her life. She still talks about it to this day."

Garcia's eyes went up and to the left as he recalled all the people who he had authorized special websites. There were thirty people on the list, and they ranged in age from eight to seventy two. He identified Nikita Carter easily enough, which triggered a memory of why he had approved her website. She had actually contributed her own music, had demonstrated talent, and he had wanted to encourage her to go further. Nikita had been twelve when he had authorized her web site, which meant she was now fourteen, soon to be fifteen.

"Nikita Carter?" Garcia asked.

"You remember her?" Carter asked, surprised.

"I remember everyone I meet," Garcia said. "Not that I met her, but when her email got through my filters, and I visited her site, and liked what I saw, I wrote her back, giving her authorization. She seems like a good kid."

"Well, good is relative," Carter laughed. "Kidding. She is my daughter. She doesn't know you are on board, yet, and I was hoping I could arrange something to surprise her. Would you be willing to have lunch with us? It would really make my day, seeing her happy. It gets pretty boring out here in space, and we really hadn't expected to be out here this long, this time, and...."

"Say no more," Garcia said. "How about lunch, Friday?"

Tatiana only heard a part of the conversation and she rolled her eyes. Lenar seemed puzzled as he re-entered the area. "He's not hitting on you, is he?" Lenar asked.

"Oh, no," Carter said. "He's doing me a favor."

"I bet," Tatiana said. "Your turn, Tam."

"Excuse me," he said to Nancy. "It's a very serious game we're playing." As he passed Tatiana, Garcia whispered, "Easy."

"Just the way you like them," Tatiana returned.

Garcia lobbed the ball with anger and it landed half way down the lane, shattering the first pin it hit. Strike. As he turned to retrieve his ball, which had just materialized, he could see Trini and Afu were suddenly tense. So was Tatiana. The sound of the previous bowling ball being lobbed caused quite a few heads to turn towards the bowling aisle and their way. The sound level in the rec. room diminished momentarily. He set the next one down much gentler and immediately turned and headed towards Tatiana, not waiting for visual confirmation that he tumbled all ten. The sound of the ball sliding, then rolling, followed by the collision told him everything he needed to know. The old pins were beamed out and the new pins were beamed in.

"Is there something you want to say to me?" Garcia asked Tatiana, trying to keep his voice low so that it stayed between the two of them. His eyes were fierce and challenging.

"No," Tatiana said, not looking away.

"Good," Garcia said. "Because I don't want to do this little dance with you the whole voyage."

Tatiana didn't say anything.

"Everything all right?" Trini asked.

"Everything is just fine," Tatiana said, not sounding truthful.

"Fine," Garcia said, with equal sincerity, not shifting his eyes from Tatiana until they mutually nodded that it was over. He returned to his seat at the table.

“What was that all about?” Lenar asked.

“Nothing,” Garcia said, brushing Lenar off. He downed his Raktajino, his favorite Klingon coffee. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Is it because of me?” Carter asked.

Garcia softened. “No, Nancy. Really, no worries,” he said. “I guess you’d like to do this before she discovers I’m on board.”

“That would be nice,” Carter said.

“Can we move it to tomorrow then?” Garcia asked.

“Thank you,” Carter beamed, shaking his hand profusely. “Thank you so much. Is there any special meal requirements that I should know?”

“No limits, well, no limit as long as it’s all synthetic. I’m a vegetarian, but I will eat synthetic proteins that resemble meat products,” Garcia said.

♪♪▶

Nikita Carter was bouncing a tennis ball off the bulkhead, occasionally bouncing it off the window. Nancy Carter came out of her bedroom and paused. “I’ve asked you not to throw that against the window.”

“It is transparent duranium, mother,” Nikita countered. “It won’t break.”

“That’s not the point,” Nancy said, catching the ball and confiscating it as she passed. “Now go change. We’re having company for lunch.”

“Oh, mother,” Nikita tossed herself on the couch. She rolled so that her legs were on the back of the couch and her feet were on the window. She hugged a pillow to her stomach. “Who is it this time? That Trill you’ve been hanging out with?”

“My dating life is not opened for discussion, young lady. Now, I highly recommend you go change,” Nancy said, punching in her preset numbers to order up her favorite meal. She removed the dishes from the machine and began setting the table for three.

“This mission has turned into a nightmare,” Nikita complained. “We’re never going to get back to Jupiter Station at this rate. You should have just left me at home with Dad.”

“Your Dad wasn’t staying on Jupiter Station,” Nancy said.

“Well, I’ve never been to Vulcan. I might have liked it,” Nikita said. She tossed the pillow up into the air, catching it, tossing it back up so that it spun, and caught it again. She entertained the idea of visiting Tammias Garcia’s home on Vulcan, day dreaming of a chance encounter with him. Maybe she would build a shrine. A real one as opposed to the virtual one she created.

“You hate the sun and heat,” Nancy reminded her.

“Sure beats being cooped up on this ship for the next rest of my life. I bet I won’t even be able to go planet side at this Iotia place,” Nikita said.

“I can guarantee that you will not be going planet side,” Nancy affirmed. “The people we’re visiting have a history of violence.”

“Klingon influence?” Nikita asked.

“Old Earth influence,” Nancy corrected.

“Old Earth as in Kahn influence?” Nikita asked.

“Older,” Nancy said.

“Strange. How can it be older than that? You mean like old Earth broadcast influence?” Nikita asked. “Someone tuned in to a radio station and freaked out? What was it? Bach? Big Band? Country and Western? Without the proper context, that might mess an alien people up. Lost my girl, lost my mom, lost my dog, and all I got left is this beer.”

The door chime rang out, announcing a guest. Nikita didn’t budge. The way she saw it, it was her mom’s guest, so her mom could answer the door.

“He’s here early,” Nancy said, sighing a little. “Niki, would you at least answer the door for me?”

“Enter!” Nikita yelled.

“No! Computer, belay that order,” Nancy shouted, over riding the door control before it opened, ruining her surprise prematurely. “I said answer it, like a civilized human being.”

Nikita kicked off the window, rolled off the couch, and came up on her feet, executed two perfect cart wheels towards the door, walking on her hands the last few paces. "Is this civilized enough for us?" Nikita asked.

"Why are you being so difficult today?" Nancy asked. "Right side up, please."

"We're in space, mother. There is no right side up," Nikita said. "And you never did answer me why all ships we encounter are all orientated towards the same up."

"I did so. We recognize a universal up based on Galactic North," Nancy said. "Now, are you going to let our guest in or not?"

"Well, maybe I don't want to participate with that convention," Nikita said, opening the door providing the guest with a presentation of her feet. "Come in," she said. "I'm a contrarian and we do everything contrarily," she said.

She was wearing a black skirt, a blouse which appeared as if someone had spilled splotches of bleach on it, black leggings, and no shoes. She tumbled backwards and came up on her feet facing away from him. "You're not welcome, good bye..."

Nikita blinked once, perplexed. She turned around slowly, her jaw muscles failing slowly so that a small O began to form on her mouth. She screamed, ran forwards, and shut the door, locking it. She ran to her room screaming, saying something her mother couldn't quite understand, but a threat of death seemed to be involved. Shaking her head, slightly amused, Nancy opened the door to let Garcia in.

Garcia's expression was stoic. "Should I come at another time?"

"Are you kidding?" Nancy asked, all smiles. "I need help with the contrairian! That was almost worth all the hair I've pulled out dealing with her today. She's been in rare form. Come in. Excuse the mess."

"What mess?" he asked, ignoring the signs of life. Of course, he wouldn't have noticed the mess at all had she not brought it to his attention.

"Mother!" Nikita called from her bed room.

"Would you excuse me?" Nancy asked.

"Sure," Garcia said.

"Help your self to whatever," Nancy said, as she disappeared into her daughter's room.

Garcia sat down on the couch, picking up the guitar that was cradled near by. He examined it, checking the alignment of the neck. He strummed it and smiled. It was tuned to the D scale, which is a nice way to start learning the guitar because no matter how you move your fingers along the frets while strumming you never get a clashing chord. Still, he decided it needed a little adjustment and took liberty to do so. He had the replicator produce a guitar tool kit and went back to the couch to work on the guitar. He adjusted the neck and then tuned it by ear, popping the harmonics just for check. As he considered what he had just done, he realized that the degree of improvement would be imperceptible to any one but him, and even so, he should have asked permission. He put the tools back into the replicator and they were instantly recycled.

"Sorry," Nancy said, returning. "She'll just be a few more moments."

Garcia nodded, placing the guitar back into its cradle. "May I?" he asked, pointing to the photo album on the coffee table. Nancy consented and continued with the meal preparation. He pushed a button and watched the album cycle through the collection. It was surprisingly detailed, in the sense that there were names and dates attached to all the photos. Other details were gleaned through viewing the images, such as Nancy's husband being an Engineer in fleet. Unlike most photo albums, where the content is usually highly selective, this one had both happy and sad pictures. Of course, happy and sad were interpretations. How many pictures had he seen with people smiling who may not have been smiling on the inside? He also thought of Tatiana and suddenly realized that she wasn't smiling in any of her pictures. For that matter, he couldn't think of any picture of any Russian smiling, and that was how he determined Nancy's husband was Russian. He would have it confirmed later and learned that Nancy had kept her maiden name. Nikita, on the other hand, smiled for almost all her shots, as if she lighted up when ever a camera was aimed at her. There were moving pictures of Nikita doing ballet and tai bo, with classical music in the background. He recognized the corridors of Jupiter station in several of the images.

"Do you miss Jupiter?" Garcia asked.

"Oh, yeah," Nancy said, sighed. "I was born there. I met my ex there."

Garcia thought more about smiling for photos and the history of pictures. Historically, people didn't always smile. It was a serious affair, having one's photo taken, especially when you had to sit unmoving for several minutes for the photo to turn out. Smiling for the camera seemed to be a social construct invented by the Americans, but he would have to research that to be certain. He felt a bit uncomfortable as he moved forward through the pictures. He discerned a clear moment of separation between Nancy and her husband. From that point forward, it was either Nikita and her father, or Nikita and her mother, but never the three of them, and never again the two adults alone. He closed the files, thinking about his own life. He had a photo album that contained snapshots of people in his life, but there were no family pictures of him with family. And his album was quite empty compared to this one.

"Can I get you a drink?" Nancy asked.

"I'd like to try a cranberry juice, room temperature, please," Garcia said.

Nancy smiled. "Sure," she said.

Nikita's door opened and she hovered over the threshold, hesitant, nervous. She had obviously showered, shampooed, for though her hair was mostly dry, Garcia could see that it was damp, and he could smell the aromas she had used to bathe. She was wearing a knee length skirt, checkered in a light pink and white diamond pattern, a white blouse, and a pink sweater, a striking contrast to how he had first saw her. She almost appeared as if she had just stepped through a time warp from Earth, America, the 1950's. She smiled, a huge smile, and reached out her hand.

Garcia stood as Nikita entered, and as he reached to take her hand, she stumbled and nearly fell. Tammis prevented her from falling. She felt weak, almost drunk, in his hands, surprised by the warmth radiating through his hands into her arms.

"Sorry," Nikita mumbled, looking away.

Garcia could feel that she was extremely tense and saw she was about to break into tears. Her tenseness was probably why she had stumbled in the first place, he imagined. "It's okay. If I had a dollar for every time I stumbled, I'd be a wealthy man," Garcia offered, reassuring her. "That was my number one incentive for taking martial arts. I may not walk gracefully, but I know how to fall pretty good."

Nikita laughed, a little too easy, and she blushed from concern that her laughter was too loud. "Are you hungry?"

"I am, actually," Garcia said. "That's why I am here."

Nikita led him to the table and he pulled the seat for her. As he sat down next to her, Nancy set a plate of fried chicken between them. "Mom, he's a vegetarian!" Nikita yelled.

"It's synthetic, dear," Nancy said.

"Is that okay?" Nikita asked, touching Garcia's arm in concern. She drew it back instantly, silently reprimanding herself for violating his personal space. "Is it the principle of the thing, or the actual eating of meat that's the issue?"

"Synthetic is fine," Garcia assured her.

"You'll love my mother's garlic, buttered, mash potatoes," Nikita said.

A conversation about the food being served ensued. The tomatoes had actually come from a plant growing in Nikita's room, which made it all the more special since the rest came from the food replicator. Nutritionally, there was no difference from a real tomato and a replicated one, but humans still had a strong connection to tending plants and reaping the benefits, and that connection is what made it nice. There had also been conversation about how Garcia ate the tomato. When Nikita had asked if he would like a tomatoe, Garcia admitted he would indeed like one, chose a whole one from the center arrangement, and bit into it as if it were an apple.

"That's really good," Garcia said with his mouth full, and then spied the sliced tomatoes on the plate that Nancy was just about to hand him. He swallowed. "Sorry..."

Nikita laughed. "I guess there's nothing wrong with eating it that way," Nikita said. "Except it sprays sometimes. You've had tomatoes before, haven't you?"

"I've had tomato products, yes," Garcia admitted. "But never a tomato from a live plant."

"So, what's your favorite food?" Nikita asked. She regretted asking that as soon as it came out of her mouth. It was a wasted question, wasted time.



“Ah,” Garcia waved a finger. He put the tomato on his plate and chose a chicken leg. “That’s a frequently asked question that you should know the answer to.”

“Yes. I know. Sorry, I guess, I meant, has it changed?” Nikita asked, still fumbling for words. She was trying to engage him in talk but it wasn’t going the way she wanted it to at all. She had imagined it so perfectly, and now here he was, and she could hardly speak intelligibly. She hid her hands beneath the table for fear that he would see her trembling.

“No,” Garcia admitted. “Peanut butter is still my favorite food group.”

“It’s not a food group,” Nikita said, laughing. She watched as he ate the food, favoring the mashed potatoes.

Garcia noted she was watching and slowed his pace a little. She had hardly eaten her dinner, and Nancy was almost finished with hers. He glanced back to Nikita, who now had tears rolling down her face.

“You okay?” Garcia asked.

“I just can’t believe I’m sharing a meal with you,” Nikita said, wiping her tears.

Garcia wondered had there ever been anyone in his life that their mere presence had moved him to the point of joyous tears. Picard was up there on his role model list, but he couldn’t say that Picard’s presence stirred him that emotionally. Guinan came to mind. Yes, he could relate to how Nikita felt. Anytime he had been in the presence of Guinan, he had felt an overwhelming sense of love and peace emanating from her. Being around Guinan was almost a transcendental experience, at least for him.

Garcia touched her hand. “I’m glad to meet you, too,” he told her.

“Can I ask you something?” Nikita asked. When he nodded consent, dipping his jalapeño corn bread into his potatoes, she built up the courage to ask. “Would you be willing to create a theme song for me?”

“Does it have to be written by me, or can I just perform it if I find or know an applicable song?” Garcia asked.

“However you decide,” Nikita said.

“Give me some time to think on it,” Garcia said.

“Niki,” Nancy said, filling a moment of awkward silence. She was amused at her daughter’s sudden self consciousness. “Why don’t you tell Garcia about being accepted into the correspondence program?”

“Oh my god,” Niki said, grabbing Garcia’s arm. “The Gnesin School of Music in Moscow accepted me into their program for advance training in musicology through correspondence and a Lt. Mathews on board this ship has agreed to be my personal facilitator and coach...” Nikita paused, suddenly realizing had she known Garcia was here she would have approached him to be her facilitator and to help her with techniques that can’t be learned via mail and media. She considered asking Garcia, but then decided it would be disrespectful to Mathews who had already agreed to assist her. Still, she could get training and experience with Garcia that might count as extra credit. “Would you be willing to sing a couple of duets with me, record them, and let me post them on my web site?” Nikita asked.

“Niki,” Nancy said. “Ensign Garcia is a busy man. He can’t spend all his free time with you.”

“Well,” Garcia said, reflecting on the request, and trying to ease Nancy’s concerns. “You know, I was thinking, this is going to be a long trip and all, so I was going to see about putting together a band, just for fun and practice. Would you be interested if I got something going?”

“Yes!” Nikita shouted, clapping her hands.

Garcia glanced over to Nancy, who mouthed the words, “thank you,” and he nodded understanding. “I’ll also throw in music lessons, but we will have to negotiate reimbursement.”

“You want me to pay you or do chores for you?” Niki asked. “I’ll do your laundry.”

“No, the replicator does that quite well,” Garcia said. “My standard contract is, if I teach you for free, you have to teach someone else for free. Maybe not now, this week, or even this year, but sometime, in your life, a student will come to you and ask you for instruction, and you can’t turn them away. It doesn’t even have to be about music.”

“Wow,” Niki said. “I can accept that.”

Garcia shook her hand. “Then it’s a deal,” he said, noting the internal alarm clock from his implant. “Give me a little time to see what sort of talent I can stir up on this ship and I’ll get back to you about our jam session. Meanwhile, I’ll also coordinate with Mathews to see if I can assist him in your training. Well, I hate

to eat and run, but I am actually going to have to go to work. I've not pulled a duty shift since I got on board and I have to make an appearance."

"I understand," Nancy said, standing as Garcia pushed himself away from the table. Nikita stood as well. "Thank you for coming."

"It's my pleasure," Garcia said.

Nikita hugged him. "I love you," she said, crying.

Garcia hugged her. "You are very kind. I'll chat with you soon."



The Bridge layout on the Oberth Class starship was definitely less spacious than the Galaxy class starship. It even seemed less spacious than the Constitution Class. Garcia didn't like the lay out of his work station, which combined Ops and Communication into one, but he could work with it. Science was to the right of him and Engineering to his left. The Navigation station was forward and down, with a control panel that almost encircled the pilot, necessitating the pilot to swivel his chair nearly 180 degrees to exit his station. The Captain's chair was center stage and slightly higher than any other chair on the bridge, with the potential for 360 degrees of swivel to take in the entire operation. Large monitors above each of the stations magnified the work being done so that the person in the Big Chair didn't have to squint or ask for details. The first Officer, Osaka, was in the Big Chair when Garcia entered for duty. Osaka turned slightly to acknowledge Garcia as he sat down at Ops/Com for the first time.

"Finally decided to pull your weight?" Osaka asked.

It was an unnecessary jab that Garcia couldn't leave alone. "I've actually been working, reviewing the media files obtained by the Minnesota in hopes of creating a useful profile that will benefit the Away Team," Garcia said.

"I've looked at some of it," Osaka said. "It seems to me to be so much meaningless dribble."

"Most of it is comparable to media from the Twentieth Century Earth," Garcia said. "It really tells us loads about their nature as a people. For example, some of the lyrics to the songs I've been reviewing suggest that they are capable of contemplating the deeper meaning of life. A society wouldn't tolerate such concepts in their arts if they were only about war, conquest, and material gain."

"Well, I hope you're right about that," Osaka said. He puzzled over the headset that Garcia had brought with him. It had an arm that branched off from the ear piece to an old style microphone boom that typically hovered in front of the mouth, but could be bent away. The left side of the headset bracket was a black cushion that rested on the external ear, while the other side of the head set bracket tapered off, curving elegantly around the ear, but leaving the right ear free. "That's not the standard ear piece."

"It's regulation," Garcia said. "I choose this version because I don't like the ear inserts on the standard ear equipment."

"I think you just like to be different, and you push the boundaries of acceptable," Osaka said, turning back to main viewer, which displayed only a warped star field. "But carry on."

Science Officer Anson didn't even look during Garcia's and Osaka's exchange. He was either sending an overt message that Garcia had nothing of interest to say, or that he was simply concentrating on his work. Garcia gave him the benefit of the doubt and assumed the latter. As it was, the whole Bridge was all business, with no idle chatter. The six weeks seemed to be getting longer, Garcia thought. His training mission under the command of Captain Janeway had passed much more quickly.

Garcia's station showed him that intra-ship communication levels were normal, and he could listen in to any by directing it to his head set, or out loud over his station's intercom, or by displaying the text transcriptions on one of the seven monitors available to him. The Com/Ops Officer before him had been listening to an exchange between two department heads over the intercom, but the volume level was low enough that it wasn't disruptive to other Bridge activities. Garcia relieved the man and set about the task of configuring his station to draw on his own personal idiosyncrasies, increasing the amount of information being displayed ten times past what the average human could efficiently monitor. Indeed, the only other person on board that might have been able to keep up with Garcia was Lt. Anson, but the Vulcan would probably still suggest a more efficient system for optimizing data projection. Garcia's set up was for him, though, not to appease a Vulcan sense of order. In addition to his Bridge duties, he chose to listen to one of the Iotian

recordings, directing it to his headset. He also delegated some computer time to searching for poetry and or lyrics to come up with a theme song for Niki. Via his implant, he instructed the computer to do a search by theme or actual words of a song based on his esoteric list, which included: flying, falling for a celebrity, music, stars, milky-way galaxy, fried chicken, wind, soul, earth, Jupiter station, dancing, martial arts...

"Um, Commander," tactical Officer, 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Owen chimed up. "There's a ship on the far end of our long range sensor, and it appears to be on an intercept course with us."

Osaka seemed grateful for the distraction. Anything to break the monotony of second shift. "One of ours?"

"It's Ferengi," Garcia announced.

Osaka, Owens, and Anson looked at Garcia for an explanation. Helm started to turn around, but then decided he would just stay focused, watching the computer fly the ship. Garcia felt compelled to respond to Osaka's questioning gaze.

"All ships emit a particular subspace wave distortion as they warp space," Garcia said. "Ferengi ships, for some unexplained reasons, create a specific noise interference on the lower subspace bands, outside of the normal Star Fleet channels."

"And you just happen to be monitoring these unused channels?" Anson asked.

"Just trying to be thorough, Sir," Garcia said.

"I've never heard of identifying a ship in this manner," Osaka said, turning to his science officer.

Anson frowned. "All objects in space emit some sort of energy signature," Anson agreed. "But I, too, have never heard of identifying a ship by the distortions it makes through subspace."

"In the old days a submarine commander could tell you the type of ship passing over head just by engine noise alone," Garcia offered. "Same principle here."

"I got a make on it," Owens announced. He smiled at Garcia. "It is Ferengi. And they're still on an intercept course with us."

"Interesting," Osaka said. "Let me know if it closes within five light years of us."

Garcia turned back to his duties, alert for any possible communications from the Ferengi vessel. He noted three planet to planet, subspace communiqués one of which required a relay and boost through the Philadelphia Freedom's subspace antennae. He validated the sending planet's code and relayed the message, as per the Federation Charter's agreement with the said planet.

"The Ferengi ship is passing through our five light year perimeter," Owens announced.

"Garcia, see if you can hail that ship," Osaka said.

"Approaching Ferengi vessel," Garcia announced over standard frequencies, but directing the signal in such a manner that the approaching craft could not mistake that the message was for anyone but them. "This is USS Philadelphia Freedom. Please respond."

"Philadelphia Freedom," came a reply, audio only. "This is the starship Oman, requesting you heave-to in order to facilitate the exchange."

Garcia waited for Osaka to give him instructions. "What exchange?" Osaka asked, and when Garcia didn't do anything, he prompted Garcia with both hands. "Ask him what exchange."

"Starship Oman, clarify your intentions. What exchange?" Garcia asked.

"Who are we speaking with?" came the reply. "Is this the Captain?"

"I'll take it from here, Ensign," Osaka said, frustrated. "You're going to have to learn to be more assertive."

Garcia did a double take. That was exactly what Munoz was advising him against, without actually coming out and saying as much. He pushed down on his frustration, opened the Bridge audio, and nodded to Osaka that he was on.

"This is Commander Osaka. Declare your intentions," the First Officer said.

"I will speak only to your Captain," challenged the caller.

Osaka mumbled, "How does he know I'm not the Captain?" Louder, he said, "The Captain is not available, so perhaps you will communicate with me."

Garcia verified the loss of transmission and took a moment to read the sensor sweep on the approaching ship. They were close enough now that the sensor clearly indicated that their subspace radio

circuitry was functioning. “The communication exchange was terminated,” Garcia said. “There is nothing wrong with their equipment.” He’d stake his reputation on that.

Osaka muttered a curse. “Alert the Captain,” Osaka said.

Garcia sighed, not really wanting to bother the Captain when she was off duty. Hopefully, she wasn’t too indisposed. “Bridge to Captain,” Garcia said.

She answered almost immediately. “Garcia, is that you?”

“Yes, Sir,” Garcia said. “A Ferengi vessel, the Oman, is approaching, and would like to speak with you.”

“What do they want?” the Captain asked.

“To speak with you,” Garcia repeated, and then because of the way Osaka was glaring at him, he added: “Something vague concerning an exchange.” Only Five weeks, one day, sixteen hours, forty seven minutes to go, he thought.

“Patch them through to my quarters,” Garcia said. “I’ll take it down here.”

“Aye, Captain,” Garcia said, and went about his businesses of re-establishing a connection to the Oman. “I have Captain Munoz standing by to speak with you. Will you reply?”

“My DaiMon is ready to speak with her,” said the Ferengi on the other end. Garcia wondered if his counterpart was equally frustrated by the game being played. What was his station like? Did he enjoy his job?

Garcia hung on the line only long enough to verify the call went through. He turned off his channel, following Star Fleet protocol.

“I’d like to hear that,” Osaka said.

“Sorry,” Garcia said. “I can not allow eaves dropping on my shift.”

“Excuse me?” Osaka asked. “I’ll make it an order.”

“You can’t give me an order that violates Star Fleet’s code of ethics,” Garcia said.

“The Captain and I have an arrangement, and unless she specifically requests privacy, I am required to listen to her conversations in order that I might be prepared to act according to her needs,” Osaka said.

“That may be, but since I have not been informed of such a procedure, I am unable to comply with your request,” Garcia held firm. A light on his panel went out, indicating the Captain and the DaiMon were finished discussing the matter.

Osaka sat there, fuming, but he didn’t say anything further. Owens found something else to occupy him at his station. So did the Science officer, Anson, and the Helm Officer Al Hubenka. A light on Garcia’s panel lit up, and the Captain’s voice rang out.

“Captain to Bridge. Why haven’t we come out of warp yet?” Munoz asked. She didn’t sound amused, but whether it was because of her conversation, or the fact that Garcia may have mishandled this ship’s standard operating procedure, was anyone’s guess.

“I’m sorry, Captain,” Osaka said, his eyes boring a hole in Garcia. “What are your orders?”

“Bring us out of warp,” Captain Munoz snapped. The helm immediately responded to the Captain’s request. “And have Security Chief Owens meet me at transporter room four.”

“He’s on his way,” Osaka said, glancing at Garcia to see if he would page Owens replacement at tactical without being instructed to do so.

Garcia was already alerting the next officer in the cue that their presence was now required on the Bridge.

♪♪▶

Owens slid to a halt at the transporter room, and then entered slowly, trying to look dignified. Captain Munoz was there, pacing. The transporter technician on duty, a cadet Jody Newell, stood waiting.

“What took you so long?” Munoz demanded.

“Um, Garcia was all about protecting your privacy on that call,” Owens said.

Munoz rolled her eyes. “Did anyone give him my SOP?” she asked, referring to her Standard Operating Procedures.

Owens shrugged. “So, what’s the deal?”

The Captain tapped her badge. “Garcia, notify the Oman that we’re ready to receive their party.”

“Aye,” Garcia responded over the transporter intercom system’s speakers.

“Got them,” Newell said. “Transport commencing.”

Four Ferengi appeared in the transporter alcove. At first they were all standing up right, but then one stepped forward, and the two furthest back began to drag and wave their arms, slumping in something that might have seemed like dancing chimpanzees as they cowed behind the second one, standing tall, but remaining on the pad. They moaned and complained about the clothed women, apparently experiencing culture shock.

“Oh, give it a rest,” the first one snapped at them and they paused behind the second, peering out from either side of him. He turned back to the Captain, smiling broadly, and held out his hand in a very controlled human gesture. “I’m DaiMon Tolro. You were chosen to facilitate an officer exchange.”

“Excuse me?” Captain Munoz asked.

He held up a standard Ferengi PADD, changing it to English before offering it to her. “I have a contract right here. It says you will participate in an officer exchange program.”

“Look, DaiMon Tolro,” Captain Munoz said, trying to sound patient. “I’m on an investigative mission, possibly a rescue mission, and I don’t have time to nurse maid an officer exchange.”

“But you will exchange officer with the Klingons?” the Ferengi asked.

“I never participated in an officer exchange period, much less with the Klingons,” Munoz assured him.

“It says right here, on star date 42506.5 that there was an officer exchange with the Klingon vessel Pagh and the USS Enterprise, condoned by Star Fleet,” DaiMon Tolro said. “We, the Ferengi Alliance, were not invited to participate. I find this discrimination absolutely abominable. You Feds are all talk. You say you want peaceful relations with us, but every time an opportunity comes along where we might actually have a cultural exchange, you dismiss us.”

“I’m not dismissing you,” Captain Munoz said with extreme patience. “I’m happy to hear that you are willing to broaden your horizons. It’s just not going to be today, on my ship.”

“According to this, Star Fleet says otherwise,” DaiMon Tolro said. “Unless, you want to start an interstellar incident, I think you should reconsider your position.”

Munoz grabbed the PADD from Tolro, startling him enough that he yelled out and brought his arm up to protect his head. The two littlest ones began their primitive dance again, arm swinging, hands dragging the ground. “I’m not going to hit you,” Munoz assured him. “If you learn anything here today, at least know we don’t hit unless seriously provoked, and even that is in self defense.”

Munoz scrolled through the electronic document. It actually seemed to be in order. “Would you excuse me a moment?” Munoz asked.

“Of course,” DaiMon Tolro said, smiling ingratiatingly.

That smile didn’t help Munoz to feel less suspicious. It took all her strength just to keep from barfing at the smell of his breath. Before exiting the transporter room, she communicated to Owens that he was not to let them leave this room with a mere flash of her eyes. She went across the corridor and entered a small armory. She activated one of the monitors inside, looking around at all the weapons locker. It was a tight fit in this particular armory, but all she needed was a screen. “Captain to Bridge,” she called, rereading the Ferengi PADD.

“Bridge here,” Garcia answered. “Go ahead, Captain.”

“Patch me through to Star Fleet Command. I want to speak to Admiral Warren,” Munoz ordered. “And, Garcia, let Osaka listen in.”

“Aye, Capatin,” Garcia answered.

A moment later an Admiral appeared on her screen. Garcia made the audio available to the Bridge crew, as well as a split image of the two callers on the main viewer. “Ah, Captain Munoz. How are you today?”

“Warren,” Munoz went right to business. “Did you authorize this officer exchange with the Ferengi ship, Oman?”

“Nice to see you, too,” Warren said. “And, yes, I did.”

“You know I don’t have time for this,” Munoz said. “We’re on an important mission.”

“You only have roughly five more weeks of space travel to go. I think you can spare a couple of those weeks to participate in a cultural exchange event,” Warren said.

“None of my Officers are going to volunteer for an exchange with the Ferengi,” Munoz said.

“I’m sorry to hear that prejudice runs so deep on one of our ships,” Warren said. “If no one volunteers, assign one.”

“This is really ill timing and you know it,” Munoz said. “I have cadets on board, and I can’t spare my experienced officers. Surely there is someone else...”

“Less busy?” Warren offered. “Or, how about, less important? Captain, in the interest of interstellar harmony, on behalf of the Federation, and on the orders of Star Fleet command, you are hereby authorized to participate in this officer exchange program. Make it happen. Star Fleet out.”

“Osaka?” Munoz said more than asked, crossing her arms.

“I’m on it,” Osaka said, knowing exactly what she was looking for. He needed to scrounge up a volunteer to spend a couple of weeks on a Ferengi Starship.

Munoz crossed the corridor and entered the transporter room.

“I really must protest this delay and this treatment,” DaiMon Tolro turned on her as she entered. He took a step back as she raised her hand suddenly, and then realized she was merely handing him back his PADD.

“I’m sorry,” Captain Munoz said. “Admiral Warren takes full responsibility for the delay, as he failed to notify me that I should be expecting you. Now that the red tape is out of the way, can I assume one of these is the Officer you’re providing us with?”

“Indeed,” Tolro said, pointing to the Ferengi not dancing, and still not slumping. “This is my First Officer, Brock. The two behind him are his attendants.”

“This exchange is for one Officer,” Munoz pointed out. “My officers don’t have servants, so Brock will have no servants.”

“Of course, I understand completely. If Brock has servants, then all your officers would want servants. I will take them back with me,” Tolro acquiesced, offering a two palm’s up gesture. “And, what sort of Officer will I be getting?”

“One of Star Fleet’s finest, I assure you,” Munoz said, and, as if on cue, A Lt. Stogner entered, a bag slung over his shoulder.

“Captain,” Stogner said. “Reporting for volunteer duty.”

“Thank you, Lt.,” Munoz said. She didn’t have to say that she appreciated the sacrifice. “We’ll see you back soon.”

He nodded and stepped up on the transporter platform, while the Ferengi known as Brock came down.

“Take good care of my Officer,” Tolro said, stepping up with a salute farewell.

“I will. Please do the same for mine,” Munoz said.

“Of course,” Tolro said. “I wouldn’t dream of letting anything happen to him. Beam us back.”

Newell transported them over to the Ferengi ship and powered down the system.

Munoz turned to Brock. “So, Brock, what field do you specialize in?”

“Communications,” Brock answered.

“Interesting. Lt. Owens, take Brock down to Sickbay and have the Doctor run him through the standard physical assessment, which all new officers must comply with, and then assign him to one of the guest quarters,” Munoz instructed. “I’ll assign a member of the communication department to guide you on your stay, Brock.”

“You are most generous,” Brock said.



The rest of Garcia’s shift was rather uneventful, except for the appearance of the Captain who went right to his station and handed him a PADD. Listed on the PADD was her standard operating procedures for all Bridge Personnel.

“Take some time to get acquainted with it, please,” Captain Munoz said, turned and exited the Bridge.

Garcia felt rather small, but no one on the Bridge snickered or gave him any glances. In fact, they went so far to the other extreme that it seemed as if they were purposely shunning him. True, Garcia could

have accepted Osaka's statement on faith value and allowed him to eavesdrop on the Captain's conversation. Worst case scenario was that the Captain would have been mad at him for doing so. No worse than his current plight. Since he was pretty much left alone, with the only discourse being those necessary to comply with his function on the Bridge, he was left to his own devices. He revisited Niki's web site and studied some of her musical performances. A true musician, she had a sampling of her favorite compositions and genres from various eras of music and then her attempts to emulate them. He did notice a slight weakness maintaining tempo and considered some lessons plans that might help her with the same.

He was glad when the Op's Officer came to relieve him from his shift. He took the lift down by himself and returned to his quarters. The first thing he did was replicate a metronome as a gift for Niki. The next thing he did was bring his HROV down for a sparring match.

## CHAPTER SIX

Garcia was watching one specific Iotian news channel while simultaneously doing reps, holding ten pound weights. “Come,” he said in response to the door chime, staying focused on the news cast. The chime rang again and he went to the door and opened it manually. Niki was there smiling up at him.

“Hey, Tam...” She was professionally dressed, holding a PADD.

Tam frowned. “I’m sorry, Niki, but to visit my quarters you have to schedule an appointment and be accompanied by your mom.”

Niki frowned. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I just wanted your opinion on this music research paper I wrote. The intern gave me a C and I am thinking of appealing to the professor to have it re-evaluated for a higher grade but I thought I would check with you before I did...” Niki pursed her lips into a pout and rocked forwards on her toes, hopeful.

Garcia frowned, giving in. “Computer, pause my work,” he said, and stepped out into the corridor. “Walk with me.”

Niki immediately started walking, struggling to keep up the pace. “So, would you mind reading it?” Niki asked, offering the PADD

“I’m reading it now,” Garcia admitted.

“Oh?” Niki asked, looking to her PADD and back to Garcia. “Oh, your implant!”

Before they rounded the corner, Garcia had read the paper. He grunted. “And she gave you a C?”

“I know, right?” Niki said. “I think it’s at least a B paper.”

“No, it’s not,” Garcia corrected. “I would have flunked you.”

“What?” Niki nearly stumbled over her own two feet. “But why? Did you read it or just scan it? Surely you couldn’t have read the whole thing so quickly.”

Garcia paused in his walking and looked at her. Niki looked up to him, wanting to understand, but she was conflicted by the emotions she was feeling, unable to separate Garcia’s dissatisfaction with the paper from a perceived dissatisfaction with her.

“You want my opinion?” he asked her

Niki nodded. Garcia turned and continued walking the corridor and she hustled to keep up. “You always walk this fast?”

“The basic premise of your research paper was a dialectic on popular 80’s music,” Garcia said.

“Right,” Niki said.

“Which 80’s?” Garcia asked. “The 1880’s? The 1380’s? Maybe 2180?”

“Surely you can tell by the context I’m discussing the 1980’s,” Niki complained.

“Of course I can. I imagine your professor can. And so could any computer that graded this paper, but can the intern? Not likely, and she shouldn’t have to struggle or do her own research to end up on the same page as you. That’s the purpose of the research paper, to define the parameters for those who lack knowledge on the topic you’re discussing. You’re writing a college level paper here, Niki. Clarity is of the utmost importance. I would require more specificity from you. You need to literally say 1980’s. You also need to say Earth, because Vulcan 1980’s isn’t anything comparable to Earth’s 1980’s. And you can go deeper than that by discussing regions because America’s 80’s won’t be the same as the European 80’s and the Asian’s 80’s. There will be similarities, because America was the great influencer of music at that time, but the other regions deserve their own scrutiny.”

Niki pouted. “I see your point,” she conceded.

“Next issue,” Garcia said, ignoring how her shoulders slumped at the realization there was more than one issue. “It appears that your definition of popular music is what appeals to you, not necessarily what appealed to the society of that time. That’s fine, you can go that way, but then you’re not writing a research paper but rather a personal essay, and doing that could be made better by you discussing the various tonalities of the works in questions. Perhaps do a compare and contrast, explain why and how certain musical compositions moved you emotionally and intellectually. If you go the research route, you need to define popularity in terms of sales, frequency of air time, or the longevity of a particular musical group or composition.”

“And the frequency of downloads?” Niki added.



“I don’t think the downloading of music took off until late 1990s, Western Civilization. In the 80’s, most people around the world had access to some form of media, radio, tapes, maybe eight tracks, but reel to reels were dead by then, but computers were still limited in numbers and sophistication,” Garcia said.

Garcia came to halt in front of the door to his quarters, for they had made a complete circuit of the deck. Niki sighed, realizing her time with Garcia was up. “I guess I should postpone the appeal process,” she said. “I’m sorry I bothered you.”

“No worries,” Garcia said. “I know you are capable of writing a better paper. Reread the interns critiques, rewrite your paper, and then resubmit it to the same intern, and be sure to send her a note thanking her for her evaluation and ask her kindly to consider reading your rewrite and ask if she will consider reevaluating your grade for this particular project.”

“I’ll do that,” Niki said, and then hugged Garcia. “Thank you, Tam.”

“Hang on a second,” Garcia said, disappearing into his quarters. He came back out and handed her the metronome.

“What’s this for?” Niki asked.

Garcia looked at her. “You’re joking?”

“Well, obviously it’s a metronome, but I don’t need it,” Niki said. “I like being free to change the rhythms according to my musical whims.”

“Changing rhythm and changing tempo is two different things,” Garcia said. “You’re expressions of musical phrases are good, but could be better. I have assigned you some exercises for you to do with the metronome. Let me know when you’ve completed the first five.”

Niki sighed. “Okay,” Niki said. She walked heavily away as if a weight had been added to her shoulders.

Garcia entered his quarters and returned to his previous activity of reviewing the Iotian materials while exercising. He didn’t make it to ten in his reps when the door chimed again. He called, but whoever it was did not enter. He went to the door, imagining Niki had returned.

Trini smiled at him. “Surprise.”

“Hey,” he said. “Come in.”

Garcia returned to his position center of his room, took a fighter stance, and began throwing punches with the weights still in hand, watching the video. After a moment he noticed that Trini was still in the door way.

From Trini’s perspective, she was leaning seductively in the doorway, wearing a modern day Indian Sari. He looked to her confused. “Yes?” he asked.

“Well?” she asked.

He blinked. “Did I miss something?”

“I don’t know, have you?” Trini asked.

“You want me to come out?” Garcia asked.

“No,” Trini said.

“Are you coming in?” Garcia asked.

“Are you inviting me?” Trini asked.

“You’re always welcome,” Garcia said, returning his focus to the news and accelerating his punches.

Trini entered, the door closed, and she leaned back against his desk, watching him. “So, are we alone?” she asked, trying harder to get his attention.

Garcia looked around. “Yeah,” he said, not being sarcastic. He knew she meant his invisible friends.

“Tam, do you not like me?” Trini asked.

Garcia stopped his reps, puzzled by the question, and puzzled by the negative in the question. “Where did that come from?”

“Well, you didn’t invite me in. You didn’t offer me a seat. You didn’t offer me a drink. You are all but ignoring me,” Trini complained.

“Okay, back the starship up, I’m lost. I recall inviting you in,” and then started quoting himself in a mocking voice, “Come in. Enter? Opening the door, oh, come in.”

“I’ve seen you give complete strangers more courtesy than you are showing me,” Trini said.

Garcia walked over to the replicator, placed the weights inside it, and recycled them. Turning his attention back to Trini, he said, "You believe I was being discourteous or inattentive."

"Both, neither, I don't know," Trini said.

"Well, I don't know either. You want something to drink?" Garcia asked.

"No," Trini said.

Garcia sighed. "I think there is a misunderstanding here somewhere, perhaps on misplaced expectations? My working assumption is that we are friends and that you are always welcome here, you can make yourself comfortable, if you want something to eat or drink, you know how to get it, and if there is something more you want, you can always ask me."

"I want you, Tammass," Trini said.

"Computer, freeze video," Garcia said, divesting himself of all distractions save Trini. He noticed that she was suddenly very aware of his change in intensity and focus on her. To hide the fact that her hands were trembling, she held on to the sides of his desk. He gently took her right hand in his. "I'm not going to cash in on that bet."

"Why?" Trini asked. "Is there something wrong with me?"

"Oh, Trini, there is nothing wrong with you," Garcia said.

"Then why?" Trini asked.

"I am unable to make a commitment to you," Garcia said.

"Whoa, I'm not asking you to marry me," Trini said, hugging him. "I thought I'd lost you when I heard the Chance had been destroyed. I don't want to go through the rest of my life with you not knowing just how much I love you."

"I don't know what to say," Garcia said.

"You don't have to say anything," Trini said. "Just love me."

"No," Garcia said.

"Why?" Trini asked. When he said nothing, she continued. "Tell me you don't love me and I'll leave." Still nothing. "Even if you don't love me to the same degree it doesn't mean this won't work out or that we can't find a way to be happy when we're together. It's not like there's a holodeck, and it is going to be a long trek, and..."

"The holodeck is fantasy," Garcia said. "This is real life and it's messy and it hurts and there are no happy, magical endings. Trini, we are friends!"

"I resent that excuse," Trini snapped, pushing him away. "Who else would you sleep with? Your enemy? You didn't hesitate to start sleeping with Rivan."

"A different set of social structure defines my relationship with her," Garcia said.

"What social structure? It's not like there's a contract between the two of you," Trini said. "And I'm not asking you for a contract. It's just healthy entertainment between two consenting adults, while we're trapped together on a ship."

Garcia led her to the door. "I'm flattered, and I'm very attracted to you, on more than one level, but I choose not to accept this offer at this time."

Trini seemed confused. He kissed her forehead, almost too paternally for her. "You best go," he said. "I have a lot of work to do to prepare the Away Team for what to expect."

Trini departed without further word and as she departed his two side kicks, Duana and Ilona, entered. Garcia ignored the internal dialogue of his companions. They both were acting shocked by Garcia refusing Trini's offer of Romance, but each for different reasons. Duana had been cheering for him. Ilona had been assigning disparaging labels on Trini. He didn't feel the need to explain it to them, but between them, their language, and the memory of Trini touching him just a few moments earlier had caused him to reach sufficient frustration that he was tempted to call his HROV-Deanna down from her corner to relieve some tension. He considered something the real Deana Troi had said. Perhaps his fantasy life on the holodeck was holding him back from making a solid connection with a live female. He decided not to think of it and forged on with his work.

Garcia sat in his chair, watching multiple channels of media, with subtitles, while simultaneously listening to the radio. He tuned into a music station for a change and discovered a big band piece that was

vaguely reminiscent of Glenn Miller's "In the Mood." Between songs were commercials, which often prompted him to tune in another music channel. He absolutely loathed the commercials. He especially hated the fact that some of them had such potent jingles that they got stuck in his head for hours. It was often so difficult to shake them that he would have to take a break from work to play a guitar and try and replace the commercial's jingle with another song. Duana and Ilona made a game of retuning him to the jingle the moment he thought he had freed himself. They were quite amused with the new game. He would have killed them if it hadn't meant suicide.

After he had managed to escape the latest jingle, he returned to the Iotian radio station that he had been listening to, telling the computer to skip through advertisements, and jump music stations periodically. He tried playing along with the song on the radio with his guitar when Duana got him back on the jingle, which strangely fit the composition he was listening to, even though some of the chords on his guitar clashed.

The door chimed.

"Come," he invited.

No one entered but the chime rang again. Welcoming the break from his personal torture, he cradled his guitar and answered the door. Tatiana was there, her fists clenched as if she were ready to fight. He motioned her in.

"Can I get you something to drink?" Garcia asked, trying to be a little more thoughtful after being so readily chastised by his other room-mate.

She waited to speak until the door closed. "What did you do to Trini?" Tatiana asked.

"I didn't do anything to Trini," Tam said.

"Then why is she in her room crying her eyes out?" Tatiana asked.

"Oh," Tam said, and went and sat down on the couch. Duana and Ilona made a quick exit, beaming out, but not before kissing him on the cheek. "Good luck," Duana whispered.

"Oh?" Tatiana said, standing akimbo. "That's it? You didn't follow through on that bet, did you?"

"Not that it's any business of yours," Tam said.

"It is my business," Tatiana said. "She's my friend, and she's been my friend a lot longer than you and I have been friends, and if you hurt her, I will personally kick your butt."

"You just need to relax," Tam said. On one level he was angered by her tactics, and yet on another level, more academic in nature, he was curious about the violent nature of her proposed solution to her perceived problem. Very Iotian of her. Or was it a Russian thing? What was the Russian's perspective on fighting? Would they still be friends if they fought? Was that dependant on who won the fight? And what was she really mad at? "I did not sleep with her and I suspect the reason's she's crying is because I turned her advances down. And another thing you should know is that it wasn't my bet. She made it up on the spot."

"You didn't sleep with her?" Tatiana asked, taken aback.

"No, I didn't," Tam said.

Tatiana was silent for a moment. "Why the hell not?" Tatiana asked, her energy level going up a notch. "You've slept with every two bit whore on the holodeck, you can't spend one hour with Trini?"

Tam did a double take. "Did you hear what you just asked?"

"I know what I'm asking," Tatiana snapped.

"Before you were angry because you thought I had slept with her and now you're angry because I didn't?" Tam asked. He walked over to the replicator, ordered a jar of peanut butter and one spoon. The jar appeared, no lid, spoon inserted into the peanut butter, just the way he pre-programmed it. "You are insane," he told her, and then ate a spoonful of peanut butter.

"I'm insane? I'm not the one going around talking to myself," Tatiana said.

Tammas swallowed, pointing the spoon at her like a dangerous weapon. "Look, there is nothing wrong with Trini. I love her, I think she's great, but I'm not going to be romantically involved with her," Tam said. "She's my friend, but, more than that, her need for intimacy is more than I can give her. If it had just been about sex, well, I might have entertained the thought. But it's not."

Tatiana frowned, most of her anger spent. She sighed. "I'm sorry I came in here so strong. I just wanted to make this right," Tatiana said. "You did the right thing."

“Well, as long as I have your approval, I guess things are alright,” Tam said, taking another spoonful of comfort food.

“You didn’t exercise any restraint when it came to sleeping with Rivan, so Trini probably sees this the way I do,” Tatiana said.

“I know how you see it. Because you believe I took advantage of Rivan you think that I would be willing to take advantage of Trini because she threw herself at me,” Tam said.

“Basically, yes,” Tatiana said. “You did take advantage of Rivan.”

“Rivan doesn’t see it that way,” Tam said. “In fact, she would be more inclined to think that she took advantage of my position because she believes that it is harder for me to adopt her free love approach to relationships.”

“Did you tell her that’s the only kind of love you’re into?” Tatiana said.

“Once again, you’re out of line,” Tam said.

“Please, that’s the only reason you spend so much time on the holodeck. You’re a control freak. You wouldn’t know what to do if you were in a relationship with a social equal, and that’s the only reason you turned Trini down,” Tatiana said. “You sleep with Rivan because you have power over her. You don’t have to make a commitment.”

“Are you through?” Tammas asked, giving pause just long enough for her to add something if she wanted. He had had enough comfort food, so he stuck the spoon back in the peanut butter, put the jar back in the replicator, and recycled it.

“No, I’m not through,” Tatiana said, stepping closer. “While we’re at it, I think it’s reprehensible that you hit on Lenar’s girl friend.”

“I didn’t hit on her,” Tam said.

“Whether you came on to her or she came on to you is irrelevant. You accepted her proposition, right there in front of Lenar,” Tatiana said. “And I happen to know you followed through on it. How can you treat your friends like that?”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” Tam said. “But even if it is as you imagine, it’s none of your business.”

“So it doesn’t bother you at all that Trini is upset, and Lenar will probably never speak to you again?” Tatiana asked.

“What bothers me is that you have such a low opinion of me. You really think I would purposely hurt my friends?” Tam asked. “I don’t owe you an explanation, but for your information, Nancy has a fourteen year old daughter who is bored out of her mind on this little trek of ours, and who also, strangely enough, happens to be a fan of mine. I shared a meal with them to surprise Niki before she learned I was on board. Further, I’m going to be tutoring her in music and have started putting a band together so that she can get some experience performing live. I have no agenda here other than light socializing. I’m not out to steal Lenar’s girl friend and I don’t expect any rewards for entertaining Niki. Now, if you are quite finished, I would like to be alone.”

Tatiana wanted to apologize once again, but couldn’t find the words. Instead, she moved in and kissed him. Garcia looked at her, confused. Tatiana started to say something, paused, and then shook her head. “I think I get so angry with you because I love you, and I’m jealous, and…” Tatiana started to cry.

“Are you and Trini both menstruating at the same time?” Tam asked.

Tatiana started to pull away but then decided to just slap him. Garcia blocked, grabbing her wrist, and surprisingly she kissed him again.

“Sometimes I think you know absolutely nothing about women,” Tatiana said, still embracing him in a hug. She wiped a tear from her face. “Maybe you should program your holodeck for a little more accuracy. Even if I were menstrating, it is socially inexcusable to blame a woman’s emotions on her cycle. I’m just feeling all of these feelings and I am doing something very non Russian.” She wiped her eyes on a sleeve.

“You mean crying is socially unacceptable for Russian women?” Garcia asked.

Tatiana pulled away, turning to leave. Tam touched her arm and she paused. He brought his hands up to her head and gently turned her face back towards his. He kissed her gently, and when she looked down, he tilted her face up towards him. “It’s okay,” he said. “We’ll keep it our secret.”

“That I cried, or that you hate me,” Tatiana asked.

Garcia answered her with another kiss and she accepted it with a passion, pulling him in closer to her. She grabbed two fists full of his uniform and dragged him to the floor. He was about to take it to the next level when the music in the back ground distracted him. He stopped participating.

“What?” Tatiana asked, trying to pull his uniform top off.

“Do you recognize that song?” he asked her, helping her to remove his shirt.

“I only hear one song,” she said, rolling him so that she was now on top.

Tam stopped her from kissing him. “No,” he said.

“If we stop now, I might come to my senses and not do this,” Tatiana said, tugging her shirt out of her pants.

Tammas stopped her, trying to sit up. “I know this song. It’s an Indian song,” Tam said.

“So,” Tatiana said, still trying to engage him in a kiss. “It sounds like something Trini listens to,” Tatiana observed.

“That’s it!” Garcia took her by the shoulders and held her back. “Let me up,” he insisted. She got off of him and collapsed to the floor, unable to believe she was being turned down because of a song. “It’s from the Indian cult classic Kum Kisse Kum Naheen!” he told her.

She decided he was on a totally different planet than she was. “So, it’s not like you haven’t heard it before. Trini listens to it all the time,” Tatiana said, sulking, giving up on any further affection.

“But this is one of the Iotian music channels,” Garcia explained, going to his desk.

“How would they get access to this?” Tatiana asked, not suppressing the frustration in her voice. Though she had a bra on, she felt completely naked, and strangely, as if she were completely alone.

“Good question,” Garcia said.

“It would have never occurred to me that there were Indians on this planet,” Tatiana said.

“That’s because people from Earth no longer think in terms of racial division,” Garcia explained. “The Iotians have the full spectrum of human beings on their planet, and thanks to the materials left behind by the Horizon, they have emulated some of the racial disharmony from Earth’s past. I’ve documented several examples of this from watching their television broadcast. Since the Horizon, women and people of non white descent have been treated less than equal. It seems to have improved since Kirk has been there, but to what degree I won’t know until I can actually get down there and measure social integration.”

“Okay, but even if they have all the races that Earth has, that still wouldn’t explain the Indian music,” Tatiana said.

“I know. That’s what puzzles me,” Garcia agreed, he began to pace. “I just went over the Horizon’s crew and there were no Indians on board. Computer, was anyone on the Horizon a fan of Indian music?”

The response was negative. Tatiana sat up and hugged her knees, watching Garcia as he tried to figure it out.

“Was there anyone on the crew that spoke Hindi? No? How about some one who enjoyed Indian movies or Bollywood?” Garcia asked, and again was disappointed to find the answer was no. He kicked his shirt up into the air, caught it, folded it, and tossed it to the replicator. “Computer, compare and contrast the Iotian media files with that of Earth and list any similarities.”

A list of known songs began to scroll and grow. Neither Garcia nor Tatiana had to study the list too hard to find a song they both were familiar with. One of the songs was “Over the Rainbow.”

“Play ‘Over the Rainbow’, by Judy Garland” Garcia said. The voice of Judy Garland sang out over his room’s speakers. He looked to Tatiana who was leaning against his desk, arms folded across her chest. “It could be a coincidence. This song was, hell, still is, the most popular Earth song ever recorded. There are more versions of this song than any other song ever written, and it has been performed by more artist than any other song. To this day, it is the most frequently down loaded song from Earth.”

“Maybe, but how do you explain all of those other songs on that list?” Tatiana asked.

Garcia scanned the list a second time. He recognized a Johnny Cash song, “A Boy Named Sue,” A Willie Nelson Song, “Angel Flying Too Close to the Ground,” and “It’s a Blue World,” by Mel Torme. There was too much going on here for it to be a fluke. “Scan the visual records for a Willie Nelson.”

Willie Nelson appeared on the screen, singing “Whisky River Take My Mind.”

“What does it mean?” Tatiana asked.

“It means...” Garcia paused. His left hand came up and the thumb and index finger met. He shook that hand at the monitor. “I don’t know. Computer, scan the visual records for content that may be similar to programs from twentieth century Earth, or programs that mention Earth, or any city or region on Earth. And display multiple images simultaneously. Add close captioning for each window.”

It started with one, then divided into two, and then three and in this manner TV images appeared until there were thirty two programs running simultaneously and Garcia had to put a halt to its division. As it was, it was now taxing even his ability to keep up. “Do you recognize any of this?”

Tatiana shook her head. “Wait, that looks like Dallas, Texas.”

“Computer, can you identify this program?” Garcia asked.

“Dallas,” the computer said, providing actual running time for the original broadcast dates, while listing the cast with publicity photo’s.

Tatiana stood and stepped closer to the viewer and pointed to one of the windows. “That’s a coke commercial,” she said. “It’s a song my mom use to sing to me.”

“That was one of those damn jingles that I was trying to get out my head earlier,” Garcia said. He could hear Duana singing again: “I’d like to teach the world to sing.”

In one of the windows, a spaceship appeared. Garcia and Tatiana recognized it right away as being a Constitution Class Starship. “Enhance window three,” Garcia said, and the television show with the spaceship became prominent. “Increase the volume for three.”

Music began to play as the ship zipped by, credits rolling, and then faded to black. A commercial appeared. Garcia skipped through the commercial to the program. He nearly fell over with surprise. The man prominently featured on the screen was Spock, only it wasn’t Spock. The man had a Go-T. Another man entered and Spock acknowledged him as Captain. It looked like Captain Kirk, but Garcia knew it couldn’t be. The Uniform was also wrong somehow. The uniforms looked like they might be better worn by swash, buckling pirates. A yeoman crossed from stage right. Her skirt was longer on the right side than the left, and her boots were knee high. The top was cut to reveal her belly, and she was wearing a gold sash. The emblem on her shirt was at least in the right place, but the symbol was strange. The actor portraying Kirk reached over and pinched the yeoman’s bottom as she passed.

“Captain Kirk,” the Go-T Spock said. “This matter with the Brillians needs your immediate attention.”

“Have they paid their taxes?” Kirk asked.

“No,” Spock said, very matter of a fact.

“Then you know what to do. I shouldn’t have to tell you to blast their cities from orbit, and keep blasting them until they pay up or they’re all dead,” Kirk said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, there’s a yeoman with my name on it.”

Tatiana turned to Garcia. “Is this a parody?”

Garcia was at a lost. “If it’s not, we’re in big trouble,” Garcia said, pushing a button on his desk. “Garcia to Captain.”

A moment later she answered. “What is it, Garcia?” Captain Munoz asked.

“I’ve discovered something about the Iotians you need to see,” Garcia said, not caring that he may have woken her up.

“Can it wait till tomorrow?” Captain Munoz asked.

“Well, um,” Garcia stammered. Technically, it could wait until they arrived at Iotia. “I suppose.”

“Great,” Captain Munoz said. “Conference room, 0900. Fair enough?”

“Um, Aye, Sir,” Garcia said. He sat down in his chair, backwards, his arm resting on the back. He simply watched the program, completely mesmerized. Was this really how the Iotian’s viewed the Federation? Should he even be surprised? After all, Captain Kirk did assume a gangster mentality to unite the Iotians.

“I always thought Spock looked better with a GO-T,” McCoy said, coming up beside Garcia.

“What do you mean?” Garcia asked.

“I didn’t say anything,” Tatiana said, looking to Garcia.

“It reminds me of the time our landing party beamed up into an alternate universe where our alter selves were evil. Spock was the only normal one, because I guess cold logic is cold logic, no matter where you go,” McCoy said.

“Tam, it’s obviously fiction. Do you have to watch it now?” Tatiana asked. He didn’t answer her. She slipped her top back on and haphazardly tucked it in. “I guess we’re through here,” Tatiana said, mumbling something about men.

Tammas was so completely absorbed in his television show that he was oblivious to Tatiana’s departure. When the next commercial came on, he asked “Tatiana?” to an empty room. He shrugged and turned back to the screen, flipping past the commercials.



Captain Munoz, Counselor Lester, Doctor Simmons, Lt. Anson, and First Officer Osaka were waiting for Ensign Garcia in the conference room, three of which were drinking coffee. There was a tray with assorted condiments near by. Garcia arrived at 0904 and apologized profusely for being late. He had fallen asleep at approximately 0800 after compiling a report.

“Yeah, well, this makes two appointments you’ve been late for, Mister, and you called this one,” Captain Munoz said. “I will not tolerate any more tardiness on your part. Now, what do you have that was so urgent that you woke me up last night?”

“This better be good,” Anson agreed, making no attempt to hide the fact that he would rather be back on the Bridge doing his own work.

“I think even you will find this fascinating,” Garcia directed to Anson, calling up the pre-arranged sequence of audio files. Simultaneously, the monitors came alive with muted scenes of television. “What you are hearing are samples of songs from Earth that I have found in-bedded in Iotian radio programs. I’ve identified musicians as diverse as Gene Autry to the Beatles... Basically, there are musicians representing every genre of music from Earth’s past on Iotia. The visual media you see are television programs from Earth. These were recorded by the USS Minnesota, being re-broadcasted by the Iotians. It’s as if they have tapped into Earth’s radio and television from the twentieth century.”

“Couldn’t it have been left behind by the Horizon?” Counselor Lestor asked.

“No,” Garcia answered, confidently. “First, the Horizon’s antiquated computer system couldn’t have contained the volume of media the Minnesota recovered. Also, there is a slight degradation of quality of the images, as if it has been traveling through space for a lengthy amount of time before intercepted by a radio.”

“Earth programs from the twentieth century will not reach the Iotian system for another ten thousand years,” Anson pointed out. “And the degradation would be worse than what we are seeing here.”

“I agree,” Garcia said. “It is a mystery and by itself perhaps even innocuous, but look at this. This is a song by Buddy Holly. It is an Iotian original. As far as I can determine, Buddy Holly is alive and well on Iotia Prime.” Garcia was probably the only one familiar with his twist on the old Sci-Fi. book, “Buddy Holly is Alive and Well on Ganymede.”

“That’s impossible,” Osaka said.

“No, that’s improbable, but not impossible,” Garcia corrected. “Case in point, while traveling in space Captain Kirk met President Lincoln, Surak of Vulcan, Apollo, Brahms, also known as Methuselah...”

“You made your point. Go on with your report,” Captain Munoz said.

“I have found several other celebrity personalities from the twentieth century living here on Iotia and I would like to interview them before I speculate as to how they have come to be here,” Garcia said. “I do have a theory, but, this next bit of information may take priority.”

Garcia triggered the next media file to start playing using his neural implant. Four episodes of a program called “Star Conquerors” began to play, side by side. “This is an Iotian original television series program, depicting an evil Captain Kirk, McCoy and Spock, going from planet to planet reeking havoc and conquering worlds. Notice the exterior shots of the Constellation Starship. This is exactly the image of the exterior of the USS ENterprise that the Iotians would have captured with a ground based telescope, with one minor discrepancy. This was well within the technological means of the Iotians at the time the Enterprise was orbiting their planet. The details inside the ship, though reasonably accurate, are what you would expect since the Iotians did not visit the ship itself.”

“What was the discrepancy?” Owens asked, intrigued.

“The inscription on the Starship is ISS Enterprise 1701, as opposed to NCC,” Garcia said.

“That looks just like Kirk,” Doctor Simmons interrupted, pointing at the screen.

“No it doesn’t,” McCoy grumbled. McCoy had been dogging Garcia like a Rottweiler ever since he saw the Iotian television show. “They look nothing like us.”

“And that’s Spock! I’d recognize that face anywhere,” Simmons continued.

“Spock did not have a Go-T,” Anson corrected the Doctor.

“Great observation,” Garcia said. “Normally, I might have passed that off as creative license. If we know anything about the Iotians, though, they are exacting in detail with an overwhelming drive towards authenticity, beyond that which can be explained by Obsessive Compulsive behavior. I don’t believe they would have strayed from the Spock they met, or changed NCC to ISS, without good reason.”

“And, I presume, you have that reason,” Anson said.

Garcia beamed with mirth. “This is the Enterprise Crew of an alternate universe.”

Anson shook his head. “Alternate Universes are theoretical...”

“Theoretical my ass...” McCoy snapped. “I was there.”

“The evidence for alternate universe is overwhelmingly for...” Garcia began, knowing better to argue with this Vulcan, and not just because he was his superior officer but because he might get further with a brick wall.

“Until it can be duplicated, consistently, in a lab room setting...” Anson argued.

“Your inability to admit that the universe, small ‘u’, might not be the center of all existence but rather just an insignificant part of a larger continuum is just as bad as saying the Earth is the center of the Universe, big U. Whether you accept it or not, what we’re viewing here coincides with the reality described by Captain James T Kirk himself when his landing party, including Scot, Uhura, and McCoy found themselves beamed up to a ship where their alternative selves were less than civil,” Garcia said.

“What does this mean for us?” Counselor Lester asked.

“Several things. Captain Munoz, you wanted me to tell you what we can expect. Well, here is my answer,” Garcia said, pointing to the screen. “The Iotians have taken the gangster emulation to the next level. As far as they are concerned, that way of life was sanctioned by Captain Kirk, and this is what they believe Star Fleet is all about. Star Fleet is about conquest, taxation without representation, might makes right.”

“You’re speculating,” Captain Munoz said.

“Yes,” Garcia admitted. “I would have to speak to the show’s creator to be certain, for it could very well be just an example of Iotian creativity, a parody if you will, about the people they met a hundred years ago...”

“Or?” Captain Munoz prompted, knowing good and well that there was a caveat coming.

“Or, at the risk of sounding paranoid,” Garcia said. “There is an alien intelligence at play here that is influencing the Iotian culture above and beyond the Horizon’s initial cultural contamination.”

“Here we go,” Anson said. “Out of reality and into the metaphorical deep end.”

“Lt.,” Captain Munoz waved her Science Officer to silence. “I would like to hear what he has to say.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Garcia said, flashing Anson a look that might be interpreted as, ‘ha ha.’ “Fact, in 2266, Captain James T Kirk, discovered an M class planet that was an exact duplicate of planet Earth. It had an identical planetary evolution, with every continent, volcano, and fault line in the right place. That alone is enough to raise cosmological questions, but Kirk further discovered that there were human’s on this planet. Kirk refers to the planet as Miri’s planet, which is less dry than A175c2 prime.

“Fact,” Garcia continued. “On Stardate 4040.7, Kirk, Spock, and McCoy found themselves on a planet that had a human population which had developed a cultural perspective identical to the Roman culture from Earth. Kirk’s assessment is that this planet’s cultural development is what we would have seen on Earth had the Roman civilization not fallen. Further, and even more interesting, they had Caesar and Christ together in a twentieth century setting.

“Fact,” Garcia pushed on after a dramatic pause. “In year 2268, Captain Ronald Tracey found humans on a planet called Omega 4. He found two competing populations, referring to themselves as the Kohms and the Yangs. At closer inspection, Captain James T Kirk, with Spock and McCoy at his side, discovered that



these people had had an identical cultural evolution that coincided with the development of what most people agree was Earth's greatest historical document, the Constitution of the United States of America. The Yangs even had an American flag, with all fifty stars!

"Fact," Garcia went on, ignoring Anson's outward signs of disapproval. "Also in 2268, Kirk helped to save a planet from an asteroid strike. This planet has become known as Miramanee's planet. It is basically a colony of Native American who had been relocated from Earth by the aid of an alien race known as the Preservers. It is speculated that the Preservers were intrigued with the Native American way of life, and recognizing that it was doomed, transplanted the society. At any rate, contemplating on these four examples alone, I believe it is preposterous, even illogical, to believe that an alien influence is not at work here on Iotia."

"You have no evidence to support such a claim," Anson stated. "These television shows and music clips can't even be considered circumstantial evidence at this point."

"Ah, but I have more circumstantial evidence," Garcia said, pointing to the screens, where once again the images were changing. The "Star Conquerors" episodes disappeared and were replaced by news casts and documentaries in which Iotian people were discussing UFO's. "What you're seeing now are reports of UFO sighting and alien abductions taking place on Iotia."

"Garcia, alien abduction stories could be attributed to mass hysteria, no doubt confounded by Iotia's actual encounters with two alien spacecraft, the Horizon and the Enterprise," Counselor Lester said.

"In another place or time I might be inclined to accept your psychological conclusion," Garcia said. "But what I find most interesting about these reports are: One, the Iotian accounts are identical to accounts of sightings and abduction that were reported on Earth between the 1820 and 2056. Two, there is a remarkable lack of any physical evidence, which was also the case on Earth."

"Perhaps there is no physical evidence because there is none to be found," Anson offered.

"Logic like that is irrefutable, but does not invalidate the possibility of an alien influence on this planet," Garcia said.

"It does not mean what you think..." Anson began.

Garcia held a finger up, requesting one more minute. Simultaneously the images on the screen changed to reveal crop circles. "This is another phenomenon that happened on Earth in the same period as the alien abductions were taking place, and which is now occurring on Iotian prime."

"I thought the crop circle mystery on Earth was solved," Osaka said. "The reports say they were made by humans, mere pranksters."

"There were pranksters involved with some of the crop circles on Earth, and maybe even here on Iotia," Garcia agreed. "However, a statistical analysis of the phenomena on Earth would reveal that the sheer number of circles generated, with the degree of sophistication, with no one ever catching any of the pranksters in the act of creating said circles, suggests that there was an alien intelligence at play there, just as the evidence points to here. The Earth news media simply maintained the position that it was pranksters to avoid starting a panic."

"And I'm sure all of this speculation will make your next work of fiction a top seller," Anson said, applauding. "But it has no scientific merit."

"Then how do you explain all of this?" Garcia asked.

"I prefer to wait till all the evidence has been collected and analyzed," Anson said. "Hard evidence."

"I may not have the archaeology credentials that would impress you, but I have written several papers on the Preservers that have been widely accepted, and my research suggests that the Preservers don't leave hard evidence," Garcia returned. "And Star Fleet recognizes their potential influence even though we have never met one in person or found any Preserver technology."

"Wasn't the technology left on Miramanee's planet that Kirk used to deflect the asteroid Preserver technology?" Captain Munoz asked.

"No," Garcia said. "It was a unique artifact, no doubt placed by the Preserver's, but Star Fleet has ruled out the possibility of it being Preserver. Though the deflector output on the device was a hundred time more efficient than that of the Enterprise, the inner computer components were compatible with Fleet technology of the time, as if who ever had built it had expected Kirk or Fleet to find it."

"Captain, this is a bit much," Anson argued.

"If the Iotians are getting media from Earth," Doctor Simmons said. "Isn't it possible that the alien abduction and UFO sightings are Earth myths that the Iotians are perpetuating?"

"That would make more sense than blaming aliens that leave no trace," Anson agreed. "There are no such things as ghosts and the sky is not falling."

"Alright, gentlemen," Captain Munoz interrupted. "Thank you for the report, Ensign. You have raised some valid questions and have left us with lots to ponder."

"Captain, if you'll permit me to make one more observation," Garcia asked.

"Go ahead," Captain Munoz said.

"If I am right, you should be aware that two out of three world's where Star Fleet is 90 percent sure that the Preservers have been an influential force have come to a catastrophic end, typically with an extinction level event," Garcia said. "Two of the worlds I mentioned here ended in some sort of biological devastation. Miri's planet appeared to have been a scientific endeavor gone awry. Evidence suggests they were trying to prolong human life and then ended up killing off all the adults, leaving the children to fend for themselves. On Omega Four, the evidence suggests that there was a biological war that knocked the civilization back to the stone-age. Curiously, though, as in with the Miri example, the result was an extension of human life. This can't be mere coincidence."

"Earth of the past did have a Preserver influence," Captain Munoz said. "Nothing bad happened on Earth."

"Please," Garcia said. "Earth barely made it through the sixties without blowing itself up, and according to Kirk, the fact that we didn't may have been due to alien influences. Take Kirk's report on Gary Seven for instance. Earth did eventually have a nuclear war, but the exchange was limited, and technology was sufficiently advanced that it allowed the survivors to eek out a meager existence and push forwards again. And if you were to consider that the extinction level event that killed off the dinosaurs was never adequately explained, then it is probable that they were purposefully destroyed so that humans might have a chance to evolve..."

"Okay," Captain Munoz interrupted, raising her hands in the classic surrender gesture. "You had me until you went there. I can see you are very enthusiastic about this subject, and that you have put a considerable amount of time and thought into your report, but I think your imagination may be getting the better of you. The way I see it, you spend too much time alone in your quarters, watching media and day dreaming, which might be explained by your recent loss and the drama with the Chance's destruction. Perhaps the demands I've placed on you, including this assignment, have been too much."

"There's nothing wrong with me," Garcia protested. "And I have been socializing..."

Garcia paused. He suddenly realized something was dreadfully wrong, but he was unable to pinpoint the exact source of his anxiety. The first time he had had a feeling such as this he had been on Betazed as a child and Deanna Troi was being held hostage. He experienced a moment of vertigo and reached out to steady himself. He vaguely heard the expressions of concern coming from the Captain and the Doctor. He felt more than heard the conference room table crack as he touched it, watching the fault line grow like a lightening strike until it had severed the table in three sections. The saucers holding the coffee cups, the coffee cups themselves, two in the saucer and one in the Osaka's hand, shattered, simultaneous with the table's cracking. The table collapsed and everything on the table slid to the center and the floor. Coffee spilled and flowed. The sugar bowl exploded putting a white mist in the air. The lights in the conference room dimmed. The two monitors directly behind Garcia, still displaying images of crop circles, shattered, went dark, and sprayed a fountain of sparks that rained down over his head.

Garcia staggered back to the wall, clutching his heart, and then slid to the floor. The lights returned to normal. Captain Munoz was now on his right, the Counselor on his left, and the Doctor directly in front of him, scanning him with a medical tricorder. His auditory sense slowly returned to normal, and their voices became louder as if someone were turning up the volume in small increments, while simultaneously turning down the volume on his heart which had been the most prominent sound during the ordeal.

"Are you alright?" the Doctor asked.

Garcia blinked. He looked up at the Doctor, nodded.

“What just happened?” Munoz asked, not necessarily directing the question to Garcia, but to anyone who could offer an explanation.

Garcia answered. “Ambassador Sarek is dead.”



Counselor Lester’s office was much more “busy” than any therapist’s office Garcia had been in before, an extreme contrast to Deanna’s spartan office. He had book shelves, with actual paper books, and an assortment of games and knick knacks. Tam examined several of the puzzles available, like a Rubik’s cube, and a stick with a rope and a ring, the object being to take the ring off with out untying the rope. Garcia knew the solution without even picking it up. There was a two dimensional chess board on one end of the coffee table, and an Othello board on the other end, and a toy car in the middle. The two chairs and the couch were arranged so that one could play the games comfortably on the coffee table from any seat. Counselor Lester tossed throwing knives at a dart board while he allowed Garcia to inspect his office, a practice that anyone else might have found unsettling, but Garcia displayed no reaction at all. Lester was intrigued that Garcia ignored the knife throwing.

“So, what do you think?” Lester asked, after Garcia appeared to be through exploring and evaluating him and his office.

“Interesting,” Garcia said. “You specialized in child or juvenile psychology?”

Lester laughed. “Yep,” he said. “How did you guess?”

Garcia recognized the rhetorical question and sat down in the chair with a book. Lester decided to sit in the chair opposite him. He twirled the remaining throwing knife in his hand, which Garcia found distracting. Watching the Counselor throwing the knives had been okay, but the way the light played against the alternating surfaces of the blade reminded him of battle light, sun light reflecting off clashing swords. He forced himself to focus on the book he had collected from the shelf.

“The Places You Will Go,” Garcia read. “By Doctor Seuz.”

“It’s a great book,” Lester said. “It came from my great, great, great grandfather’s library. My favorite though is ‘Where the Wild Things Are,’ by Sendak. Every kid should have it.”

“I was unaware that Sendak wrote a book,” Garcia said, placing the Seuz book with the oddly drawn characters on the coffee table. He was thinking of Sendak from Vulcan.

“I’m shocked,” Lester said. “I thought you knew everything.”

Garcia didn’t respond to the quip. “So, how do you want to do this? You want to do Freudian therapy or Jungian.”

“Neither,” Lester said. “Tell me about your relationship with Sarek.”

Tam settled into his chair and explained that Sarek was his father through adoption. The Garcia’s were still his adoptive parents as well, but Sarek had needed parental authority in order to access medical records and to take full custodianship of him while on Vulcan. He chose not to disclose the information that he had been pawned off on Sarek by Spock because Spock had not wanted him. He knew that wasn’t exactly true, that Spock had had things to attend to that did not include raising a child, but ever since that day Tam had noticed growing feelings of animosity towards Spock.

“So, that would make Spock your brother,” Counselor Lester noted.

Garcia recognized the reverence in the observation Lester had made, as if by counseling and or knowing “the great” Tamas Parkin Arblaster Garcia he was somehow closer to Spock. Garcia shook his head. “Technically, yes,” Garcia agreed. In actuality, Spock was biologically his grandfather, which made Sarek his great grandfather. His genetic history was a complicated issue due to the fact he was constructed in a test tube by the Kelvan, using materials stolen from the Enterprise crew, way back, ‘in a once upon a time’ sort of reference. He was not about to reveal this, for he imagined the reverence he had noted in Lester’s voice would go beyond just mere admiration for sake of a name.

“Were you aware that Sarek was suffering from the degenerative disorder known as Bendii Syndrom?” Counselor Lester asked.

Tam came to the edge of his seat. “No,” he said. Everything seemed to fall into place. “That can’t be,” he argued. But all those meaningless quarrels he had had with Sarek now made sense, and why he had always felt better whenever he vacated Sarek’s home and went for a walk. Was this the source of his anger

towards Spock? Was he picking up on Sarek's emotions? How long had this gone on? And then he knew. Perrin had sent him away after the incident with Professor Heart, where he and Garcia had had a physical confrontation in a lecture class.

Counselor Lester noted the light of revelation mixed with anger flashing in Garcia's eyes, which dimmed to the low flickering of ignited coals, and then it was snuffed out completely as Garcia repressed all his emotions and became calm again.

"Tell me what you were thinking just now," Counselor Lester said.

"It's not important," Garcia said, forcing himself to settle back in the chair.

"It looked important," Counselor Lester said.

"Be that as it may, I have nothing to disclose at this time," Garcia said.

Lester nodded and sat quietly, flipping the knife. After a few minutes of neither he and Garcia speaking or moving, he decided for a game. "Would you go and retrieve the knives from the dart board and then go stand behind that line."

Garcia stared at Lester, wondering if he were joking. After a moment of silence, Garcia complied with the request. He retrieved the knives and then stood behind the indicated line, but he did not throw either of the two knives he had retrieved. He waited for instructions.

"Interesting," Lester said. "Why didn't you throw the knives at the board?"

"Your instructions were to retrieve them and stand behind this line. You did not instruct me to throw them," Garcia said.

Lester nodded. "Most people would have concluded my intentions were to have them thrown and gone ahead and done so."

"So, did I flunk a test?" Garcia asked.

"No. It's not a pass fail," Lester said. "It just tells me a little about you, that's all. Do you think you can hit the target?"

"I know that I can hit the target," Garcia said, still not volunteering to throw.

Lester nodded. "Describe the throwing knives."

Garcia held the knives up for inspection. "I'm guessing they're made of titanium alloy. Fifty grams. Well balanced. Aerodynamic cut, except, the design is such that there might be a slight propeller affect, so the knife might move to the right or left of the target depending on how you're holding it when you throw it, the degree of deviance increasing with an increase in distance from the target. You may not have noticed that because your target is three point two meters away, so the affect is negligible."

"Very precise," Lester said. "Now, demonstrate that you can hit the target."

Garcia tossed both knives simultaneously. Both hit the bull's eye. Again, Lester was surprised, for he had predicted Garcia would have thrown them both separately.

"Absolutely remarkable," Lester said. "You're ambidextrous. Nothing wrong with your spatial acuity, either."

Garcia sat down. "So that was a test?"

"Just curious, that's all. You know that Lt. Anson contacted Vulcan and confirmed that Ambassador Sarek died?" Lester commented.

"The Captain notified me," Garcia said. "I'm starting to receive sympathy cards."

"When Sarek's estate responded, Perrin was concerned that you might have had a higher than normal sympathetic response to Sarek's death due to your connection, which might have been heightened due to his projection of emotions through you because of the Bendii Syndrome," Lester said.

"I was not apprised of his condition," Garcia said.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Lester asked.

"There's nothing to talk about," Garcia said.

Lester brought his hands together, index fingers up to make a steeple, and touched his chin. It was almost a Vulcan expression. He sat there and studied Garcia for a long moment, and then drew his legs into the chair to sit Indian style. "Have you ever manifested telekinetic abilities before?"

"I do not have telekinetic abilities," Garcia said, matter of fact.

"How do you explain what happened in the conference room?" Lester asked.

"I have no explanation," Garcia said.

"There is a similar report of an unexplained psycho-kinetic event on the Enterprise when McCoy died," Lester said. "You were present for that as well."

"I don't remember," Garcia said.

"Interesting," Lester said.

"What do you mean by that?" Garcia asked, defensively.

"Well, either there is something wrong with your memory, or you are choosing not to remember," Lester offered. "Simone, great grand daughter of T'Pau is known to have telekinetic abilities."

"So," Garcia said.

"So, now that you and she are telepathically bonded, do you suppose there could have been some transference of abilities?" Lester asked.

"What are you looking for?" Garcia asked.

"I'm trying to understand where this ability comes from and what triggers the events. Is it the result of emotional suppression? Are people going to have to start ducking every time you get angry?" Lester asked

"I think you're over reacting," Garcia said.

"Am I?" Lester asked.

"I don't get angry," Garcia said.

"Really?" Lester said, not fully repressing his disbelief, which came out in the form of laughter. "Will you move the toy car on the coffee table?"

Garcia leaned forward and moved the car back and forth using his left hand. Lester didn't smile.

"Cute, now do it again with only your mind."

"Tell you what," Garcia said, standing. "When I figure out how to do it, I'll show you. Now, if we're finished?"

"Alright, you can go," Lester said.

Relieved, Garcia headed for the door. Before he got there, he paused because one of his mental companions let out an alarm, and when he turned around he saw Duana holding a throwing knife, the very one that Counselor Lester had just been holding. She pointed at the Counselor. From the Counselor's perspective, the knife was suspended in mid air, with nothing tangible to explain its hovering. Garcia didn't hold back his anger.

"I can't believe you threw that at me!" Garcia yelled.

"Very interesting," Lester said, calmly.

The counselor's calmness angered Garcia even more. "I find your actions unethical," Garcia stammered. "I'll see you disbarred from the psychological community, your licenses revoked, and you kicked out of Fleet."

"You're angry because I threw a knife at you," Lester pointed out. "But not curious that the knife is still suspended in air without either of us holding it up?"

"I ought to kick your butt..." Garcia went on.

"At ease, Ensign," Lester said, dropping into command voice. "Observe the line on the floor in front of you. That line delineates where a force field would have blocked the knife had you not used telekinetic abilities to stop its advance."

Counselor Lester got up to retrieve the knife and found himself unable to budge it. He then retrieved one of the other knives from the dart board. He motioned Garcia out of the way and demonstrated the presence of a force field. The knife flew and suddenly bounced off a green veil of light, making a sound similar to a ball bearing bouncing off a tambourine drum. Counselor Lester then revealed the on off toggle switch for the shield, a remote control he had in his vest pocket.

"Irrelevant," Garcia said. "It might have failed."

"I still find it interesting that you are going out of your way to avoid focusing on the fact that you clearly have demonstrated telekinetic abilities," Lester said, pointing to the knife that still hovered in the air.

Duana released the knife and it fell to the floor. Of course, all Lester saw was the knife fall. "One minute, three seconds for you to calm down from your fight or flight response," Lester said. "Very interesting."

“You and I are through,” Garcia said, turning to leave.

“On the contrary,” Lester corrected. “We’ve only just begun.”

“To Live,” Duana sang out. “White lace and promises.”

“Stop it!” Garcia snapped at her. He closed his eyes, knowing full well that Lester had just witnessed his outburst to one of his “Physic personalities.” Tam forced himself to take a breath.

Lester put a hand on his shoulder. “You no doubt needed to go to Vulcan to deal with this, but I am quite capable of training you to control it so that it doesn’t explode out of you in fits of rage or when you experience a loss. You need to learn some new mental disciplines to compensate for this extra psychic energy.”

“Who are you?” Garcia asked.

“I’m your counselor,” Lester said.

That wasn’t what Garcia meant. “I don’t want to learn to develop this,” Garcia said. “I already have enough freakish abilities that I don’t fit in, and, besides, do you know what happened to a guy named Gary Mitchell, who after he crossed the Galactic Barrier began to manifest psychokinetic abilities?”

“No, I’m not familiar with this story,” Lester said.

“It’s not a story,” Garcia said.

“Okay, I’ll bite, what happened?” Lester asked.

“His best friend was forced to kill him,” Garcia said.

“Okay. And who was his best friend?” Lester asked.

“James T Kirk,” Garcia said.

“Interesting,” Lester said. “You do seem to know quite a bit about Enterprise history. Whether this is true or not is irrelevant to the fact that you have an issue that needs to be dealt with. It’s not going to go away by ignoring it. Now, you can either work with me, or I can inform the Captain that you’re a security risk to her ship and have you spend the rest of your time on board in the Brigg. How would you like to proceed?”

Garcia actually considered the option. At least in the Brigg he would get some sleep. “What makes you qualified to assist me with this?” Garcia asked, taking a seat on the couch.

“Ever heard of a little planet called Platonius?” Lester asked.

“It’s one of the planets Kirk visited,” Garcia said.

Lester chuckled. “What is your obsession with Kirk?” he asked.

“I’m not obsessed,” Garcia said, hugging one of the couch pillows to his chest.

“No?” Lester said, smiling to himself. “Beyond the fact that Kirk visited there, what else do you know?”

“The Philosopher King, Parman, was injured and sent out a distress signal. Kirk answered it, McCoy treated his wounds, and Parman tried to compel McCoy to stay on as his personal physician,” Garcia said.

“The Platonians, natives to the star, Sandara, had left their world when their star went supernova, and while visiting Earth, probably to get supplies, they became enamored with the philosophy of Plato, and consequently, named their new home world after him.”

“Yes, yes,” Lester said. “Plato’s stepchildren, as we refer to them. But do you know about their psychokinetic abilities?”

“Their abilities are artificially derived from the ingestion of a chemical substance, kironide, found in fresh foods on the planet,” Garcia said. “It’s a controlled substance due to some of the side effects. Contraindications can include nausea, vertigo, liver damage, but most dangerously, various mental disorders such as extreme megalomania and paranoia in humans. It can make a person more susceptible to infections, and with a half life of three months, toxicity is the biggest issue with taking the drug in an artificial manner, as opposed to consuming it in its natural forms. The pituitary gland can be severely and irreversibly harmed in an overdose situation.”

“Very clinical,” Lester said. “So, you know telekinetic abilities are not unheard of in the Universe. In fact, it’s much more common than people imagine. I have been to Platonius several times, and my job on each occasion was to insure that all Star Fleet personnel had sufficient kironide in their system to give them psychokinetic abilities. I also trained them in the use of those abilities, in order to make sure that we were able to maintain the status quo, and not be abused by the Platonians.”

“How many of those did you have to treat for psychotic episodes as they came off the drug?” Garcia asked.

“A few,” Lester said. “But we’re talking about you. Your ability may not be due to chemical ingestion of kironide, but the ability is the same, and I can teach you how to control it. That is if you’ll trust me.”

“When do we start?” Garcia asked.

“Tomorrow, noon,” Lester said.



Garcia hadn’t taken ten steps from the Counselor’s door when he was waylaid by a Ferengi. “Ahhh,” Brock said, with an ingratiating tone, almost begging. “How fortunate am I to run into the Great Tammam Parkin Arblastar-Garcia!” He fell on Garcia, touching his arm and shoulder, in a type of bow that might go with the worship of royalty.

If I have all of these great powers, Garcia thought wistfully, why can’t I avoid these sorts of fans. He tried willing the creature to go away, but the Ferengi followed like a persistent mosquito, intent on scoring blood while buzzing the ear in defiance of a potential swatting.

“My name is Brock,” he said. “I am participating in an officer exchange program, and you have been assigned as my guardian while I’m here.”

“Bloody hell,” Garcia mumbled, sounding very much like Miles O’Brien.

“You might not know this, but I am a great fan of yours, and it is serendipity that now brings us together like this” Brock said, struggling to keep pace with Garcia. “I’m a communications engineer, with a doctorate in economics. Perhaps I can be of assistance to you in some capacity, or you can spare some time to acquaint me with the normal functions of the ship? Or perhaps we can just discuss music. I love music.”

Garcia sighed. He might actually find the Ferengi useful. “Actually, I might like to employ your economic analysis of a culture I am studying.”

“Oh, anything to help you,” Brock said.

“Yes, well, relax,” Garcia said. “You don’t have to try and impress me. Just be normal.”

“I am being normal,” Brock assured him.

“Yes, I suppose you are,” Garcia said. He led Brock to a small computer lab where they could access Iotian media files together. Tam described the Iotian and some of the details he had gleaned. They watched a number of commercials together and discussed them. Brock also pointed out his concepts on the evolution of commercialization, and since the Iotians were beginning to do product placement inside of the entertainment shows it might indicate an evolution in entertainment technology.

“Explain,” Garcia asked, though he believed he had an idea where the Ferengi was going with this.

“Product placement suggests that the masses have greater access to technology which they can use to curb or eliminate commercials,” Brock said. “You are right that there is a war being waged here for the hearts and minds of the public. The market has almost reached a saturation point for adults, and the only way to sustain market influence is to start subliminal tactics, like product placing, or advertising directly to the children, there in by-passing the adult’s built up tolerance to commercials.”

“Earth went through a similar phase,” Garcia said. “It nearly killed us.”

“Nonsense,” Brock said. “Consumerism teaches the value of material wealth, provides them with incentive to improve the quality of life, and gives them the sense of empowerment by pursuing the things they want.”

“It’s a distraction from more important goals,” Garcia said.

“What’s more important than the accumulation of wealth and power?” Brock asked. “It is greed, the desire for more stuff, conquest, and market forces that drive cultures to developing affordable space flight. Commercials help solidify societies definition of success.”

“It also creates wants and wars,” Garcia argued.

“Please, it doesn’t have to create war,” the Ferengi said. “Humans are just more violent than Ferengi. Think about it. War destroys infrastructures, destroys your employee pool, and destroys products. A Ferengi would always choose a business solution, because even if we lost a bid, there’s still a way to make a profit,

and even a small hope that the winner will either lose his interest or die, leaving a thriving business for a Ferengi to assume later on down the road.”

“And you’re telling me that doesn’t lead to back stabbing?” Garcia asked.

“Of course it does,” Brock assured him. “How does your earth saying go, all’s fair in love and business! Wait a minute. Tell me that the Federation isn’t going in there to destroy this free market place.”

“That would go against the prime directive,” Garcia said. “But they clearly need guidance.”

“I agree,” Brock said. “I’ll contact my ship and recommend we send them some consumer advocates.”

“This is not a new customer base for the Ferengi Alliance,” Garcia said.

“Why not? They’re not Federation protected, are they?” Brock asked.

“Well, no,” Garcia said. “But consumerism can’t sustain itself. Clearly you see they’re on the verge of economic collapse.”

“They’re on the verge of economic collapse because they haven’t fully taken on the principles of greed,” Brock said. “You give a man a fish and you have a customer for life. You teach a man to fish and you ruin a perfectly good business opportunity.”

“Your economic model can’t be sustained because wants and needs are artificially created. What happens to the market when these people create replicator technology? The market will crash,” Garcia pointed out.

“Oh please,” Brock said. “Replicator technology just enables us to increase the market. Infinite wants and infinite capacity doesn’t destroy markets, it’s just the beginning to a new sort of commercialism. You create demand for new products by introducing products through celebrity advertising. For example, I take you and show you using a product, then everyone wants that product, and I provide licensing for a small fee. Everybody’s happy!”

“But that isn’t true happiness!” Garcia said.

“How dare you!” Brock said. “One man’s trash is another man’s treasure. Why, I could sell your used chewing gum if you allowed me. And when you die, I would really love the opportunity to sell your remains.”

“What I mean is that happiness has to be an internal event,” Garcia said. “Haven’t you ever heard of the ‘string of pearls’ story?”

Brock hadn’t. Garcia gave him the quick version. There was a man who had little home, a son, and a horse. One day the son left the gate to the corral open and the horse got away. The neighbors said, poor man. The man said, we’ll see. The next day the horse returned and it brought a friend. The neighbors said, lucky man. He responded, we’ll see. The next day the son broke his leg trying to break in the new horse. The neighbors said, poor man. The man responded, we’ll see. The next day, an army came through and drafted all the young and able young men for the war. Neighbors said, lucky man. “We’ll see,” the chorus went. The next day the man’s house burned to the ground as the war passed too near. Poor man. We’ll see. In the ashes the man found a string of pearls.

“The story goes on infinitely long, but the moral is, if you base your happiness on external events, you are subject to extreme ups and downs,” Garcia said. “Where as, if your happiness comes from a source inside yourself, you are not subject to the vacillations and whims of life.”

“Interesting story,” Brock admitted. “I will think about it.”

“Think about this. What happens when one day, everyone participating in your economic venture wakes up satisfied with who they are and what they have?” Garcia asked. “The entire economic system will collapse.”

“That’s why we have to ensure that no one ever feel satiated,” Brock agreed. “We have to up the ante and give them marginally better products, while maintaining the illusion of an ever expanding continuum of product and service improvement. That’s what it’s ultimately all about. We sell magic, illusions. Naturally no one needs this stuff. I mean, look at this Iotian product advertised here. Who actually needs an Evil Kirk action figure? No one! But that’s what’s so great about the game. You create a need and then you fill it. This society here is ripe for the picking.”

Garcia sat there, regretting having drawn the Ferengi into this. Further reflection, though, suggested that perhaps it wasn’t such a bad idea. The Ferengi had pointed out some things to him that he had not considered. “Market forces,” Garcia mumbled.



“Market forces!” Brock agreed. “You don’t really have a concept for market forces, because you give everything away for free. Take your music for example. Anybody who wants it can download it. It costs them nothing and you gain nothing.”

“That’s not entirely true,” Garcia said.

“Oh, you probably get some residual benefits due to the popularity of your work, a measurable rate of compensation, a currency if you will, that you personally can exchange through your notoriety, but turning that into hard capital doesn’t necessarily correlate,” Brock said. “There is no direct compensation to you when people download your stuff. At least, in the Federation. I could change that for you. If you would allow me to market your material through the Ferengi Alliance Network, I could make you a wealthy man.”

“Capital is irrelevant,” Garcia said. “All my material needs are met.”

“That’s what I mean when you don’t truly understand market forces and respect the natural law: for every action there should be an opposite and equal return,” Brock said. “Oh, you have an idea, philosophically, but when it comes right down to living off your work and reputation alone, you have no clue. The livelihood of Iotian artists is directly dependant on the quality of their work. If they don’t produce, they starve.”

“That’s not true. Surely there are good artists that starve,” Garcia pointed out.

“By definition, no good artist starves,” Brock countered. “You either produce what society wants, or you starve, or find an alternative career. But you forget it’s not just about the artist. There’s the artist’s agent, the band, the distributors, the people that produce the tours and set up equipment, and feed the artist, and do their hair and make up and clothes. And there’s a whole continuum of products and services that spin off the artist. You, by refusing to participate in such a system, are robbing good people of good employment. Now, again, I know you are a reasonable person, and would hate to deprive someone of an honest living, so let me help you. I have been authorized to broker a deal with you on supplying your work to all of the planets in the Ferengi Alliance.”

Brock’s words suddenly clicked. He wasn’t here for an Officer Exchange program. He was a representative of the Ferengi Alliance Network, sent to broker a deal with Garcia concerning his music. “Is that the real reason why you’re here?”

“Um, of course not. I’m here on a cultural exchange initiative,” Brock corrected quickly. “It’s just that we’re talking about this important stuff, and you did want to better understand the Iotians economic situation, so, by you participating with the FAN, I can give you some valuable lessons in market economies. There is a demand for your work in our Alliance, but because we understand and respect property rights, we have to have a contract before we can distribute your work through out the network.”

“I’ve gone through this with your people before,” Garcia said. “You can distribute my work provided that there are no charges attached to that distribution in either hidden or direct form.”

“It costs us money to maintain the network,” Brock said. “We can’t just be giving stuff away free!”

“Then there is no deal,” Garcia said.

“I could offer the compensation that we would give you to a charity of your choosing,” Brock said.

“No deal,” Garcia said, standing. “I’ve got to go. I have a duty shift in an hour and I want to get cleaned up.”

“Think about what I said...” Brock called after him. “You’re throwing away the chance of a life time. You don’t think your work is always going to be so popular, do you? You can only hold stuff off the market for so long and then people lose interest, and the value decreases.” But Garcia was gone, and the door closed, leaving Brock considering alternative approaches. “Unless you die and then it’s who ever gets the stuff to market first.”

Garcia ignored Duana and Ilona as they accompanied him to the lift. They had a conversation amongst themselves and were about to join him in the lift when he closed the door on them. “Deck 14,” he requested. The lift started up. It stopped on the next floor and Tatiana got in. Duana and Ilona were there, arms akimbo, suggesting they were angry for being locked out on the floor below. He pushed the button, closing the door on them again. “Resume,” Garcia said.

“Deck 11,” Tatiana said, focusing on Garcia. He seemed more distant than usual. “I’m sorry I left without saying good bye.”

“Forget it,” Garcia said.

“Are you angry?” Tatiana asked, thinking she should be the one angry considering how he had got her started only to drop her for a television show.

“My anger today has nothing to do with you,” he said.

“Can I help?” Tatiana said.

“Probably not,” Garcia said, and exited the lift on his floor. His two mental companions were there to berate him for his lack of social graces, but he pushed right past them. They pursued.

Garcia retired to his quarters. McCoy asked Garcia if he could make him a drink, and then laughed, “I can’t do that.” Tam thought about activating his Tarkington program, but he really just needed to eat a quick bite, shower, and go to work. The thought of Terra Tarkington, however, pushed the quick meal from his mind. He opted for a shower with her, using the HROV to holographically manifest his distraction, dressed and went to work. His shift would have been unbearable except for the fact that his email account was flooded with sympathy cards. He took time to examine and save the ones from Janeway, Picard, and Troi, but at the top of the list was one from Persis, with pictures of their daughter, Tama. She was just a little younger than Niki.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Brock the Ferengi had hit a nerve with Garcia when he had suggested Garcia didn't understand consumer societies. All societies were ultimately about consumption and waste, with each society producing more and more of both until a certain threshold was achieved. That threshold could mean one of two things: the destruction of that society, such as the Aztecs, and so many others on Earth that reached their pinnacle, or the evolution of technology and a push towards a new plateau. During the whaling days of the sixteenth century on Earth, there was a prediction that the harvesting of whales would one day soon result in their immediate extinction and, consequently, no more oils. Since textile technologies of that time were dependent on the oil products derived from whales, the belief was that society would collapse and disappear. Indeed, that would have been the case had technology not advanced and alternatives to whale oils been found.

The same prediction had come around again during the fossil fuel era. There was an obvious finite supply of oil reserves, and during the 1970's oil crisis, many believed that society was facing imminent collapse and that the people of Earth would be plunged back into the Stone Age. Of course, the people that made that prediction didn't envision new technologies, such as making cars that could get seventy miles to the gallon, or new oil locating and recovery techniques that allowed them to drill deeper than ever before. Granted, it was still a dead end technology, but its relative cheapness drove the economics long enough that alternatives could be found. There was speculation that perhaps Earth had stayed too long with fossil fuel technologies because of the power structure that enabled those in the oil industry to monopolize and control economic forces. But that issue was taken care of around the time of the Third World War, when the Shakespeare line "Kill all the lawyers" was taken literally, and lawyers ran scared for their lives. The average working person could not reconcile the huge profits made by the average CEO and, consequently, Corporate Leaders fell like lawyers. The oil executives received the worst of it as a public driven by desire for retribution against evils real and imaginary sought to level the playing field once and for all, and a more equitable distribution of resources could be allocated.

No one knew music better than Garcia, and Brock's remarks stung the most here. Earth's music, and entertainment in general, went through a crisis of its own as technology made it easier to distribute. In the days before the net, the high costs of albums were due to shipping and handling. After the net, there was the belief that media should have been greatly reduced in price because shipping and handling had virtually been eliminated. When that didn't happen, consumers, always seeking a better deal, took matters into their own hands and simply took it for free. It was a radical idea, liberating all the forms of art, making it available to everyone who had access, but it was an idea that the world was not quite ready for at the time. And, mostly, that was due to the fact that there was a media monopoly, and some regimes fall hard. Sure, all the world had libraries, but even that was a controlled form of distribution, and ownership remained with the state, not the citizen.

What eventually toppled the market was the fact that consumers stopped buying the products due to the availability of a new breed of artist that made their work available for free, sharing it over the internet to whoever would listen. The better the artist, the better the popularity, and quite frankly, the stuff being written and produced outside of the commercial lines were actually better quality than the stuff the record studios were peddling, which was mostly cheap imitations, factory style assembly, and if that wasn't enough to get you, they added sex appeal.

In addition to that, people were growing tired of seeing the talent of the day not being so talented. New stars were often the sons and daughters of celebrities, who got their positions by riding on the coat tails of their parents. There was a movement by the people to "take back TV" and produce materials that were often better written than the Entertainment which was starting to rehash its older materials through redoing classics. And they were also tired of the war games between studios. If one studio came out with a water movie, all the other studios came out with a water movie. That's why in any one summer release, you would have one great film, like the Abyss, and then several lesser ones, like Deep Star Six or Leviathon. If England produced a great new television series, America produced it, too, recasting it with American actors, even though Americans wanted the English version. Just because this didn't make sense to Garcia that didn't mean he lacked an understanding of the "invisible hand" that governed market forces, he tried to convince himself.

The Internet leveled the playing field when it came to movies, too, because people wanted to see “real” people succeed, as opposed to watching those who already had everything keep everything. That was one explanation for the popularity of reality TV shows, one famous historian had written. People had wanted a break from the “crap” that the industry was forcing on the consumers, and turned to seeing people that were more like them and less like royalty. There were several factions on Iotia pushing for better quality TV, according to the news Garcia had been reviewing, and they were beginning to spread conspiracy theories about the monopolies controlling their lives through their viewing habits and choices. The idea behind their theory was basically this: as the number of reality TV shows increase, the number of unemployed script writers should also increase, which meant the better writers should remain employed while the mediocre fell to the bottom, with the end result being that there should be better entertainment scripts. Since that wasn’t happening, it left two obvious conclusions. One, either Smith and his invisible hand and his theories of market forces were wrong, or, there was some agency with an agenda to dumb down the public peddling crappy shows and tunes, overwhelming an already stupid population with commercials for things they didn’t need to impress people they didn’t like.

Perhaps Brock was right, Garcia considered. “Maybe I don’t understand this completely,” he said to no one in particular. He was surprisingly alone, he realized, as he rotated in his chair surveying the confines of his quarters. It was surprising that the times he actually wanted his invisible friends to chat with they were scarce. He started day dreaming about traveling back in time to interview people from Earth to get a feel for what it was like having a life defined completely by market forces. The pressures of everyday living must have had a profound effect on individuals and societies. How frightening that must have been to the artist of the day when they realized that the benefits for their services was about to change, perhaps permanently. They would have to redefine who they were and how they would relate to society and market forces. They might actually have to become nicer people, he mused. He corrected his thought. There was no doubt a correlation between celebrity friendliness and the demands placed upon the celebrity by the fan base, but it didn’t mean that celebrities were by nature rude or inconsiderate or spoiled, as myths tended to paint them. The people of Earth’s past were so hungry for the idea of fame and power that they often pursued celebrities beyond reason. That could change a person. Though there were public demands placed on Garcia’s life, it didn’t reach the madness that once played out on Earth.

And this is something that would change with Garcia, if Brock had his way. The moment people started paying him for his work, they gained a sense of entitlement to his time and energies. And if they didn’t get it from him freely, they would find alternative ways of getting it. Whether it was the public paying him directly, or a record studio, he would become a slave to their demands, and he didn’t like that. He wanted to produce what he wanted and when he wanted, and if a person didn’t like it then they had an off switch on their computer.

Garcia had a thought. Perhaps he could interview someone from the appropriate time period to get a better feel for how the economics ruled their lives. He called his HROV down from its place in the corner, making it visible. He was still very proud of his holographic remotely operated vehicle. His intentions were to put the schematics on the IS-Net to share but before he did, he wanted to make sure there were no bugs that still needed sorting out. At least, that was what he kept telling himself. It did cross his mind that he was reluctant to tell anyone about it because people would talk.

“Computer,” Garcia said, standing. “Identify a celebrity from twentieth century Earth. The parameters should be, the person should have had world wide influence on society or on Entertainment itself at the time, whether good or controversial, someone who understood market forces, could sell a product regardless of quality, that was able to evolve or change as the market forces changed, or as the person changed, aged, whatever, and that has lasted the test of time.”

“There are more than ten thousand, six hundred thirty two celebrity profiles that meet these criteria,” the computer responded. “Please be more specific.”

“Choose a celebrity with the greatest profile information and pick the subject for musicality,” Garcia requested. “Extrapolate potential personality fields based on all known data, whether autobiographical in nature or gleaned through media files, fans, friends, or family. Once you’ve done that, establish an AI

algorithm to run the personality. Download that personality and a holographic representation of said personality to my HROV.”

“Working,” the computer said. “Work request completed.”

“Activate the program,” Garcia said.

Rays of light shot forth from the top and bottom of the HROV describing the north and south poles of the sphere. The rays delineated the diameter of a sphere, just over two and a half meters, which also described the physical limits of the holographic emitters. The light pooled at the poles, and began to bleed down until there was a floating sphere of light encapsulating the HROV. The sphere of light began to deflate, shrink, fold, and bend. Flashes of light and swirls of sparkling specks of dust where extraneous bits of information being discarded or woven into the fabric of the new manifestation kept the eyes entertained. This all happened very fast. Not as fast as a transporter beam rematerializing a subject, but fast enough that the whole process seemed like magic. The process was a great deal slower than it would have been on the holodeck, but then, he had had to make some sacrifices in emission speeds in order to get a small enough package to meet his wants.

A young female stood before him wearing a denim skirt, flip flops on her feet, and a t-shirt that read: “I am the American Dream.” Based on the T-shirt, Garcia believed he had down loaded exactly the right personality to start his interview process. The eyes of the person became more life like as the personality matrix finally finished installing.

The girl screamed at the top of her lungs, simultaneously boxing Garcia in the face. It was a perfectly timed right hook, followed by a left upper cut, which he later discovered she had been taught by her body guard. As he fell, she drove an elbow to the back of his skull, and then stomped on his back as he lay stunned on the floor. She looked around for an exit, noticed what appeared to be a door and went to it. The door opened for her automatically and she took the opportunity to flee.

The next thing Garcia knew was that Tatiana Kletsova, Security Officer Owens, and Doctor Simmons were standing over him.

“What happened?” Garcia asked.

“We were about to ask you the same thing,” Doctor Simmons said.

“The computer reported a scream from this room, and when it was unable to elicit a response from you, it automatically triggered an emergency call,” Kletsova said. “I was the first one here. I found you unconscious.”

“It would appear as if someone beat the crap out of you,” Doctor Simmons said.

“Did you notice an intruder?” Owens asked.

“The computer did say that the scream sounded female,” Kletsova reported.

Oh, bloody hell, Garcia thought, his memory returning and setting off a slight panic. He tried to ascertain the where about of his HROV gone astray. He found it, being escorted to the Brig.

“Lt. Owen,” came a voice over his comm. badge. “We have found an intruder on deck nine. The Captain wants to see you in the Brig.”

“Aye, I’m on my way,” Owens said. “I guess you should go with the Doctor, Garcia. Kletsova, you’re with me.”

“May I join you?” Garcia asked.

“You think you can identify the intruder?” Owens said.

“I think so,” Garcia said. “We’ll just match the fist print on my face.”

“Alright. Let’s go,” Owens said.

Garcia could have spilled his guts, but he was trying to figure out just how he was supposed to go about explaining all of this. The HROV was being grilled by the Captain, and Garcia was watching the whole thing via his neural implant. It was like watching a small TV in his head, and he chose that option because he didn’t have the luxury of immersing himself in the virtual matrix while navigating the corridors.

“How did you get on my ship?” Captain Munoz demanded.

“I don’t know!” the HROV repeated, crying. And, that was true enough. The current personality would not have access to that sort of information, and the only one that could access the deeper subroutines and computer access would be Garcia.

“What is your name?” Captain Munoz asked.

“Brittany,” HROV said, simply. “Don’t you know me?”

“Should I?” the Captain asked.

“She was resistant to phaser at the stun level,” the security officer informed the Captain. “I didn’t go to the next setting for fear of harming her, and she did come along relatively peaceful after I fired on her.”

Garcia grimaced, wondering how the HROV held up to that kind of energy burst. He would have to do a full diagnostic after recovering the unit.

“What’s wrong?” Tatiana asked. “Are you still in pain?”

“Umm? Oh! No, no, I’m fine,” Garcia said, trying not to sound conflicted. Whatever they thought, they accepted it as normal symptoms from a person who was recently clobbered by an unknown assailant, and who tended to hear voices that no one else did at the best of times.

The personality file that he had created and downloaded into his HROV had obviously freaked out on being activated, and since the AI was going for authenticity, the personality responded to the perceived threat according to the nature of its profile. What he needed was to add a scenario to the programming that would help it accept Garcia as a friend, putting everything that the AI was experiencing in context. He quickly created that scenario as the lift opened up and they headed towards the brig. Off the cuff, he compiled the memory insert: Brittany and I met when I was time traveling to her period, I saved her life, a friendship developed, a relationship ensued, and I had offered to bring her to the future and show her around my world, as compensation for all her help to my temporal research.

Garcia transmitted the file as they entered the brig.

“Oh, Tammias!” Brittany called out. “I’m so glad you’re here. I’m so frightened.”

Everyone turned to Garcia for an explanation as the Brittany robot embraced him, kissing him on the cheek. “Um, hello, Brittany. Captain? I think I can explain this.”

♪♪▶

“So,” Catapin Munoz said, sounding as if it were taking all her strength to remain calm and collected. “You’re telling me that you created a mobile holographic emitter in order to conduct research?”

The entire command staff was present in the conference room, with some additional personnel. Tatiana Kletsova was there, as was the security person who had rounded up Brittany. He was Ensign Ronnie Burk. Brock was also there, demanding a piece of the action. Against the wall opposite Garcia, facing him, were McCoy, Ilona, and Duana. Duana seemed amused by Garcia’s discomfort. Ilona carried the same expression Tatiana did, a mixture of hate, contempt, and pity.

“Some research,” Owens said, louder than he had intended.

“I bet,” Tatiana agreed. “No wonder you’ve been spending so much time in your quarters.”

“That also explains why the intruder alarms didn’t go off,” Burk said. “And why my phaser didn’t stun her.”

Captain Munoz held her hand up for silence from the rest and looked to Garcia for an explanation. “Well?”

“Actually, I created the HROV in hopes of offering it to you as an alternative way for me to join the Away Team,” Garcia said. “I was still in the process of testing its capabilities when I had a slight mishap.”

“HROV?” Owens asked.

“Holographic Remotely Operated Vehicle,” Garcia and Munoz said simultaneously. Munoz could understand why he had created it.

“I really think this is the wave of the future,” Garcia went on. “HROV technology would have a virtually limitless potential. They can go into any environment, and appendages and tools can be immediately created to perform any task that might present itself within the parameters of any given mission.”

“Limitless versatility would make a grand selling point,” Brock pointed out. “Can I get a copy of the schematics from you?”

“I’ll buy one,” Owens said.

Captain Munoz, Kletsova, and Ilona stared the man down. Owens bowed his head a little and mumbled, “I’d still buy one.”

“This thing will sell like hotcakes,” Brock went on. “I’ll be rich!”

“I didn’t create it to make a profit,” Garcia said.

“No, you did it just to enhance your private entertainment,” Kletsova said.

“A selling point that isn’t lost on me,” Brock said, massaging his own ear in contemplation.

“Except for the fact it could have killed you!” Captain Munoz pointed out.

Brock shivered. “We will have to fix that. You can fix that, can’t you?”

“Captain, I admit I have some details to work out, but the technology is completely safe,” Garcia said.

“Its fundamental operating principles are similar to a holodeck. I did cut some corners in order to miniaturize it, as well as assemble it so quickly, but the technology is tried and true.”

“I want you to deactivate your Britney Bot,” Captain Munoz said. She didn’t like it when he frowned. “Was that a flash of rebellion on your face?”

“No, Captain, I’m not rebelling, though I would like to point out that I have not violated any laws or Star Fleet rules and regulations,” Garcia said.

“Noted, now deactivate it,” Captain Munoz ordered.

Garcia closed his eyes and sent the code to turn the HROV off. Nothing happened. “I seem to be experiencing some technical difficulties at the moment,” Garcia admitted.

“What sort of difficulties?” Osaka asked.

“It can’t turn it off,” Garcia said. “Burk must have damaged it when he fired his phaser at it.”

Captain Munoz turned to her Science Officer. “It might be possible to use a magnetic pulse to shut it down,” Anson offered.

“I added shielding to protect against that,” Garcia said. “Captain, I’m performing a diagnostic even as we speak. Permit me to continue to work on it. I’m sure I can improve it, given time.”

“Captain,” Lt. Anson said. “Garcia is right about one thing. HROV technology, if properly developed, has far reaching potential and would be a great asset for the Federation. Miniaturization of holographic emitters is the logical next step.”

“Yeah, think about it,” Doctor Simmons said. “Instant soldiers, instant doctors, instant technician...”

“Instant companions,” Brock added.

“I can’t have this loose canon running around assaulting members of my crew,” Captain Munoz said.

“That was a fluke,” Garcia assured her. “And totally my fault. It won’t happen again. If it increases your comfort level, I can still over ride all of the HROV’s functions and direct it to do my bidding. The Brittany personality is simply a mask that the HROV is wearing. I can control it, and consequently, I can control her.”

“I am not convinced of that,” Captain Munoz said. “This AI simulator allows for learning and adaptation algorithms, does it not?”

“Yes,” Garcia agreed.

“That means this personality will learn, grow, and change,” Captain Munoz said. “Is there any research that describes what happens to a program capable of learning if it is left running for extended periods of time?”

“That is a very interesting question,” Counselor Lester said. “Does it have the potential of becoming sentient? Do we even have the right to turn Brittany off? And does that right change over time and at what time does that right start or go away?”

“It’s a mechanism,” Kletsova said. “Give me a phaser and I’ll turn it off.”

“Do you understand now the depths of my concerns?” Captain Munoz said. “To you it may just be another holographic fling that you can turn off when you’re tired of it, but to me, it is the potential for something more disturbing. It opens up a can of cosmological questions that I don’t have the time and energy to contemplate. I like having clear cut boundaries. This is a slave and this is a free person, this is a machine and this is human and this is animal, plant, mineral, whatever. This technology blurs that line. I am uncomfortable putting a human face on a machine when I may have to turn that machine off one day, or instruct it to do something against its nature and self interest.”

“Is it any difference from when you order a crew member to sacrifice his or her life for the well being of the crew?” Garcia asked.

Captain Munoz fumed, choosing not to respond right away because that had been a thought in the back of her mind. Garcia noted the flash of anger, looked away, and when he looked back, Munoz had softened a

little. “Maybe not,” Munoz said. “I don’t know. I suspect your intentions here were good, you’ve demonstrated that you have reasonably followed the protocols for developing and testing a new technology, and you certainly have demonstrated that you were thinking outside the box, for both the parameters I set forward defining your role in an Away Team, and for continuing research to aid you in better understanding the Iotian situation...”

“But,” Garcia said, knowing full well there was a ‘but’ in there.

“I just wished you had consulted me,” Captain Munoz said, sighing. “I don’t like surprises. Confine this to your quarters for now. And I’ll want continuous updates on your progress with the HROV. Dismissed.”



There is only one thing that can travel faster than the speed of light and that is scuttlebutt on a Starship. Garcia tried to put a positive spin on it, such as, ‘at least it gave the crew something to talk about,’ other than the routine tasks they performed on a daily basis just to keep the ship functioning. For the most part, the ship didn’t even need them for those routines, but they performed their duties none the less just to verify that everything was running along as it should.

“So, how’s your new pet?” Lester asked, as they met for their second meeting.

“It’s not a pet,” Garcia corrected.

“You’re right. In some ways, it’s much more, and in other ways, it’s probably less,” Lester said. “It really does raise some cosmological questions. Like where are we from, where are we going, what is the nature of consciousness?”

“People have been asking that long before computers were even capable of mimicking intelligence,” Garcia said. “Is this really what you wanted to discuss today?”

“As opposed to why you consistently choose fantasy over reality?” Lester asked. “Or why you would choose a toy or a computer game over the companionship of real people.”

“I don’t want to discuss that with you, either,” Garcia said.

“Okay. So, how about we work a little? I want you to pick that chess piece up using telekinetic abilities,” Lester said.

Garcia frowned and stared at the piece. Nothing happened.

“Try to remember to breathe,” Lester instructed.

“This is stupid,” Garcia said, after a little more effort.

“That’s because you’re not doing it right,” Lester said. “You can’t think about it. You can’t use analogies or metaphors. You need to use your mind in a new way. It’s like, when you were a kid and you tried dissipating clouds by just staring at them. If you think laser beams, and think heat, and think rain, you become mentally attached to the cloud, and consequently, it stays, or gets bigger.”

“Would you prefer to discuss your preoccupation with childhood games and wishful thinking?” Garcia asked.

“Feeling a bit adversarial today, or are you just frustrated because you haven’t moved the chess piece?” Lester asked.

“No one ever moved a cloud by thinking about it,” Garcia said.

“Not in a lab setting, perhaps,” Lester said.

“Please,” Garcia said. “I’ve seen all sorts of psy studies, and though there is some evidence that thought and observation has some affect at the quantum level, it so rarely translates to results at the macro level that most events can be dismissed as coincidence.”

“On the contrary, quantum and particle physics has proven beyond a shadow of a doubt that the observer has great influence over his or her reality,” Lester said. “Why do you think it’s standard operating procedure for there to be a transporter tech at the controls of the transporter instead of just allowing the computer to do it.”

“So that there is someone there to clean the mess if it malfunctions,” Garcia said.

“No,” Lester said. “The tech is the designated observer who carries expectations of the results that helps to force the particles to conform to a certain reality.”



“Please,” Garcia said, cringing. “You’re not going to push Shodinger’s cat theories on the transporter. Observer or no, reality is what it is. You can’t make clouds come and go by wishing and people can transition through transporter waves without witnesses.”

“Oh, ye, of little faith,” Lester said, clucking ‘tsk, tsk, tsk.’ “Even when you’ve seen it with your own eyes! You have to empty your mind of thoughts, Tam. Don’t think, at least in terms you’re familiar with.”

“It’s impossible to eliminate thought,” Garcia argued.

“Technically, yes,” Lester agreed. “The brain is always thinking, so, what is the better analogy here. Ah, music. When you play you’re music, you’re not really thinking, but listening, and performing, matching the qualities you hear from the other performers. Imagine thinking is an ocean. The surface of the ocean is everyday awareness, with attention every where, words bouncing all over the place, a cacophony of musical instruments. You want to dive deeper, where the quality of thought becomes fewer and fewer words, beyond visual and auditory symbols for reality, pure musical tones. As you dive deeper, if you experience surface thoughts, simply observe them. Don’t try to cancel them out, or squash them, or run them off, or replace them. Just observe them, allow them to come and go like bubbles rising to the surface, passing you as you continue deeper. If you fight them or engage them in any capacity, you will rise to the surface again and have to start over.”

“I am familiar with this metaphor,” Garcia said. “It is a common metaphor when describing the goals of meditation. I meditate regularly.”

“You’ve hit a plateau, then. You are not going as deep as you can,” Lester said. “Let me hypnotize you and walk you through a meditation.”

“I’ve been meditating all my life, what makes you think you’re going to get me somewhere I haven’t been before?” Garcia asked. “Really, this is a waste of time.”

Lester nodded. “There are two ways we can get you to the quality of thought I want you to experience. I can walk you through a meditation, or, I can increase your physical stress through exercise and present you with random threats to your well being. I’d rather do the meditation, but recreating the stress that causes you to manifest these abilities will work just as well. Once we get you use to recognizing the state you are in when these psychokinetic events occur, we can begin working on performing them on demand, and after that, we learn finesse. So, which do you prefer?”

“Walk me through a meditation,” Garcia said. After an hour, Garcia was brought back, very relaxed, but no where closer to the goal that Lester was trying to reach.



Nancy Carter caught up with Garcia as he was on his way back to his quarters.

“I need your help,” Nancy said.

“What’s wrong?” Garcia asked.

“Niki and I were arguing and she’s run off. She’s not wearing her comm. badge, and I don’t want to get security involved, and...” Nancy said, pausing only to visibly see if Garcia was really interested. “I don’t know where she’s hiding, but if it’s somewhere off limits to non personnel...”

“I understand,” Garcia said. “Would you like me to talk to her?”

“I don’t want to burden you,” Nancy said.

“It’s alright...” Garcia said.

“Would you?” Nancy asked.

“Of course,” Tam said, sending an email to Lenar, asking for a discreet person search that wouldn’t be logged.

Nancy kissed Garcia on the cheek. “Thank you,” she said.

“I’ll email you when I’ve found her,” Garcia said.

Lenar got back to Garcia quicker than he had imagined, having performed a ship wide scan, logging the event as a routine diagnostics of internal scanners. He pin pointed several likely candidates that might be Niki and Garcia soon joined Nikita in her hiding place, an observation blister on the lowest deck of the main hull. A tube led to the blister. Crawling down the tube could be disorienting due to the artificial gravity changed over, which made it possible to stand on the bottom of the hull but still feel like you were standing right side up. Garcia opened the hatch in the floor and crawled down it head first. Once his feet moved past

the sensor, the hatch closed so that no one walking the corridor would fall in. Garcia pushed through his moment of vertigo and then stuck his head up through the hatch. Niki was sitting, back up against the blister, hugging her knees.

“Oops?” Garcia said. “I didn’t know anyone was here...”

Niki turned her head away, wiping her eyes.

“May I join you?” Garcia asked.

Niki shrugged. Garcia climbed into the blister and sat on the floor next to Niki. He sent a quick note to Nancy filling her in on the details.

“So, you come here often?” Garcia asked, trying to be funny.

“Please, I know my mother sent you,” Niki said.

“I volunteered, actually,” Garcia said.

“Right. Did she tell you what we fought about?” Niki asked.

“Nope,” Garcia said. “And I don’t need to know. I doubt you were actually fighting about what you think you were fighting about.”

“You lost me,” Niki said.

“Well, the way I see it is you’re a little bored, frustrated being cooped up on the ship with no peers your age, no where to escape to that you’re not under adult supervision, and your mother is working twelve hour shifts, so she’s tired, and perhaps a little cranky...”

“A little?” Niki asked.

Garcia chuckled. “Tell me something. What is your definition of happiness?”

“The state of being happy,” Niki said.

Garcia whistled. “Okay. That would be the dictionary’s response. Now, what is the Nikita definition of happiness?”

“I don’t understand,” Niki said. “Do I have to have my own definition?”

“Yeah,” Garcia said. “Deanna Troi helped me come up with my definition.”

“Deanna Troi?”

“My Counselor,” Garcia admitted.

“You have a counselor?” Niki asked, amazed. “But you are a counselor!”

“Even counselors have counselors,” Garcia said. “Everyone needs someone to talk to. There’s a counselor on board and he specializes in juvenile counseling.”

“I’d rather talk to you,” Niki said.

“I guess it’s a good thing I found you, then,” Garcia said.

“But I don’t want you as my counselor,” Niki said, looking at him. When he didn’t respond, she turned her body to him and divulged what she and her mother had been fighting about. Touching his hand, she said, “I love you.”

She was horrified when he laughed. She started to cry. Garcia pulled her to him, and held her in a hug, patting her on the head. “I am so sorry. I didn’t mean to laugh. I should have known, seen this, and I swear, I’m not laughing at you. It’s just, well, life can be so funny at times. Ironical funny.”

“I don’t think it’s funny!” Niki cried. “I am so in love with you my heart aches and I want to be closer to you and...”

“Shhh,” Garcia calmed her. “It’s okay. I was in love, hell, still in love, with Deanna Troi.”

“Your counselor?” Niki asked. “Isn’t that a conflict of interest?”

“Not for her,” Garcia chuckled. “She has really good boundaries. I was just a kid when I first met her, even younger than you are now. Oh, and it was instantaneous, fireworks with musical overture and cannons and, well, it was magic.”

“So, what happened?” Niki asked.

“Nothing,” Garcia said. “I learned to breathe and carry on.”

“So, it’s okay that I love you?” Niki asked.

“Absolutely,” Garcia said. “The caveat being that you fully understand and appreciate that this matter goes no further than a philosophical discussion.”

“But you love Troi!” Niki said.

“And we still have a dialogue about it from time to time, but her boundaries are still solid, and at the moment, I am actually feeling some sympathy for her position, as a counselor, and as an older person who has an obligation to affirm healthy boundaries with a younger person who is experiencing strong emotions of affection,” Garcia said. Having the roles reversed on him is the irony that caused him to laugh, but even so, he doubted he would ever completely stop hitting on Troi, testing to see if that boundary was still solid. “She and I will never be in a romantic relationship.”

“But that doesn’t rule us out, right? I mean, you’re not officially my counselor,” Niki tried.

“I am currently in a counselor role,” Garcia said. “And even if I wasn’t, there are a number of factors that would prevent us from ever having a romantic relationship.”

“The age disparity?” Niki said more than asked.

“For starters,” Garcia said.

“But I am of legal marrying age on seventeen planets in the Federsation,” Niki protested.

“Um, none of which we are currently on, and since you don’t come from these planets, you have no claim over their social rules, but nice try,” Garcia said.

“But we could...”

Garcia stopped her with a look. “Nikita Carter, you and I will only be friends,” he said. If Deanna were watching, she would no doubt be laughing hysterically, he mused.

Niki pouted. “So, what’s your definition of happiness?”

“Some happy, some sad, and a whole hell of a lot of neutral,” Garcia said.

Niki smiled. “Cute. May I?”

“You can quote me,” Garcia said. “Can I walk you back to your quarters?”

She frowned. “Can we watch the stars for a little bit more?”

Garcia nodded. He allowed her to hold his hand, and rest her head on his shoulder. Outside the blister, stars appeared to stream by, broken into their spectrum, the normal visual affect of the Universe twisted through the lens of the warp bubble encapsulating the ship. A large particle, cosmic debris of some sort, triggered the deflector screen, which shunted the object to the starboard side of the ship. It was an interesting visual phenomena to witness, but it startled Niki, who had never witnessed one before. Garcia educated her about the difference between deflectors and shields.



The song ‘Tears of Jupiter’ fit Garcia’s expectations for Niki’s theme song so well that he couldn’t wait to get back to his quarters and play with it. He performed the song, personally laying down each track for each instrument. Using the HROV, or the Britney Bot as everyone was calling her, he was able to play two instruments at once. For fun, he also put together a video, giving credit to the band ‘Train,’ who originally performed the song. It was so perfectly what he wanted that he attempted not to change it too much, but he was Tammias Garcia, so he had to put his trademark spin on it. He found himself obsessing over the chorus: “Tell me, did you sail across the sun. Did you make it to the Milky Way to see the lights all faded. That Heaven is overrated. Tell me, did you fall for a shooting star, one without a permanent scar, and did you miss me while you were looking for yourself out there...” He watched the video in his head, subtitled. As the starship traced its way through the heavens, the outlines of constellations lightly illuminated when the camera moved to certain angles as if the background of space was a hologram. There was a close up of the starship with the background of a gas giant. The ship stirred ripples through the wake of the gas giant’s rings. Comets blew by. There were nebulas with lightening, and lightening in the clouds on the dark side of the planets. An image of Nikita on the highest cliff of the Cliffs of Heaven, where Garcia had made a leap of faith with Kristin on the Enterprise. Niki’s hair blew in the sea breeze as she struck a pose, an unknown statue of Venus by Michaelangelo. She lifts up and flies away again. The video closed with a starship going to warp, a star point of light, fading, gone. Blackness. The song also caused Garcia to think of Captain Janeway and he decided he would have to send her a copy, too.

Garcia caught himself humming the chorus again. “Tell me, did the wind sweep you off your feet. Did you finally get to the chance to dance along the light of day, and head back to the Milky Way? And tell me, did Venus blow your mind. Was it everything you wanted to find, and did you miss me while you were looking for yourself out there...”

After completing the song and video, he emailed it to Niki and then got ready for his first live rehearsal with the band he had put together. The band was setting up when he arrived at the small stage in the rec area. Niki and her mom made their appearance, pretty much on his heels. Niki rushed the stage and hugged Garcia.

"Oh my god, that was the most perfect present I have ever had. Oh, thank you," Niki said, popping up on her toes and bouncing so she could kiss him on the cheek.

"You're most welcome," Garcia said. "Are you ready to rock?"

"Here?" Niki asked, her eyes going over the small crowd that had assembled to listen to their fellow crew members.

"You can sit this one out if you like," Garcia said.

"Umm, no," Niki said.

"Okay, get your guitar. That's your mic," Garcia said, pointing to the spot next to him. The mic stand also held a PADD which would display words and musical notation. The entire band had this set up, because they would be playing many songs impromptu, reading the scores raw.

Garcia introduced the members of his band for posterity. Tatiana Kletsova, on drums, Lenar on sax, Nikita acoustical guitar, Brittany via Garcia's assistance on bass guitar and vocals, Marvin Thomas, trombone, Jody Newell keyboards, Al Hubenka trumpet, and Brenda Sharlow violin. "Now, we're playing improvisational, and this is our first time together, so don't be too harsh on us. I'm going to start us off with a song by Sir Elton John, which, fittingly enough, shares the name of our ship, 'Philadelphia Freedom.' Ready?" Garcia asked, counted off, and off they went.

Garcia had chosen the band members on ability to read music and improvise. He was recording as they went and he was so happy with the results of their version of 'Philidealpha Freedom' that he saved the file and sent it to the Captain with his compliments.

"Wonderful," Garcia complimented them. "So, Niki. Have any requests?"

"Do you know anything by Abba?" Nikita asked.

"Abba?" Brittany reeled. "They are like so retro."

"Like you aren't?" Nikita asked, and then turned her attention back to Garcia.

"Brittany, today is Nikita's day," Garcia said. "We're here to support her."

"Alright, Tam," Brittany said, with the same sort of undying love sound in her voice that Nikita manifested when talking to Garcia. Tatiana's head shaking was not lost on him, and when he glanced at her, she gave him the sign for "gag me."

Garcia directed Brittany to bring him a flute from a nearby cradle and then she took a spot next to Nikita. As he prepared to play, he called up the music notation for the band to follow along. Given the band's first performance, he was confident in their ability to pull this off equally as well. He did have to remind himself that it was okay if they made mistakes because this was supposed to be fun, not work.

"Fernando, by Abba," Garcia said, and he kicked it off with the flute, the rest of the band joining in. Nikita sang, timid at first, but her confidence grew. Garcia gave her signs to adjust her tempo a little, as she kept trying to speed things up. Without direction, Brittany actually aided Nikita, encouraging her with her eyes and hand gestures. She accompanied Nikita without trying to take the lead or outshine her. When the song ended, Nikita looked to Garcia for direction and praise.

"Very nice," Garcia said. "Have you taken formal lessons?"

"Not with a human," Nikita said. And to further clarify her statement, "Only computer lessons."

"I recommend standing straighter," Brittany said. "Better posture, and try breathing deeper..."

Garcia nodded. "Those are techniques I was going to recommend, but we'll work on that later. Let's just have fun today. I think you wanted to do a duet, right?"

"Yeah," Nikita said. "From a musical? Brigadoon or Starlight Express or Grease!"

"Summer Nights," Kletsova recommended.

"Broadway or movie version?" Garcia asked.

"Our own version," Kletsova said, setting the tempo. "Just join in." Britany established the rhythm with her bass guitar.

"Wait, I'm still downloading the score," Thomas said.

"Don't worry, you can fake this one," Kletsova said.

Nikita put down her guitar and took the mic from the stand. Garcia sent the music to everyone, and those that could sing were prompted with back ground lyrics. The next song after “Summer Nights,” was “Next Time You Fall in Love,” from Starlight Express. Garcia was impressed by the change in Nikita’s tonal qualities from song to song, revealing a real talent. Her voice began to shine, reflecting the words of the song: “Next time you fall in love, it better be with me, the way it used to be. Back then was when we touched the starlight.” Of course, when she sang those words, she really meant it. Garcia realized that there was great potential for her being hurt when he didn’t return those feelings and considered ways of lessening that potential. Then again, that sort of hurt was a part of life that almost every human being experienced. Perhaps it was just best to let her be and experience life as it comes.

After hearing the song from Star Light, Afu stepped up to the stage.

“Hey,” Afu said to Garcia. “I’d liked to sing a song from Starlight. My favorite is ‘One Rock and Roll Too Many’.”

Garcia agreed and gave Afu a hand up. “Okay, Afu. You and me.” The two of them shared the song, which went something like: “One rock N Roll too many, one night’s sleep too few, too much ringing of that bell, takes its toll out of you...”

This song was a big hit with the audience, which had grown since they started playing. Garcia wouldn’t be surprised if their impromptu playing was being pumped intra-ship by now. “Since we’re still stuck on Starlight, perhaps you’ll permit me to select one,” he asked. No one objected. “Starlight Sequence, Afu will you sing Starlight? I’ll be Rusty.” “You got it, Rusty,” Afu agreed. For this one, Garcia accessed the stage lights with his neural implants, and affected the mood.

“Starlight Express, Starlight Express, are you there? Are you real?” Garcia sang.

“Still blind,” Afu responded. “Look in you’re mind. I’m there. Nothing’s new. The Starlight Express, is no more, no less, than you, Rusty, I am you, I’m you and only you... have the power within you... Just believe in yourself, the sea will part before you, stop the rain, turn the tide... Needn’t beg the world to help you if you draw on what’s deep in inside.”

“I am the starlight” Garcia sang, simultaneously with Afu’s part. “I can achieve... anything. I can see it through... Needn’t beg the world, to turn around and help you, if you draw on what is deep inside. I won’t let you down.”

There was a standing ovation for the Afu and Garcia number. They bowed and pointed towards their band. Garcia whispered to Afu, “I didn’t know you were such a great singer.”

Afu played modest and shrugged it off. Nikita hugged him.

“Wow, you do a good Starlight,” Nikita said to Afu. “I’d like to hear you perform Light at the End of the Tunnel.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Afu said, still playing modest.

“Everybody, give Afu some encouragement!” Garcia said, cheering him on.

“Light at the end of the Tunnel” was seconded by Kletsova. Afu acquiesced, and started the song before the band was ready by shouting, charismatically, “Diesel is for unbelievers!” The band jumped on a note and squashed it. “Electricity is wrong.” Musicians pounced, then silence. “Steam has got the power that will pull us along,” he sang, and the band joined in, with Tatiana driving a strong beat. “There’s a light at the end of the tunnel, yeah,” he sang, everyone laughed at his ‘yeah.’ He encouraged everyone in the audience to join the chorus and to clap their hands. “That’s right, sing it, children. There’s a light at the end of the tunnel. The inside might be as black as the night, but at the end of the tunnel there’s a light. Its power of James Watt, the steam is hot, the man who got the fire started said hey I got, a brilliant watt when the steam is hot... steam can make a lot of power. It can turn a wheel, lots of power. Drive it down a track, clickety clack, clickety clack. Time it with a beat, choo, choo choo...”

All they needed was someone jumping a pew, Garcia thought. This was a happening place, a revival unparallel since the invention of tents. The audience was clapping along. Niki danced as she played the guitar, really enjoying herself.

“There are dog days ahead, when the power goes dead, when the oil runs dry, what can we try?”

“We can use the sunlight” Niki offered in song.

“But it don’t shine at night,” Afu returned to her.

And they agreed to share, “Nuclear fission leaves a nasty emission.”

“Soon the pistons will be humming steam will have a second coming, woo, woo woo! See the light, see the light, see the light, see the light at the end of the tunnel ohhhhhh,” Afu held the note out longer than anyone expected him to as the chorus went divergent on their own parts. “Let the water boil, say goodbye to oil. At the end of the tunnel is a light.” Afu nailed it.

Garcia took a moment to save the recording he had just made intending to review it later on. Nikita put the guitar in the cradle and hugged Afu. “That was awesome,” Nikita said.

“I have a good band,” Afu said.

“Since we’re still twentieth century, why don’t we do a Partridge Family Song,” Nikita requested.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Brittany said, looked at Garcia, and then added, pretending to be pleased, “Because that would be so awesome.”

Nikita jumped, clapping, and then hugged Brittany. She retrieved the guitar and began playing “I Think I Love You,” by the Partridge Family, never once wondering who was calling up the music on all the PADDs that the band referred to for their scores. In an attempt to be humorous, she gave it more of an edge, as if it had been remade by Guns and Roses. She screamed with delight at the conclusion and winked at Garcia.

“Your turn, Tam,” Nikita said.

“Five O’Clock World, by the Voques,” Garcia requested, and the words came up for them. “Your turn, Nikita,” Garcia threw the ball back to her.

“Sunshine, Paul Westerberg’s version.” They sang it.

Jody Newell made a request. “Know any Cat Stevens songs?” “Yes,” Nikita said, and strummed the guitar playfully. “How about ‘Oh Very Young?’”

Garcia nodded approval, picking up a Banjo. They followed the selection with three other Cat Stevens’s song: “Trouble,” “Don’t Be Shy,” and “If You Want to Sing Out, Sing Out.” The latter Garcia sang with Nikita in harmony. Nikita moved to a place beyond happiness, her eyes moist.

“Let’s make this next one the last number for the day,” Garcia said, feeling strangely tired. Ilona and Duana had been singing along, and dancing. It did make the music more enriching for him, since he could hear their harmonies, but it was also a bit draining. McCoy was in the audience, apparently enjoying the music as well. He was sitting in the empty seat next to Nancy Carter, along with Troi and Lal.

Nikita protested a little, but she quit the moment Garcia gave her a look that suggested don’t do that. “Can I pick it?” she asked.

“Sure,” Garcia said. No one in the band would have protested since this was more for Nikita than for any of them.

Nikita closed her eyes to think of a song that she had always wanted to perform, remembering her daydreams where she and Garcia were in a band, just like now. Garcia was known for his affinity towards retro and had spent thousands of hours listening to music that was on his influence list. “Dreams, by the Cranberries,” she said, and started playing her guitar before the band even had their music cued up. They all caught up to speed before she started the vocal. “Oh, my life is changing everyday, every possible way. Oh, my dreams, it’s never quite as it seems, never quite as it seems. I know I’ve felt like this before. But now I’m feeling it even more, because it came from you. And then I open up and see. The person falling here is me. A different way to be.”

Nikita danced, playing, singing notes without words. She danced around Garcia, playing flirtatiously. He blushed slightly, feeling the heat in his cheeks. Tatiana seemed amused by Garcia discomfort.

“I want more. Impossible to ignore. Impossible to ignore. And they’ll come true. Impossible not to do. Impossible as it seems. And now I tell you openly, you have my heart so don’t hurt me. You’re what I couldn’t find, a totally amazing mind, so understanding and so kind. You’re everything to me. Oh my life, it’s changing every day, in every possible way. It’s never quite as it seem. Cause you are a dream to me.”

Everyone applauded as Garcia motioned to the star, Nikita, and then the rest of the band. He then started putting the instruments away as the band and audience, the crew, mixed, discussing and chatting about the event. Everyone in the band gave Niki a hug. After Tatiana hugged and complimented Niki, she joined Garcia in the stowing of the instruments.

“How is it you know so much about twentieth century music,” Tatiana asked.

“My birth mother,” Garcia said, taking the flute apart and cleaning it before stowing it back in its case. “Most of it I got vicariously through her, still prenatal. The Kelvan had raised her in a mock up of America late 90’s to develop a particular minds set and paradigm for her. By controlling the way she thought, they had hoped to better control the way I would think.”

“Brain washing?” Tatiana asked.

“Yes,” Garcia said. He closed the flute and watched Niki as she was talking to her music instructor. “The kind of techniques used either result in complete compliance or complete rebellion.”

“And, so you became the rebel,” Tatiana said.

“Why would you say that?” Garcia asked.

They both heard Niki laughed, causing them both to look over to see Afu clowning around with her. Her mom was there and so was Lenar, but Niki was definitely the center of attention.

“She’s pretty good,” Tatiana said. “This is a good thing you’ve done, Tam.”

“She’s the only kid on the ship,” Garcia said, trying to dismiss the complement. “Everyone has a job and something to do but her.”

Tatiana turned back to him. “You don’t acknowledge that this is a good thing for her? That she’ll remember these days for the rest of her life and it’s because of you?”

Garcia took a moment to read Tatiana’s eyes. He nodded. “It’s a very good thing. She’s very talented, as are you. I may have facilitated this, but it was all of you that made it happen so well. All of us.”

Niki skipped up to them. “I’m sorry, do you need some help?”

“Sure, Niki,” Tatiana said, roughing Nikita’s hair. “Why don’t you gather up the mic stands. The mics go in that box there, and drops in the cubby hole there.”

Niki joyously complied.

“If only you could harness that to drive a spaceship,” Tatiana said. She shook her head, remembering moments from her childhood that were equally happy. “Will you be joining us for dinner, Tam?”

“Not tonight,” Garcia said.

Nancy Carter came out of no-where and greeted Garcia with a hug. “Thank you,” she said. “Thank you, so much.”

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The days passed with routine work, studying the Iotian tapes, frustrating counseling sessions, music lessons for Nikita Carter, technical work on the HROV, improvisational band playing to a now full auditorium, and an occasional sparring match with Tatiana. Captain Munoz grew more and more annoyed by the illusive Ferengi ship Oman, which had not returned to pick up Brock and return their Officer. The Ferengi, Brock, did take several calls from the Oman, but no one knew that DaiMon Tolro had given Brock specific orders not to come back without a contract. Munoz was not pleased when she finally discovered that Brock's only reason for being on her ship was to negotiate a deal with Garcia, allowing them to have distribution rights to his music over the Ferengi Alliance Network. The Captain's prerogative was to have Garcia simply sign it over to them, but it was not something she could ask, ethically or legally. By the time they dropped out of warp near Iotian space, they were all relieved for the change in pace, but still a little on edge for being cooped up for so long. Perhaps a holodeck upgrade wasn't such a bad idea after all, she considered to herself. Thank god for the music.

The USS Philadelphia Freedom dropped out of warp approximately nine point three million miles from the Iotian sun and began taking scans. The ship rested on the boundary between interstellar space and Iotian space, as described by their sun's solar wind. They began an intensive scan of the system.

"No sign of the USS Minnesota," Owens announced. "Possible debris halo around Iotian prime is of sufficient mass, with the right material composition, to suggest it could be what we're looking for."

"Mr. Anson?" Munoz asked.

"I agree with Owens, but reserve my opinion till I have examined some of debris up close," Anson said.

"I'll give you that inspection soon enough, but for now, speculate," Captain Munoz said.

"The debris field and material composition is consistent with what we would find if a Starship's warp core collapsed," Anson said. "I do not care to speculate as to what might have caused that collapse at this time."

From the Com/Ops station, Garcia had been recording live Iotian broadcasts since their arrival in Iotian space. He found the use of the word, "live," ironic, since the radio waves he was recording would have been transmitted roughly seventy-six hours ago to have reached this point in space. That was factoring in Iotia prime's current position in its orbit to where Freedom was about to enter the solar system.

An energy spike in the gamma frequencies drew Garcia's attention, but by the time he had adjusted his monitoring equipment, the energy signature was gone. It could have been anything from just a rogue energy wave, a single gamma particle hitting one of the sensors directly, to just normal space background noise. Still, he ran through the list identifying all the radio signals in the system. Both gas giants produced radio signatures. All gas giants have unique radio wave signatures, a finger print if you will that allowed space travelers to navigate and made space a very interesting place to listen to. He compared it to the old days when sailors listened to the songs of whales, amplified by their sailing vessels. Sailing vessels were as good at amplifying whale songs in the same way that the acoustical properties of an acoustical guitar amplified the sound of the strings.

There was another spike in the gamma range and Garcia redirected a minimal amount of sensors to focus on a nearby object. Sensors described the object as a comet. He pulled up a visual image. It looked like a comet. He did a chemical composition and the computer alerted him to an anomaly. The mineral composition of the comet did not match the signature mineral composition for items originating in the Iotian system. For every solar system, there was a reasonably consistent trace mineral finger print, going back to the initial stirring of matter before it became a star system. A comet or meteor that came from outside the solar system would most probably have a different finger print, or chemical composition.

"Prepare to take us in," Captain Munoz told the helm.

"Captain," Garcia interrupted. "I found something interesting. May I have a moment?"

Captain Munoz turned her chair to Garcia and looked up at his screen.

"Comet watching?" Munoz asked.

"I noticed an intermittent spike in the gamma frequencies, and I think it came from this comet," Garcia said. "I did a standard scan and the computer reported an anomaly."



“Indeed,” the science officer confirmed. “The comet did not originate in this system.”

“What’s so unusual about that,” Captain Munoz asked. “There are stray comets all over the place. Stars fling old ones off and pick new ones up all the time.”

“I understand that, Captain, but there are two unusual things about Garcia’s comet. One, I am unable to scan the interior of the comet, and two, the outer composition of ice and trace elements is an exact match for material for the Earth’s solar system,” Anson said.

“This comet came from the Sol system?” Munoz asked. “What are the odds of that?”

“Astronomically against it,” Garcia offered. “However, if we assume that life on earth was originally seeded by a passing comet, as the leading theorists have proposed, then it would explain how it might be possible that the Ioitan’s have had a similar biological evolution to that of Earth’s. They were seeded by the same comet.”

“I’m more willing to buy that than your alien abduction theory,” Munoz said.

Owens stepped a little closer to Garcia’s screen. “Is that metal sticking out of the comet?”

“On main viewer, magnify,” Munoz ordered, and turned her chair to face the screen. She stood up.

“That,” said the Chief Engineer, “Looks like the tail end of a warp engine nacelle.”

“Helm, take us in closer,” Munoz said. “Two hundred KPH. Bring us to within fifty meters and give us some illumination. Anson, are you telling me you still can’t scan that.”

“The comet is resistant to all scans,” Anson said.

“Captain, may I try something?” Garcia asked.

Captain Munoz looked to Garcia. “Clarify.”

“I believe it may be possible to simulate the dolphin’s ability of echolocation,” Garcia said. “If I were to send a pulse of energy at the comet, I might be able to induce a harmonic resonance. I can then use the feed back to generate a three dimensional map of the comets interior.”

Captain Munoz looked to her Science Officer. He did not look happy. “In theory,” he finally conceded. “It could work.”

“Give it a shot,” Captain Munoz said.

Garcia pushed one button and a laser was emitted from the forward section of the ship. Captain Munoz looked to Garcia for an explanation for how he had been so prepared to do this trick.

“When Anson announced that we are unable to scan the comet, I began formulating this procedure, hoping to provide you with an alternative option,” Garcia said, all the while adjusting the frequency of the laser emission by tapping on his panel. The station’s speaker offered a sound that rose in pitch, correlating to a blue shift from red in the laser’s light. That was Garcia’s audio cue to confirm his activity while he spoke to the Captain.

“Thank you, Ensign,” Munoz said.

“Got it,” Ensign Garcia announced. “It’s only a partial map, but sufficient to give you an idea of what we found. Computer, color code the variations in details, and look for a match from our ship’s library. Over lap this graphic with the image on the main screen.”

There was a limited picture of the ship, for the deeper it went into the comet the hazier the image became until it finally gave way to nothing. But it was enough to reveal the answer to a mystery and raise a multitude of new questions.

“The Horizon!” Captain Munoz said, astonished. After all these years, they finally found it.

“More than likely,” Lt. Anson said. “It does appear to be an NX class ship, and that class was decommissioned in 2161...”

“I know my history, thank you,” Captain Munoz said. “I want to see my senior Officers in the Conference room. Nice work, Garcia. Also, page Lt. Carter to join us.”

They reconvened in the conference room and began talking about the find. Nancy Carter slipped into the room as they were going over the stats of the Horizon, and discussing the possibilities.

“I’d like to volunteer to go on board the Horizon,” Lt. Sutton said.

“Jared, I need you here. I will need your expertise in trying to find out what happened to the Minnesota,” Captain Munoz said.

“Well, I’ll volunteer,” Garcia said. “It’s not like you’ll miss me, since I can’t go planet side, anyway.”

“Sorry, Garcia, but I need you, too, and you know that,” Captain Munoz said. “I know you have an interest in this sort of archaeological find, and that’s what this is, an archeological find, but I can’t divert a lot of man power to it. Can we send in your HROV and you operate it from Iotian prime?”

“No, the distance would be too great,” Garcia said. “Well, I mean, I could preprogram it for certain tasks, but with no way to check in for updates... I don’t think it’s ready for that.”

“Well, that leaves me little choice...”

“I’ll go,” Nancy volunteered. “I can take a portable Auxiliary Power Unit, plug it in, and work on retrieving the data banks. It should only take me about four hours at best, a couple of days if I have to rebuild any circuits.”

“Are you sure?” Captain Munoz said. “In addition to being away from Freedom, there is a potential for discovering some biohazards.”

“You mean, the dead crew of the Horizon,” Carter said. “I’m not afraid of ghosts, Captain.”

“Very well,” Captain Munoz said. “I want you to take shuttlepod Darwin, and link up to the service access panel, here, at the end of the engine nacelle. From there, you should be able to crawl to the number two Jeffries tube, and climb down to the engine room. Garcia, I want you to help her get her supplies together and double check that she has everything she might need for this sort of excavation.”

“Captain,” Owens interrupted. “I really don’t think she should go alone. May I volunteer?”

“No,” Munoz said. “I have a crew of twenty percent cadets and I really can’t spare senior and experienced officers. If we get to Iotia and there are no issues, I will consider allowing you to bring back a whole engineering team to look at the possibility of salvaging the Horizon.”

“Owens has a valid point, Captain,” Osaka said. “If she were to get injured and was unable to call for help, a second team member would be very useful. So, if this is a time to vote or add suggestion, I say we either delay in this tangent until we can spare the full resources to do the job correctly, or we increase the Away Team by at least one member.”

Munoz reflected over her First Officer’s comment, neither frowning nor smiling. She finally nodded. “I consider this a minimal risk excursion, however, Osaka, I agree that safety should come first. Lt. Carter, you can take Cadet Jody Newel with you. Are you okay with that?”

“I can do it alone,” Carter said. “But, I admit I would prefer the company.”

“Very well,” Captain Munoz said. “Can you have your shuttle stocked and prep in an hour?”

“With my help, she’ll be ready in twenty minutes,” Garcia said.

“Fine, you have one hour,” Captain Munoz said. “Dismissed.”



Jody Newel made a prompt appearance on the shuttle deck. Near the main hatch was an anti-grav skid with a pile of supplies being handed up into the pod. Garcia was handing the supplies to Carter, who turned and stowed them in a compartment, or simply flung them on the floor. Jody approached Garcia.

“Excuse me?” Newell asked. “Why don’t we just beam over?”

“We are unable to scan the ship. That rules out transporting,” Garcia said, and appraised her dress. She was in regular uniform, with the alternative skirt versus the pants. “You might want to dress a bit warmer.”

“I’ll be staying on the shuttle, won’t I?” Newell asked.

Carter came halfway down the ramp. “Maybe, maybe not. Either way, if we determine that the Horizon still holds an atmosphere, when I cross over, there could be a significant drop in temperature, even with the atmosphere force field in place. At least get a coat.”

“Alright,” Newell said. “Is there anything else I might get while I am at it?”

“Let’s go over the list again, Garcia,” Carter said.

Garcia lifted his PADD and began reading through the list he had put together. “Two specialized tool kits. One general tool kit. A box of various cable adaptors, couplings, and a demagnetizer. Two sleeping bags and inflatable beds...”

“Inflatable beds?” Newell asked. “We’re spending the night?”

“Planning for the possibility,” Carter said. “And since the deck plating will no doubt be freezing, the inflatable beds will keep us off the floor, preventing hypothermia.”

“One emergency med kit. Too bad the Horizon wasn’t equipped with emergency holoemitters and a portable EMH...” Garcia mused, referring to the emergency medical hologram.

“Maybe you should design one,” Newell said. “More practical than a Brittany Bot.”

“But not as entertaining. Just call me Doctor Frankenstein,” Garcia said and turned back to his list. “Standard bag of emergency rations and potable water, just in case your shuttlepod’s replicator should fail,” Garcia answered the question Newell was about to ask. “Two portable APU’s. Rappelling gear, harnesses, two spools of one hundred meter line, connectors, and pulleys. Two EVA suits. Two emergency Life Belts...”

“Whoa, hold it. I hate those things,” Newell said. “Is it compulsory?”

“Think of it this way. We’re going to hook a shuttlepod up to a service hatch that was built over three hundred years ago and that has probably not been opened in an equal number of years. If there is a leak or the seal should fail, and we decompress, do you want to have the Emergency Life Belt on, or do you want to wear your EVA suit for the duration of the Away Mission?”

“I’ll put the ELB on,” Newell complained. “But I want you both to know that it gives me a rash.”

“Should your ELB activate, I will personally apply lotion to any part of you that you feel needs attention,” Garcia offered.

“Umph,” Newell said. “I imagine there are quite a few people on board that would find that appealing. I don’t. I consider it harassment. Please refrain from that type of humor around me.”

“Sorry,” Garcia said, and turned back to his list. “Engineering, medical, and two general tricorders. Two type two phasers, and two type three phaser rifles...”

“Whoa, hold it,” Newell said. “What do we need phasers for? It’s a dead ship, right?”

“Precaution. We don’t know why it’s a dead ship,” Carter said.

“Well, hello. They flew right into a comet,” Newell said.

“There would not have been any ship left had there been an impact with a comet at near relativistic speeds,” Garcia said. “Don’t worry. There’s a ninety nine percent probability that you will not remove the phasers from the weapons locker.”

“I’m not worried. I just want to know what I’m getting into,” Newell said.

“That’s reasonable,” Carter said. “So, why don’t you be a good little cadet and go get a coat, or a jump suit, just in case you were to get cold? And, I also recommend using the toilet.”

Newell acknowledged that with a salute. There was no telling what condition the Horizon’s lavatories were in. “Be right back,” Newell said, pivoted, and walked off with a little bounce in her step.

“I sure wish you were going,” Carter confided in Garcia when Jody was out of earshot, sighing.

“I like her. I think she’ll work out for you,” Garcia said. “She does know her electronics and quantum physics, and she’s an excellent Jazz musician.”

Carter made an “umph” sound. “I suppose that’s all you like about her, too,” Carter said, smiling deviously. “Her musical qualities.”

“I appreciate more qualities than I am often given credit for,” Garcia said, knowing it was just friendly banter. Had the same banter come from Tatiana, he would have felt defensive. He snuck another glance at Newell, which Carter caught. “I wouldn’t mind hearing her sing, but then, it’s not like she’s falling for my natural charm.”

Carter laughed. “Hand me that APU.”

Nikita Carter entered the shuttle bay and walked over to her mom, yawning. “Sorry, Mom, I just got your message. What’s up?”

“Taking a nap, were you?” Garcia asked.

“Your music lessons are killing me,” Nikita said. “I don’t see how exercising has anything to do with musicianship.”

“I’m helping you strengthen your core muscles, which in turn will help your breathing, increase your endurance, and provide you with the ability to sustain longer notes and musical phrases between breaths,” Garcia said. “You didn’t expect I would go easy on you, now did you?”

“I’m not unappreciative,” Nikita said, stretching. “Just tired. So, again, Mom, what’s up?”

“Honey,” Nancy said, speaking now as a mom and not a Star Fleet officer. “I’m going to be leaving the ship for a little while.”

“Define a little while,” Nikita said, more awake.

“Garcia, you’re rubbing off on my daughter,” Nancy said, touching her daughter’s chin. “Well, best case scenario, a couple of hours. Worst case scenario, three or four days.”

“Can’t I go with you?” Nikita asked.

“There’s barely room in the pod for me and Newell, much less you,” Nancy said. “You’ll be more comfortable on the ship.”

“Please,” Nikita protested. “Comfort is relative. Thinking like that suggests that I would have been more comfortable on Jupiter Station with Dad, and you didn’t leave me there. What you really meant to say is that I would be safer on the ship. You never take me anywhere.”

“Excuse me? I brought you with me on this ship, did I not?” Nancy said.

“That’s not the same. I want to go on an Away Mission. I want to go somewhere where there’s some fun, and adventure, and risk. I want to do things, Mom. I want to be useful,” Nikita said, crossing her arms over her chest, sulking.

Nancy came out of the shuttle and hugged her daughter. Nikita resisted at first, but then released her arms and embraced her Mom. “Oh, baby. You are very useful, and I love you very much,” Nancy said, and pulled back and tilted her daughter’s face up, brushing her hair out of her eyes and wiping a tear. “Though I consider this mission safe enough to take you on, there is a good chance I’m going to come across some HR’s.”

“HR’s?” Nikita asked.

“Human remains,” Nancy said.

Nikita grimaced. “Dead people?” she asked.

“Now, I want you to stay here, and be safe, and warm, and if you need anything, you can call on Garcia, or the Captain, or anyone from your band,” Nancy said. “Okay?”

“Alright, Mom,” Nikita said.

Nancy touched her forehead to her daughter’s forehead. “We’re of one mind and one heart on this, right?”

“Yes,” Nikita said. “I’ll see you when you get back.”

“Okay,” Nancy said. “Thank you for your help, Garcia. Ready Cadet?”

“Roger that,” Newell said, having just returned, her winter gear draped over her arm.

Garcia and Nikita stepped out of the marked off area describing the potential danger zone. The warning klaxon sounded as the shuttle bay door began to slide open. Nancy waved to her daughter from the pilot’s window. Nikita waved back, and then leaned into Garcia for support. He put an arm around her. The shuttle lifted a few centimeters off the floor and began to move forward. It eased out of the bay, pushing through the anular force field that held the atmosphere in. As soon as it was clear of the ship, the pod flipped over so that the forward window was facing the bay, but upside down. Newell was holding on, obviously upset by the sudden maneuver, and perhaps experiencing a little vertigo due to seeing Garcia and Nikita still rightside up. Nancy blew a kiss to her daughter and then rolled the pod, dropping below the sight line of the flight deck. Small thrusters flared, and the pod eased away. The shuttle bay door began to close.

“She’s such a show off,” Nikita said.

“So, I guess that explains where you got it from?” Garcia asked.

Nikita punched at his arm. Garcia blocked, and a mock battle ensued, power fists, with a final kick when her arms got trapped. They playfully went through a series of punches and blocks, kicks and blocks, each time ending with Nikita getting pinned. She slapped out, indicating she was through. “One of these days I’m going to beat you at this game,” Nikita said.



The closer the USS Philadelphia Freedom came to Iotia Prime, the more certain they were that the debris field was the remains of the Minnesota. Captain Munoz brought her ship to a stop, relative to Iotia Prime. Based on the debris field and the trajectory of the pieces, they were fairly confident they could discern where the ship was when it met with its fate, but they were still at a loss to explain the destruction. What ever

had happened had happened so fast that Captain Heller obviously had not had time to launch an emergency buoy, which would have also held telemetry of the Minnesota's final hour.

Captain Munoz leaned forward in her chair, staring at the main viewer as if the answers to all her questions might magically appear. She listened to her staff's conjectures and the numerous hypothetical remarks, but nothing made sense. One of the options available to them, proposed by Garcia before his duty shift was up and he was relieved, was simply to call the Iotians up and ask them if they knew what happened. If only things were that simple, she mused. Her orders were to avoid official contact with the planet until she had ascertained the status of what had happened to Minnesota and determined that the Iotians were not responsible. True, they knew the Iotians relatively well, and the Iotians already knew aliens existed, but what if those "Star Conquerors" episodes were more than just works of fiction. What if that was how the Iotians truly perceived the Federation and Star Fleet?

It would make contacting them out of the question. It would either cause a mass panic, for fear the Federation had finally returned to collect on Kirk's piece of the action or start a fight. Neither of those things appealed to her.

"Number One," Captain Munoz said, committing to a decision. "Prepare an Away Team, humans only. Dress according to Garcia's recommendations. As soon as you're ready, I'll take us within transporter range."

"Aye, Captain," Osaka said. He paused. "Captain? Do you want me to take Garcia's HROV?"

"Not at this time," Munoz said.



Shuttlepod Darwin was the small, two seat variety, restricted to sub-light speeds, and used mostly for orbital work or short interplanetary trips. The aft section of Darwin had a variable size hatch, designed to fit most Star Fleet ships, however, the engineers never really considered that this pod would be attempting to connect to a three hundred year old vessel. Carter was a fair enough pilot, but this was a tricky maneuver, even when computer guidance was working. Because they still couldn't scan the Horizon, and the Horizon wasn't transmitting a navigational aid signal, Carter was forced to pilot the pod manually, docking it as best she could. Newell called out directions and distances, as Carter eased their pod up towards the service hatch, backwards. The last five meters took the longest. Newell removed her jacket and wiped her forehead. She was burning up in her jump suit.

"Two centimeters starboard," Newell called out. "Three meters to go. Two point nine. One centimeter to port, and two down. Hold that line. Good. Two point eight meters to go."

Newell continued to count it down until there was zero. There was no jarring or sounds that indicated they had hit. She looked to Carter. "Pretty damn good," Newell said.

Carter grunted noncommittally and proceeded aft. The indicator on the door panel suggested that everything was in tolerance and that a good seal was possible. She pulled a lever down and the Pod latched onto the Horizon with an audible sound that was reassuring. Newell and Carter put on their ELBs and reassured themselves that they were ready to proceed to the next step.

"Activating the anular force field," Carter said, flicking a switch. "Opening the inner hatch."

A circular hatch spun open on the aft hull, like an iris to a camera. It was wider than the service hatch on the Horizon, but there appeared to be a good seal of pod against the Horizon's engine nacelle. Carter pressurized the space between the anular force field and the Horizon's outer hull. It held.

"So far, so good," Newell said.

"Yep," Carter agreed, pulling on some gloves. She reached through the anular field and depressed a small square to the right of the hatch. The square popped out and folded over revealing a key pad and an emergency release. The latter was used in cases where there was no power to the key pad. The emergency release was a lever that folded out, turned, and pulled. Or at least, that's what it should have done.

"Perhaps the mechanism is frozen," Newell said. "After all, the comet is mostly frozen carbon dioxide."

Carter considered possible solutions and then retrieved a type two phaser from the locker. She adjusted the setting and held a sustain fire against the engine nacelle.

"I don't think that's the appropriate procedure for that," Newell said.

Sure enough, the plastic cover on the handle cracked with the sudden application of heat, but it also turned, and pulled out as it was supposed to. The hatch popped open, swiveled, and pulled to the side, with an accompanying sucking noise as the air pressure equalized with the air trapped between the anular force field and the ship. There was enough water vapor in that small bit of air to create snow. Carter checked the readings. "Well, it is cold as hell, but it's breathable."

"I think I'll be putting on the rest of my gear now," Newell said.

"Me, too," Carter agreed, taking off her ELB. "Um, Jody. Your emergency life belt has to be worn on the outside of the outer most garment."

"Oh, yeah," Newell said, just as she was about to zipp up the jump suit. She removed the ELB, set it in her chair, and then zipped. It was a snug fit, as she had had to tuck her skirt into it, but she managed. She could already feel the heat building up between her and the insulation, which made the idea of actually going in the cold appealing. "Thanks for reminding me."

Carter nodded and continued putting on her winter gear, including a scarf which she used to cover her mouth and nose.

"Sure is dark in there," Newell commented, slipping her gloves on before she secured her flash light to her wrist.

Carter only nodded.

"You afraid?" Newell asked.

"No," Carter said. "You?"

"No," Newell said. "I was just wondering why they issue us wrist-band flash lights instead of head-band flashlights."

Carter smiled and handed her a headband flashlight. She hated the wrist band flash lights as well. Stupid design, only allowing you to see where you point your hand. Not everything Star Fleet did made sense. Perhaps someone had made a bad deal on flash lights and to make sure he didn't look completely stupid, he issued orders that all Away Teams will use them.

"Well, can I help you lug that APU up," Newell said.

"It shouldn't be too bad," Carter said, putting on a head lamp. "No gravity."

"Oh, yeah. Good point," Newell said. They were both now ready to proceed, but they stared at the entrance to Horizon, and thought about it. Carter's flashlight beam sliced through the cold, darkness, illuminating only a small portion of the inside of the nacelle. Frost on all the surfaces sparkled as the light passed over it. "You first?"

Carter took a deep breath. "Alright," she said. She got closer to the threshold, took another deep breath, and then she pushed herself through the anular field. The sharp contrast of warm pod to cold Horizon was shocking, but she coped. Newell handed her the APU. It was awkward carrying it in zero G's, and had she been alone she would have had to take several trips back and forth to the pod to fetch her supplies. As soon as they touched the engine room's deck, they activated the magnets in their shoes that would hold them to the floor. With Newell's help, it took half as long to move everything, netting their camp site to the floor to prevent it from flying all over the engine room. The next thing they did was activate one of the auxiliary power units in order to run a portable heater. It would take several hours to heat the air in the entire engine room enough that they could remove their winter gear, but it was still more comfortable to stand in its wake and feel the warmth on their faces than not having it at all. The next thing they did was to hang some lights and take some general scans with their tricorders.

"Well, I am relieved there are no dead bodies in here," Newell said, her face pale under the dim lighting hung from various pieces of equipment.

"Me, too," Carter said. "That makes this next part easier."

"What next part?" Newell said.

"I have to go back and close the emergency service hatch and then close all the hatches in the Jeffries tube," Carter said. The expression on Newell's face suggested she didn't quite like that idea. "If the pod were to come loose, all our air would be vented into space. True, we have our ELB's, but I would just assume not use them if we can avoid it."

Newell acquiesced. "I'll go do it. Do you want me to bring anything else from the pod?"

“Yeah,” Carter said. “I’d feel much better if we had our phasers handy.”

“I’ll be right back,” Newell said.

Newell only took two minutes to go and return, manually closing all the hatches along the way. She joined Carter who was choosing the proper adaptor to connect the APU to the Horizons main engine consoles. She found it and plugged it in. The console lit up briefly and then went dark.

“That was promising,” Newell said, checking the power supply. “Still got power on this end. Let’s try removing this panel.”

“The tool we need is in one of the special tool kits,” Carter said. While Newell searched for the tool, she took the second APU over to another station, and tried plugging it in. Nothing seemed to happen.

“Everything on this ship has been dead for so long, it may be impossible to revive it.”

Newell and Carter started at the sound of a beep. It occurred again and established a rhythm of one beep every twenty-four seconds. It was an annoying beep, like the kind in a fire alarm warning you that the battery is low. They sought out the sound with flash lights and tricorders in hand. They circled around the engine room until they bumped into each other and both let out a scream.

“Okay, stop that,” Carter said. “There’s nothing here that wouldn’t be here in the light.”

“And that is supposed to comfort me how?” Newell asked.

Unable to identify the source of the beep, they went back to the original console and got to work. They both pulled out circuit boards and examined them one by one, looking for flaws. Carter found the first one and sent Newell to replicate the necessary components using the pod’s replicator. When she returned, Carter handed her an entire circuit board. “I need a whole new board,” she said. When Newell returned, Carter said, “I need a quad-link processor for this board...”

“Hey, I’m tired of climbing up and down that Jeffries tube, opening and closing all the doors, turning on and off the magnets in my boots, taking off my coat while I wait for the part to replicate, and then putting it back on to return. Why don’t we examine all of the boards, and then take them all back at once to replicate or fix,” Newell said.

Carter blinked. “Okay.” They were settled into a routine of sorting through boards and circuits and chips, leaving the bad ones suspended in air while the others were returned to their position in the console, when the overhead lights in engineering kicked on. They both dropped what they were doing, scattering their work in various trajectories which made several of them hard to retrieve. They stood, allowing their shoes to click to the floor. When they were both fairly sure there was no threat, they began to breathe.

“Hey, the beep is gone,” Newell noticed. They waited a minute to confirm that the beep was indeed gone.

“Low capacitor alarm,” Carter said.

“That would make sense,” Newell said. “Once the capacitor had recharged, the lights came on, and the warning beep went away. I wonder if anything else down here has power now.”

“Let’s finish this console first. It should give us a great deal of information,” Carter said.

An hour later they had practically rebuilt the entire console. Carter switched it on. The console lit up and two minutes later, several more consoles came to life, all running off their APU. They applauded and hugged each other. Then there came a crashing sound and a sudden sense of vertigo. They clung to each other, and then sighed when they realized they had standard gravity again. The crashing sound was the sound of their netted gear falling to the floor.

“We’re going to have to do something to relax,” Newell said.

“You want to go exploring?” Carter asked.

“That would help us relax?” Newell asked.

“It would probably ease our minds knowing that there is nothing on board ready to eat us,” Carter said. Newell considered and then nodded. “Okay. It might even be fun.”

## CHAPTER NINE

“Standard orbit, Lt. Hubenka,” Captain Munoz said, and took a sip of her coffee. “Keep us on the opposite side of the planet from their space station.” The planet grew larger on the view screen. The Bridge hadn’t seen so much activity over the course of their journey here, but now there was lots of work to do, and every person on the Bridge was coordinating some function with another group else where on the ship. Cadets were now logging actual work hours, hopefully practicing things they’ve already been taught, building experiences that would last a life time. “Is the Away Team ready for transport?”

“Ah, negative, Captain.” It was Osaka’s voice. “Garcia made some last minute changes to our costumes, based on the region we’re beaming down to.”

“When in Rome, you dress as the Romans do,” Captain Munoz said.

“I know,” Osaka said. “I just hate wearing this tie. It’s a useless piece of cloth.”

“You’re complaining about a tie?” Captain Munoz heard the complaint of the female ensign she had assigned to the Away Team. “You should try walking in these high heels. There’s nothing ergonomical about them. I think they may be trying to hobble their women.”

Osaka nodded. “I agree. Very impractical, especially in the event of an emergency.”

“Let’s just try to avoid any emergencies,” Munoz said. “And phasers set on stun.”

Intruder alert klaxons began to flare and a computerize voice began repeating: “Intruder, intruder...”

Captain Munoz stood, looking to Owen. “What deck?”

“Decks sixteen and twelve,” Owens said. “Security is on its way...”

“Captain!” Hubenka yelled.

Two people appeared on the Bridge, decked out in full space suits. One of them aimed a weapon at the Captain. Hubenka pushed her out of the way, taking the bullet. He cried out in pain as he was carried away in a wave of light. “Computer, lock out all Bridge controls, Munoz delta one.”

“Bridge controls locked out,” the computer responded.

Owens moved to attack but he was gone before he even stood from his chair. Whatever sort of energy they were using to kill her people was obviously extremely painful. Captain Munoz heard three more of her people scream out in pain and saw one of them disappear before the two invaders cornered her. She couldn’t see their faces due to the mirrored surface of their visors. She saw herself and part of the panel behind her, though the image was a bit warped due to the curvature of the visor, which added a surreal quality to her experience. This is the last thing I’m going to see before I die, she thought.

“We come in peace,” Munoz tried.

The intruder shot her point blank. It was the worse pain she had ever felt in her life.



Garcia had just about made it to his quarters when two humanoids materialized half way down the corridor. They carried assault rifles at the ready and they immediately opened fire on the closest people to them. Garcia’s crew members disappeared in independent blazes of light, unlike anything he had seen before. It didn’t appear to be typical disruptor fire, but it certainly seemed to be as painful. When he was the last one left in their line of sight, he didn’t wait for their weapons to be pointed at him before he decided to vacate the immediate area. Garcia detoured back around the corner and ducked into a recess, a hidden conduit closet. He heard them pause at the corner. Their voices were muffled, but he could clearly understand them. “Go that way. That’s the exterior wall. Plant your explosive and detonate as soon as you’re clear. I’ll make my way to the other side and do the same. Keep your eyes open.”

Garcia wanted a phaser, but the closest phaser was in an emergency weapons locker across from his room and he would certainly be seen if he left this space. He smiled to himself. He didn’t have to leave this space. Intruder alert alarms were now blaring through out the ship as he accessed his HROV. Brittany was reading a book when he took control of her functions. She stood, dropping the book, walked to the door, and exited the room. She saw no one in the corridor. She stepped across the hall and opened an emergency weapons locker by keying in Garcia’s access code. It slid open. She slung a phaser rifle to her back, attached two phasers to her belt, a belt that was more decoration than functional, and took the remaining two phaser rifles in either hand. Two crew members came around the corner and she tossed them the rifles and collected



two more. The two crewmen turned and went back in the direction they had come and Brittany turned and went the opposite way. As Garcia directed her towards his hiding place, he retrieved a stick of gum from the hidden pocket in his sleeve, un-wrapped it, stuck it in his mouth, and threw the paper on the floor.

Brittany stepped around the corner, both riffles aimed. The weapon in her right hand was set for stun. It hit the intruder point blank, but it had no apparent effect. Wrong, Garcia thought. It alerted the intruder to the fact that someone was behind him. He stood, turned, and drew his odd looking weapon in one smooth movement. Had she been a person, the first shot would have scored her shoulder. The second one would have hit right between the eyes. The computer that ran the Brittany program automatically decided it was best to allow the projectiles to pass through. She fired the weapon in her left hand, which was set for kill.

The intruder staggered back and exploded. The blast forced Brittany backwards and she would have crashed into the wall but the escaping air from the hole that was just torn into the ship pulled her forwards. Garcia reached out and grabbed her by the weapon she had slung to her back. He held on to a groove in his cubby hole, and then, just as suddenly as it had begun, the wind was gone. A force field had popped up, patching the jagged hole. Brittany fell to the floor.

"Jesus Christ," Brittany said, getting up. Garcia took one of the rifles she was carrying. "Set your weapons for disintegrate," he told her. "Maybe that will prevent the bombs from going off." He hit his badge as he headed for the second intruder. "Garcia to Bridge." Nothing. "Garcia to security?" Nothing. He turned to see Brittany wasn't following.

"I'm scared!" she said.

Garcia frowned. He didn't have time for her to be scared, so he once again triggered the control override and took over her functioning. A normal human being probably could not have handled walking, navigating, and evaluating the environment from two perspectives simultaneously, but Garcia's Kelvan imprinting made it easy. As a full fledged Kelvan, he had a hundred times the number of limbs to control, and over a dozen different senses to tell him about his environment. He knew the Brittany program was still scared, as he could see the dialogue that she wanted to say subtitled in a window in his head, but he directed her forwards so that she took the lead. He followed as if they had drilled together for years.

Brittany stepped around the corner just as the second intruder Garcia was pursuing was about to come around. She bashed him in the helmet with the butt of her weapon. The man staggered backwards. Garcia came around and grabbed at the intruder's weapon as Brittany hit him again and again in the visor, which had splintered but not yet broken clean away. As the man continued to stagger back, the tricorder that made up Brittany's senses alerted her to the fact that he had just armed a bomb which was strapped to his suit. Quicker than even Garcia could have done it, she turned, grabbed Garcia and forced them both around the corner. The bomb went off as she threw him up against the far wall.

The lights in the corridor flickered, and there was smoke and dust in the air. Garcia was temporarily stunned by a surreal feeling that he had done all of this before, a de-ja-vu sort of feeling. What compounded the effect was that Brittany was looking at him. He saw her looking at him with his own eyes, but he also saw himself looking at himself through Brittany's eyes, which made this eternity slide, like putting two mirrors together. The ringing in his ears somehow added to the surreal effect. In the prolonged moment of weirdness, Brittany regained some of the control over herself and kissed Garcia hard on the mouth. That woke him up. Of course he had done this before, he told himself. This was a scene from a holodeck novel he must have played through a dozen times!

"You okay?" Brittany asked.

"Thanks to you," Garcia said. "Come on."

They stepped around the corner. There was a hole in the deck leading down to the next level. It was too big to jump across. The ship rocked with another blast, perhaps several decks up. They were definitely in a fight for their lives. Down the corridor, a fellow crew person took a chance to flee his quarters and immediately disappeared, crying out in pain. The shadow of the intruder approaching the corridor intersection gave Garcia pause. He backed up and then fled to the hole in the deck, leaving Brittany to take care of that intruder. Brittany fired her weapon at the man at the end of the corridor as Garcia reassessed the distance he was going to have to jump to make it across. He looked down just in time to see an intruder aiming up at him. An explosion rocked the ship, fire and flames briefly flowed up from behind the intruder, flames literally

licked at his suit, tumbling the intruder and causing his shot to go awry. Garcia leaped down, hitting the man in the helmet with the butt of his weapon with such force that it shattered the visor, creating a spider webbed pattern. Two more hits and the glass was away and he fired point blank at the man's face. The man evaporated inside his suit.

Garcia was suddenly aware of Brittany beside him.

"His death triggered a count down," Brittany said, grabbing Garcia up and throwing him back up to the next deck. She followed, but it looked like she was flying. Indeed, she was flying, and not just because of the blast below. The blast did accelerate her departure from deck seventeen, but she landed as if she were Peter Pan, flying by means of a rope. She helped Garcia up.

Garcia noted he was now on the side he had wanted to be and took off running, bringing Brittany with him. He opened a Jefferies tube and went down two decks, ran around a corner, and slid to a halt. There was a breach in the outer wall that the force field hadn't been able to seal. Instead, the computer had sealed off that particular section of the corridor with two anular force fields approximately six meters apart. It was paramount that he make it across the six meters, but the only way was through the vacuum.

"You're not thinking about..." Brittany asked.

"No choice," Garcia said. The drill was simple enough. Take several, long deep breaths of air, to saturate the blood with O<sub>2</sub>, empty all the air from your lungs, and then plunge yourself through the vacuum. He would not explode, as the popular myth would have people believe. But he did risk passing out. "It's only six meters," he said, more to convince himself than his holographic friend. He would have to run six meters, in a vacuum, and leap over a hole in the floor that looked out into space. He could do that.

Garcia took a few steps back, breathing rapidly, then ran towards the anular field. Hitting the vacuum was like hitting a brick wall. The sudden absence of air brought on a total silence he had never experienced before, a sharp contrast to the blaring alarms he had just been hearing. But it wasn't completely silent. With no air against his ear drums, his heartbeat was the most prominent sound. He was also pretty sure he heard the blood moving through his veins. Along with the absence of external sounds, came the rush of fluids from his mouth and nose. Though he had emptied his lungs, he was not able to get all the air out of his system. Air rushed from his throat and sinuses, drawing muscuos along with it, tinged with blood, suggesting some venous nasal membranes had ruptured. Fluids even evacuated his tear ducts, moving out and away from his eyes. The absence of air also registered as extreme cold against his exposed skin.

Three steps past the field he prepared to jump clear of the hole. Unfortunately, he discovered too late that the floor plating between the two anular fields had no artificial gravity. Consequently he left the floor and floundered wildly. Because of his speed, he careened off the ceiling, came towards a wall, but over compensated, and then pushed towards the floor landing just shy of the other side. He almost went through the hole and out into space, which would have been the end of him. Brittany had simply floated right down the center of the corridor and passed through to safety. She reached in and pulled Garcia through. He gasped for air, wiping his face.

"Thank you," he said, hoarsely, though it hadn't been necessary. He had been directing her the whole time, even though she would not remember it as such. He accessed Brittany's controls and lifted himself up. He really didn't have any time for screwing around. He figured he only had ten minutes before the Iotians had complete control of what was left of the ship, but before he did anything else, he was going to get protection. He stepped into a storage closet and grabbed an Emergency Life Belt. He handed Brittany his weapon. As he headed towards his destination, he secured the belt around his waste. Brittany led the way, stepping around each corner as brave as any robot would be. She had to fire twice, and each time, the resulting explosion rocked the ship.

Overriding the automatic feature of the ELB, he turned it on. He wasn't going to wait for a drop in air pressure to activate the belt. One exposure to vacuum had cured him of all his curiosity. A blue aura of energy surrounded him. It was the same concept as the anular field that kept air from leaking out of the Shuttlebay, only this field completely encapsulated the belt's wearer. The field was not constrictive, exactly, except for the fact that it provided little room for air between the body and the force field to move. One had to labor to breathe, pushing air out with enough force that it moved away from the face. Garcia was aware of the heat from his breath, as if he were hiding under a blanket. The belt did generate new breathable air, but it still

tasted stale, and the field had a tendency to close in with every inhale, as if someone was trying to smother him. In addition to the unpleasantness of breathing, the force field pricked every nerve cell on the exterior surface of the skin, making it feel as if ants were crawling all over his body. It was no wonder to Garcia that they were discontinued in Kirk's day, even though Kirk used them on several missions, and highly recommended them. They must have had the luxury models, he imagined. Or, they were just better men than he.

Still, it would keep him alive if a deck suddenly depressurized, which was becoming more and more likely considering the number of bombs he was hearing going off. Each new explosion caused the ship to shudder. The rumbling through the floor plates grew increasingly longer so that it felt as if each new blast would be the last, because the ship would soon tear itself apart.

Brittany stepped out into the branching corridor and fired in each direction simultaneously, laying down a suppressive fire that allowed Garcia time to pass through a door. She followed, sealing the door behind her, and then shot the control mechanism. It wouldn't keep out regular personnel, who could still open the door with verbal commands, but it would slow down the intruders. They were in a smaller corridor that branched into three offices, one of which was the auxiliary control room. Brittany entered the control room and was immediately fired upon. She brought her weapon to bear in the direction from which the phaser fire had come but was restrained from firing. The phaser fire stopped as the people inside realized who had just entered. Garcia felt immediate relief when he saw through Brittany's eyes the people who had holed themselves up in here. Only then did he allow himself to enter the room.

It had to have been more than serendipity. Never in his life was he so happy to see the members of the Tammam commune: Kletsova was bleeding, Trini was patching her up with a band-aid, and Lenar was holding his weapon aimed at Brittany. Garcia had Brittany lower her weapons. The door closed behind him.

"Oh my god!" Trini said, hugging him. She cried out and jumped back. "You're wearing an ELB?"

"Yes," Garcia said, pointing to a cabinet. "There should be some more in there. Get them and pass them out."

Trini obeyed instantly.

"Have you been able to get in touch with anyone in charge?" Garcia asked.

"Negative," Kletsova answered, accepting a belt from Trini. "We were hanging out in the galley when it all started going down. I managed to get the weapon from one of the intruders, and when I used it on him, he disappeared."

"I think they're shooting isolinear tags, so that they can beam the targets out of the way," Lenar said.

"I agree," Garcia said. "They want the ship at all costs. We have to stop them."

"And just what would you like us to do?" Kletsova asked. "We try trapping them between security force fields, and they suicide bomb, which knocks out the force field allowing the next one in the wave to get that much further along."

"They're worse than the Borg. They're like lemmings," Trini said. "They're willing to die to meet their goals."

"We shoot them with phasers and they blow up," Lenar said. "No matter what we do, they win."

Another series of explosions ripped somewhere far above. They had to hold on to chairs and each other stay on their feet. "What are you chewing?" Kletsova asked Garcia.

"A valium stick perhaps?" Trini asked.

"We have more important things to discuss!" Brittany snapped.

"We're locked out of the computer," Lenar added, slapping the desk. "I can't access security protocols! I can't do anything without computer control. If only I hadn't lost my PADD in the shoot out..."

"I can still access the main computer through my neural implant," Garcia said, blowing a bubble. "The gum helps calm my nerves. Would any one like a stick? Stand by. I'm redirecting computer control to here."

There was another explosion and the controls at Lenar's station went blank.

"Stand by," Garcia said, turning to Brittany. "Computer?"

"Working," Brittany responded. Everyone turned their attention to her. Her eyes looked dazed, but she kept her face turned towards Garcia's face.

"This is Ensign Tammás Garcia," Garcia told her. "Emergency situation, scenario 14, subsection B. Initiate self destruct sequence, Fox Trot One, Jericho, when the walls fell, Bravo. One."

"Garcia, Ensign, voice recognition verified," Brittany said.

"Oh my god," Trini said. "You can't do that! You're not authorized to do that."

"Give me another option, but make it quick," Garcia said.

"Depressurize the ship..." Trini offered.

"Have you forgotten they're wearing space suits?" Kletsova asked.

"We find an officer and we..." Trini began

"And we what? Everyone's gone or hiding!" Garcia snapped. "And for sound reason! Other wise someone else would have already set the destruct sequence in motion. I need two more people to authorize this in order to give us time to escape. The other option is instant destruct, so what's it going to be?"

"Blow the damn ship up," McCoy urged them, but no one heard him but Garcia. "You can't let them have it, Tam. And if anyone asks, tell them I gave you permission."

"Right, cause that will really help at my court marshal, won't it?" Garcia said more than asked, out loud. Everyone was looking at him in an odd manner.

"You speaking to your special friend is not lending us a lot confidence here," Kletsova said.

"We're blowing the ship up and that's final. We can not allow Star Fleet technology to fall into Iotian's hands," Garcia said. "Think about it. What happened to the Minnesota? This happened. We still have some time to prevent it, but we have to act now."

Tatiana Kletsova stepped up to Brittany. "Computer, this is Tatiana Kletsova, cadet. Emergency situation, scenario 14, subsection B, paragraph one. Fox Trot Two, Delta, Rainbow Music, Bravo. One Two."

"Cadet, Tatiana Kletsova, voice recognition verified," Brittany said.

"I can't believe we're doing this," Trini said.

"I will take full responsibility," Garcia said.

"Post humorously?" Trini asked. "No one will even know what happened!"

"I'll launch the buoy," Garcia said. "Let's finish this while we still have a chance."

Lenar stepped up to Brittany. "Computer, Teli Lenar, Cadet, Second Class. Emergency situation, scenario 14, subsection B, paragraph one, last sentence, the end, period. Foxtrot Three, Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow, Bravo. One, two, three."

"Teli Lenar, Cadet second class, voice recognition verified," Brittany said.

"Could you have made your pass code any longer?" Tatiana asked Lenar.

"Is that it?" Trini said. "We're still here."

"Give it a moment," Garcia said. "Emergency situation, scenario 14, assumes none of the senior staff is available to counteract the destruct sequence. A five minute countdown will be initiated..."

"Warning," Brittany said. Every comm. panel and view screen on the ship still functioning began to sound the alarm, with Brittany's voice. "Self destruct sequence activated. You now have five minutes to reach minimum safe distance."

Trini grabbed Garcia's hand and instantly let go, reminded by the shock that he had a force field around him. Tatiana put a reassuring hand on Trini's shoulder.

"Computer, broadcast this message to all decks," Garcia said. "Attention all hands. This is Tammás Garcia. Abandon ship. Self destruct has been initiated. You have less than five minutes to secure a life pod and escape to minimum safe distance. If you need assistance, contact me at Auxiliary Control. God speed. Computer, launch buoy."

"Buoy away," Brittany answered. The buoy sped away from the ship and the planet, so that it could be recovered by the next Star Fleet ship that would come to investigate. Philadelphia Freedom was now sending all telemetry to the pod so that everything that was possible of being known would be. "Four life pods have just jettisons. Six. Seven."

A voice piped in to auxiliary control. "Garcia?"

Everyone looked to Garcia. "Who I am speaking with?"

"Abort the self destruct sequence and we will talk."

"Only the Captain can abort the self destruct sequence," Garcia said.

“What if that was the guy we killed?” another voice in the background said.

“Shut up!” the first voice said. “Take a team down there and see if you can locate this Garcia chap and disable the self destruct. Hurry!”

“But what if he’s right...”

“Shut up, I said. You’re giving the game away,” the first voice said. “Now get down there, fast.”

“Down where? I don’t know where auxiliary control is!” the other argued.

“Damn it, just go!” the first said, and then turned his attention back to Garcia. “Garcia, abort the self destruct, or I will torture your people.”

Trini dropped her head against Tatiana’s shoulder, sobbing. She squeezed her hand, letting her know everything would be okay, even though she knew, things would never be okay. Life was simply crisis management and this was definitely life.

“I assume that if the Captain is not on the Bridge, then the Captain is dead,” Garcia said. “You have less than five minutes to get to minimum safe distance.”

“You’re bluffing,” the man argued. “You don’t have the balls to blow the ship up.”

Garcia turned the comm. system down, but not off, just in case a crew member needed to contact him for any reason. “You guys better get to a life pod. Rendezvous at the Horizon and wait for help to arrive.”

“What about you?” Tatiana asked.

“I’m going to wait to the last moment, just in case someone needs assistance, and then I’ll catch the last transporter wave down to the surface,” Garcia said. “It is, ultimately, what I was brought here for.”

“You can’t go alone,” Trini said, wiping her tears on her sleeve.

“She’s right,” Lenar said. “We’re a team, we stick together.”

“Alright,” Garcia said. He didn’t want to go to the planet alone, but mostly he just didn’t want to argue with them. It would waste too much precious time. “Energy is being shunted away from transporter control to facilitate the self destruct process. I’ll need to transport you three now to guarantee we all make it out of here. I’ll join you in a few.”

“Do it,” Kletsova said.

Garcia accessed the transporter control remotely through his implant, and executed a site to site, emergency transport. His three friends were away in no time. Brittney heard something outside and turned her focus to the door.

“Three minutes, forty two seconds to self destruct,” Brittany continued.

“Garcia! Talk to me...” the invader’s team leader yelled over the comm.

“What would you like to talk about?” Garcia asked, slightly amused. He noted six more life pods were away. He hoped everyone was going to make it. Come on, every one make it. “I could read you a story. Oh, the places you will go, by Doctor Seuss...”

Someone was now pounding on the door. Garcia tensed. If they tried to blow up the door, he would be seriously hurt. He started setting up the transporter to beam him self out.

“Tam?! Is that you?” It was Nikita’s voice. “Let me in, please!”

Brittney opened the door and Niki rushed in and flew right to Garcia’s arms and then jumped back in surprise, but then she didn’t care and hugged him anyway, ignoring the resistance and the static noise. Everything she said was garbled from panic and sobbing, but she continued ignoring the sensation of the force field surrounding Garcia and clung to him tightly.

“Shh, take a deep breath,” Garcia said, cursing himself. Had he beamed out in panic, Niki would have been stranded and as good as dead. “I got to get you to a life pod.”

“They’re not working on this level, so I came right to you,” Niki said.

Garcia tapped into the transporter control and sought out a nearby life pod to beam Niki to, but all of the evacuated escape pods were already out of range. He could beam her to another pod on another deck, but if the systems were failing, he would only have time to transport her once. “I need to beam you down, now. Stay with Tatiana. Do you hear me? Garcia to Tatiana?”

“We’re here. Now, get your butt down here,” Tatiana said.

“Stand by to receive Niki. She’s coming down, can only do one at a time,” Garcia said.

“I don’t want to leave you,” Niki protested, clinging even tighter to him.

“Niki!” Garcia held her by both arms and touched his forehead to hers. The static of his force field crackled. “We have to be of one mind and one heart on this. I need you to go and now.”

She stepped away from him, wiping her eyes with her sleeve. She nodded to let him know that she was ready, but she was wincing with anticipation, a common reaction with many people who have limited experience with transporters.

“Transporting,” Garcia said.

A moment later, Tatiana announced: “We got her, Tam. Your turn.”

Unfortunately as soon as the transporter set Nikita down, it disabled itself. One hundred percent of its energies were now being directed into the self destruct sequence, consequently cutting off his only expedient avenue of escape. And since the transporter was also the technology he expected to use if anyone else on board needed his help, anyone else would now be as screwed as he was. It was time to leave. There was nothing he could do for anyone at this point and nothing they could do for him. It was every man for himself and the odds were he was already dead.

But still he had to try. And if he was lucky, really lucky, if that was the only thing his genetic heritage gave him, extreme luck, then he might, just might, get out of this.

“Brittany, follow me,” Garcia said. “I’ll need your help if I’m going to pull this stunt off.”

Brittany snapped out of her computer trance, and followed him out of auxiliary control. “Do you want me to keep counting down?” she asked.



Lt. Nancy Carter and Cadet Jody Newell, had just finished a sweep of another deck. It was cold and they found a number of items that had been broken by the extreme temperatures, such as glasses with water in them, and a fish tank. What they had yet to find, and were expecting to see around every next corner, were dead bodies. After searching what seemed like the entire ship, they were puzzled by the lack of crew, dead or otherwise.

“Let’s check the shuttle bay and see if the shuttles are still here. Maybe they took them back to Iotia,” Newell said.

“The whole crew would not have been able to escape in shuttles. They didn’t have the capacity,” Carter said, comparing it to the Titanic, which had not carried enough rafts for emergency evacuation. Still, there was very little left to explore, so she led Jody down to the shuttle bay. The shuttles were there. But still no crew.

“That door is open,” Newell said, pointing forward. They walked to the door, taking a tricorder reading. “Um, I’m not picking up anything beyond this point.”

“Do you mean anything unusual or anything at all?”

“Anything at all,” Newell amended.

They entered the room, which led to a forward airlock. Both doors to the airlock, inner and outer, were open. A make shift tube led away from the forward section of the ship. The tube twisted away at an angle, which kept them from peering further. Glow strips ribbed the tube, providing fresh light every five meters.

“They tunneled into the ice?” Newell asked.

“Very odd,” Carter agreed.

“We’ve come this far,” Newell said.

Carter nodded and led the way, after checking to make sure her phaser was still in her hand and set for stun. At the end of the tunnel was a wall, a perfectly smooth wall. There was an indentation in the wall where a three-fingered hand would fit. Newell scanned it.

“Nothing,” Newell said.

Carter took a glove off and tapped the metal with her hand, knowing full well that the temperature of the metal might freeze her hand to the surface.

“That’s not very scientific,” Newell said.

Carter shrugged, and touched it again, maintaining contact a little longer. “The artifact is warm,” she said.

“But it’s packed in ice,” Newell said.

Carter shrugged. Making the Vulcan salute, she placed her hand into the three fingered slot. A door revealed itself by opening. A lit corridor stretched out before them for what seemed like eternity. There was a change in pitch in the surrounding air, as if they had put a seashell to their ears and a breeze from the artifact rushed in to greet them. They stared into it, unbelieving, waiting for something to move or stir in their vision.

“What I’m seeing doesn’t seem to make sense,” Carter said. “The comet has a circumference of approximately two kilometers. And yet, this corridor appears to go on for hundreds of kilometers.”

“Do you want to go in?” Newell asked.

“No!” Carter said. “I mean, yes, but no! We have to report what we’ve found to the Captain. We don’t know where it goes or what may be in there...”

“The Horizon’s crew must have gone in there,” Newell pointed out. “They found this, their ship broke, and they went in.”

“And you don’t find all of that to be a bit coincidental?” Carter asked

“Look, we’ll just go a little ways in, and then come right back,” Newell said.

“No,” Carter said. “The door might close and we could be stuck.”

“Okay, I go in, and you wait her for me,” Newell said.

“No, and that’s an order, no.” Carter said.

“This is an opportunity of a life time!” Newell said.

“And it will still be here later on,” Carter said.

A scream emanated from inside. It was human and it was in English. “Help! Somebody please, help me! Stop it, please, someone make them stop.”

Both Carter and Newell raised their phasers and stared down the hall. A door opened and a man on a gurney crossed the corridor. The crying grew louder, obviously because it was the man on the gurney. Three little beings pushed the gurney, waited for a door to open, and disappeared into the room. The door closed and the sound of the man vanished. The creatures didn’t seem to notice or care that they were being observed, for they were focused on their victim.

“We got to help him,” Carter said.

“Are you kidding?! We can’t go in there,” Newell said.

“We got to try and help,” Carter said, and she entered the artifact and started down the corridor at a full run, not looking back to see if Newell would join her.

“I can’t believe this,” Newell said, and decided to join Carter. The moment she did, the door behind her closed, and disappeared completely. It vanished very much like a door to a holosuite would when a game was in progress. She hesitated. Go back and pound on the door and look for a control mechanism, or give Carter the back up she was going to need. She didn’t like the way pounding on a door would look in a report, so she went after Carter.



The life pods had the ability to link together in a chain. There were seventeen life pods in all, with a total of sixty five crew members that had made it out with their lives. Ten of them were seriously wounded, while twenty others had minor wounds. 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Brenda Sharlow found herself in command of the group, being the highest ranking officer that had made it off the Philadelphia Freedom. They waited, hoping there would be another life pod. Sixty five people were less than half of the crew.

“Maybe we should go back within transporter range,” Ronnie Burke suggested.

“No, we can’t risk letting the Iotians in here,” Sharlow said. “Nor can we risk the pods being damaged when the ship goes. Did anyone see if the buoy was launched?”

“I think so,” Cadet Marshall said.

“What are we going to do, just sit here?” Burke demanded.

“For now,” Sharlow said.

And then there was a blinding white light that caused the windows to darken momentarily. By the time the window return to its transparent setting, the Philadelphia Freedom had begun spiraling in its death throws.

“I can’t believe Garcia did that!” Burke said, hitting his fist against the wall. “Damn it, I was just about to storm the bridge.”

Sharlow appraised the young Ensign, and turned back to watch the fireworks. She didn't say anything for a long while. "Did Garcia make it off?" Sharlow asked.

"I have a list of everyone who made it into life pods," Marshall said, indicating the list on his PADD. He shook his head no.

"Ugh!" Burke shouted in frustration.

"Relax, Burke," Sharlow said. "Set a course for the Horizon."

"It will take us seven to ten days to get there in these pods," Burke said.

"That's fine," Sharlow said.

"We should just wait here for a rescue," Burke said.

"Normally, I would agree," Sharlow said. "But I think the Horizon might be more comfortable, if Carter is anything of the engineer I believe her to be. And we could use the medical supplies. We have wounded that we can't care for in the capacity they need to be cared for. The Horizon might enable us to save their lives. So, the faster we get there, the better. Marshall, keep trying to hail Carter. She could tow us there much faster with the shuttlepod."



"Where are we?" Kletsova immediately asked upon arriving planet side.

"It appears to be a park," Lenar said, wishing he had a tricorder.

"Garcia to Tatiana, can you hear me?" Garcia's voice ran out over Keltsova's comm. badge.

"We're here. Now, get your but down here," Kletsova responded.

"Is that someone crying?" Trini asked.

"Stand by to receive Niki. She's coming down, can only do one at a time," Garcia said.

"Safety protocols must be in effect," Lenar explained to his friends, just in case they didn't understand. "When the energy starts to shunt away..."

"We know!" Kletsova snapped.

"I don't want to leave you..." they heard Nikita arguing.

"Niki! We have to be of one mind and one heart on this. I need you to go, and now. Transporting."

Nikita appeared one meter from where they had beamed in. She looked around, and saw them approaching her. She went right to Kletsova's arms and cried against her.

"We got her, Tam," Kletsova said. "Your turn."

No reply.

"Garcia?" Kletsova called. "Garcia, are you still there?"

They all waited anxiously, hoping to hear a transporter beam somewhere near them, or hear Tam's voice one more time. They silently counted down the minutes, waiting anxiously for some kind of answer. When the answer came, it was not the one they wanted. The night sky lit up with the fiery destruction, a bright light that turned darkness into day for about five seconds. The Philadelphia Freedom began to break apart. Splintery particles went out in all directions and to better ensure that every piece was atomized, it fell towards the atmosphere. The atmosphere began to glow around the ship, accelerating the process of breaking down the molecular bonds that once comprised its hull. A few years from now, a person wiping the dust off his book shelf might be able to say, with a reasonable amount of certainty, that they owned a piece of Freedom.

Nikita screamed for Garcia and tried to pull free from Kletsova, but she held on to her. Nikita struggled and went to her knees. Kletsova followed, never easing up on her embrace. She held Niki, looking at the others in her group, wanting to comfort them and Niki, and at the same time, wanting to join Niki in a hysterical meltdown. Niki tore at the grass and then pulled her arms into her chest, succumbing to the rocking motion, and Tatiana's quiet voice, as she whispered, "Shhhh, breathe." Trini was shuddering, her hands on her stomach. Lenar was stoic. Kletsova held her tears for Garcia in check, because it wouldn't do for her to be seen crying. This time it wasn't just because she was a Russian, but because she was now in command. Her first Away Team and their lives depended upon her ability to remain in control and make sound decisions.



## CHAPTER TEN

Garcia made his way to the closest airlock from auxiliary control, with Brittany in the lead firing both weapons, often simultaneously and in multiple directions. She held the corridor while he entered the storeroom next to the main airlock. There were rows of space suits, but he passed them by and went straight for the EMU, the Extravehicular Mobility Unit. In laymen terms, it was a rocket pack. It was suspended from the wall in such a way that a person could put it on by his or her self, but it was typically worn by a person in a space suit. Garcia didn't have time to put on a space suit, and so he was just going to have to make do with the Emergency Life Belt that he was already wearing. He dropped the EMU onto his shoulders and strapped it on. It was more than a little loose, but again, he was just going to have to make do.

Exiting the storeroom, Garcia saw that most of the corridor was gone. Each consecutive Iotian that Brittany had killed, or which Garcia had killed via Brittany, had left a hole in the deck, and taken out much of the bulkheads. Parts of the ceiling were collapsing. The intruders could no longer easily get to his position, but not from lack of trying. They shot from a distance, apparently desperate to catch him at all costs. The closest hole would have been a more convenient escape, but intruders had him pinned down.

"Help me to the airlock," he ordered Brittany. It was hard to walk in the EMU, and he had been unable to adjust the artificial gravity for this floor, due to too much damage to the system. Once he was in the airlock, he realized that there was concern in her eyes.

"Are you going to leave me?" she asked.

"Are you kidding?" Garcia said. "I need you. Sling the weapons. Now, come in front of me, and hang on to me."

"But, what about breathing?" she asked.

"It's okay, Brittany, trust me," Garcia said. "Are you ready?"

Garcia executed an emergency airlock over ride, which opened the door instantly and they were blown out as the air evacuated. He had also fired up the EMU to full power simultaneously with the door opening, to maximize thrust potential. He was now in space and with no space suit. It was difficult to keep from hyperventilating. Everything his senses told him was that he should be dying or dead. It was very much like the first time he went scuba diving. Even though he had been telling himself to relax and breathe, he had sucked the scuba tank dry three times as fast as it should have emptied, just from panic breathing. He could no longer see the blue aura of the Life Support Belt's force field in space, except when he looked at himself through Brittany's eyes. That was because the energy field only fluoresced when molecules interacted with it, and with no atmosphere to surround him, the intensity of the fluorescing had been cut practically in half. He saw the stars, he saw the lights of the cities on the continents below, several thunderstorms with cloud to cloud lightening, and he recognized the light growing in the atmosphere at the far side of the planet. He knew from this last bit that he would be moving into sunlight soon. He closed his eyes so that he wouldn't burn his eyes out.

Garcia could still see via Brittany's eyes. She was looking back over his shoulders towards the Philadelphia Freedom. She was watching it when the first light of destruction hit. An expanding sphere of energy followed and would over take them. He just hoped that he was far enough away to avoid serious radiation burns. He also feverishly hoped that his ELB didn't fail on him. If it was going to fail, it was going to fail when the wave hit. He shut off the EMU's rockets, knowing full well when the wave hit, he would tumble, and he didn't want to be tumbling with the rockets going.

The wave front hit and he tumbled, but it was not as bad as he had expected it. He had reached minimum safe distance. His mind went to the line from the song, "Philadelphia Freedom, shine on me..." He opened his eyes and watched the dying light of the ship, Philadelphia Freedom, and thought to himself: "That's two." Referring to the number of ships he had been on that were now gone. Of course, this counted as the first ship in which he had actively participated in its destruction. The Chance's destruction hadn't been his fault. He had merely been along for the ride.

He closed his eyes and rotated back into the direction of travel. He passed fifteen meters under a weather satellite, its large solar panels spread like an Eagle's wings. It was going to take him another two hours before he arrived at the Iotian's space station. The power pack on his ELB would last him three more hours, and the fuel in his EMU should be sufficient to bring him to a standstill along side the space station.

Getting in the station was something he would figure out once he was there. Perhaps if he were to just go up and knock, the Iotian astronauts would welcome him in.



“Now what do we do?” Trini asked.

“We wait till morning and try and fit in as best we can,” Kletsova said, taking charge of the group.

“You all are going to look rather conspicuous in Star Fleet uniforms,” Nikita said, her voice still bitter with her loss.

“She has a point,” Trini said.

“There’s nothing we can do about it at this time,” Kletsova said.

“We could walk,” Lenar offered. “Maybe there’s a place that offers a public rest room and water.”

It sounded reasonable, so they walked, following a joggers’ path through the park. It was lined with arches made of curtains of orange cloth. A homeless person slept on a park bench. A bag with the tip of a darkly colored bottle was in his hands and he was using a newspaper for a pillow.

“If I didn’t know any better, I would say we were in New York,” Nikita said. She sniffed. Her eyes were now dry, but the crying spell had taken a toll on her. She was tired and wanted to sleep.

There was a statue near by. They would have gone passed it, but Lenar was drawn to it. “It looks familiar,” he said, detouring.

“Try and stay with us,” Kletsova corrected him.

“He’s right,” Trini said. Kletsova sighed and followed the two straying lambs.

They all stopped and stared at the statue. Lenar’s mouth was agape and he had nothing to say. Nikita looked to Kletsova, confirming that they were all seeing what she saw. She then grew closer to the statue in order to read the plaque.

“In commemoration of Captain Kirk, who unified our nations once and for all,” Nikita read. She looked back to them. “They know Captain Kirk?”

“Yes,” Kletsova said. “He was here about a hundred years ago. And, he did do as the inscription says.”

“Did they have to put a phaser in his hand?” Trini asked.

Lenar laughed. “We come in peace, shoot to kill,” he said, mimicking Kirk’s voice. Kletsova was a master at vituperation, and there were times when she didn’t even have to speak a single word to get her point across. This was one of them. Just the look alone that she gave to Lenar was enough to cow him back into line. “Sorry,” he said. “I just wish we had a phaser.”

“I would do anything for a tricorder,” Trini said.

“Well, we don’t have these things, so we might as well get use to it,” Kletsova said.

“My mother will come for me,” Nikita said. “She’ll save us.”

None of the Away team did anything to discourage her belief.



Nancy Carter slid to a halt at the door that she believed the man had been carted off to. Newell slid into her. “Are you sure this is the one?” she asked.

“Pretty sure,” Nancy said, putting her ear to the door. Nothing. She put her hand in the Vulcan greeting and inserted it into the three fingered slot. The door opened. A few paces from the door was a lift, continuously moving up, like a dumb waiter rising. Every six meters was a new floor, and it moved slowly enough that they could climb on and ride it up to another level without risk of injury. Carter was not pleased by this. She went to the next door over. It was like the first, only the lift was going down. She went back two doors. It was an empty room.

They started at the sound of a door opening and closing somewhere. They turned in each direction, phasers at ready. Nothing entered the corridor.

“Let’s head back,” Nancy said. “We can’t afford to get lost in here.”

Newell didn’t argue. She had been more than happy to explore in here until she had seen the little gray aliens. She shivered just thinking about them. Nancy stopped. Newell stopped as well. “What?” Newell asked.

Carter turned and looked back the other way. “Where’s our door?” Nancy asked.

“It’s over here,” said. “I think we’re in a holosuite.” Newell swallowed as she reached out for what she was sure should be the end of the corridor. She kept pushing forwards, though, as the illusion of the corridor stretched to infinity in either direction. “This can’t be.”

Newell picked up her pace, expecting any moment to run directly into a wall. Carter followed, but at slower pace. When Newell had gone past the point that it was ridiculous to keep trying, she returned to Carter. “What’s going on here?”

Carter shrugged.

“Computer, end program,” Newell said. Nothing. “Computer, arch. Computer?!”

“Maybe it doesn’t respond to voice commands,” Carter said. “But it has to be a holodeck.”

“Why does it have to be?” Newell asked.

“Because it’s physically impossible to have a corridor that stretches into infinity,” Carter said. “It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Let’s try another door. Maybe we came through one of these,” Newell said, opening the door in the same manner that Carter had. The door opened to reveal a dark, watery world. Newell touched it with her finger. Her finger disappeared into the water and came back wet. She licked it.

“Because that’s scientific,” Carter said, reminding Newell of her earlier admonishment.

“Fresh water,” Newell said, and stuck her whole arm in.

“Don’t do that,” Carter said.

“Why?” Newell asked.

Something on the other side of the door jerked Newell completely over the threshold. Her facial expression barely had time to change, or register what was happening, before she was gone. Carter dropped her phaser and grabbed at her, partially entering the room. She found a hand, grabbed it, and pulled it back. It was a struggle, but she came free, falling to the floor. She was blinded by a backwash of water and it took a moment before she could see the results of her rescue efforts. The only thing of Newell that Carter had recovered was a bloody arm and hand.

Carter screamed, tossing the arm away from her, kicking herself backward even further from the door. A tentacle reached out, grabbed the arm, and pulled it into the water, snagging Carter’s phaser and pulling it into the watery room with it. A dark shape, like the shadow of a giant squid, with one eye blinking, stared out at Carter. The water rippled around the door frame. Another tentacle emerged reaching for her. She tried to scoot away further, keeping her back against the far wall, kicking at the tentacle, screaming hysterically. It grabbed her foot and started to pull her. She rolled over, trying to claw at the floor, but there was nothing to grab. She tried relaxing her foot so the boot would come off, but it was taught with an extra layer of socks she had put on to remain warm. And then, suddenly, she wasn’t being pulled towards the door.

Carter rolled over to see that the door had shut once again and had severed the tentacle in the process. Carter kicked and screamed trying to dislodge it, and then finally peeled it off with her hands and threw it as far from her as she could without really grasping it firmly. She moved far away from that door, sat down on the floor, drew her knees up to her chest, hugged them, and began to openly sob.



The space station resembled something out of Arthur C Clarke’s ‘2001 A Space Odyssey.’ The theme music for that, the Blue Danube, came up in Garcia’s head as he made his lengthy approach to the station. He had to match the orbital speed, for starters. There was no way for him to approach the ring part of the station, so he would have to approach the axis and try and enter there. On the bottom ring, he observed what appeared to be emergency escape pods. They were capsules that would take him straight down to the planet. If he couldn’t get to a transporter, then perhaps that would be an option.

Garcia moved in closer, hoping no one was watching. He was happy to see that the inner part of the axis didn’t rotate with the station. Unfortunately, there wasn’t an airlock on the side he was on. That meant he had to go to the other side. He risked being seen, but there was nothing to do about it. He backed off and calculated the most efficient path given the amount of fuel he had left. He would have to go straight along the axis, and he would have to time it just right, or the spokes that held the rings in place would squash him as easy as swatting a fly. There were three rings to pass. He closed his eyes, slowing the tempo of the music in his head to match the rhythm of the spokes. Without opening his eyes, he fired a ten second burst. He opened

his eyes and watched. He cleared the first spoke by a hair, rotating his body to do so, the second one by a meter, and the last he could have reached out and touched it. He rotated and brought himself to a stop, relative to the station. He sighed with relief at the sight of the airlock and began creeping his way towards it.

The airlock was very simple, which helped a great deal, and, it was in English. Even better. This was where he would need Brittany, because he couldn't just reach out and touch the station's control surfaces, or anything else. It would either be too hot or too cold to touch without gloves. He had heard of ELB protecting people from hand injuries, but he wasn't willing to risk it. He instructed Brittany to let go of him, and he spun her around to face the door. He had her push the buttons to evacuate the air in the airlock and then open the door. He then used the EMU to set them gently inside the airlock. Brittany grabbed onto a hand hold, and then held on to Garcia so that he could come out of the EMU. He then instructed the EMU to use its remaining fuel to put itself in a decaying orbit. It would then burn up and no technology would be shared with the Iotians. The EMU departed and Garcia had Brittany close the door. She pressed a button that filled the airlock back up with air. They then cycled through the inner door and floated down the center of the station.

"Oh my god, that was so much fun!" Brittany said, now that they were in air and she had her voice. "Can we do it again?"

"Um, not today, hopefully," Garcia said, turning his life belt off, and then, deciding better, turning it back to automatic. The air in the station didn't taste as fresh as the air on a Starship, but breathing in without the restrictive qualities of the Life Belt was a pleasure. It was also nice to have something under his feet, even if he was floating above it.

They continued to pull themselves along the tube until they came to the third ring, the ring closest to the planet. To enter the ring, they had to proceed up the hollow spoke. The higher up the spoke they went, the stronger the centrifugal force became until eventually they were at or above normal Earth Gs. They proceeded cautiously with Garcia using Brittany to scan the area for hostiles. So far, he had seen nothing. When he came out on deck, he was happy for the illusion of gravity.

"Hey, who are you?" someone said, coming around the corner.

Garcia had Brittany stun the man. They would now have to quicken their pace. An alarm went off. Well, he thought, he had gotten further than he had expected. He would have thought the alarm would have gone off the moment he opened the airlock. Funny how things often work out. Two people came from a room, drawing their own phasers. Garcia ducked below a couch, allowing Brittany to endure the fire fight. The two guys fell, but more were coming from the other direction. They couldn't stay pinned down. The longer they stayed, the higher the chances of getting caught, because all the Iotians had to do was transport up more troops. Two more station personnel arrived. As Brittany drew their fire, Garcia took a chance to slip around them, picking up one of the down Iotians weapon in the process. He came up behind the two, sent one to the ground with a Vulcan nerve pinch, and put a weapon to the other man's neck.

"Drop it," Garcia said, bringing Brittany to him. "Where's the transporters?"

The man's eyes flashed, giving the direction away, and Garcia rendered him unconscious. He went right to the room and studied the transporter controls. It was very puzzling. For one, there were two sets of pads, one marked for transmitting, the other marked for receiving. As he studied further, he realized just how primitive the Iotian transporters were. They barely had sufficient memory in their buffers to contain the information of a full human being, which meant transport had to be an instantaneous process, because there was no complete storing of the person in virtual memory. It also explained why some of the intruders had materialized into solid walls. They had no scanners! Consequently, they had no way of locking onto a person. The intruders that had beamed onto the Philadelphia Freedom had done so blind, and the only way they could transport the Phili's crew down were to shoot some sort of tag into them. But most importantly, Garcia now understood why everyone had cried out in pain. The lack of memory and buffers meant they had been slowly ripped apart, disassembled bit by bit.

"Screw this," Garcia said. There was no way he was going to use their transporter systems. Still, he could slow down the incoming wave of support troops by disabling the receive platform. He blasted it with the Iotian phaser he had acquired.

"So, how are we going to get out?" Brittany asked.

"Escape pods," Garcia said. "Let's go."

They ran into more astronauts and Garcia easily rendered them all unconscious but one. "Take me to your life pods."

"You'll have to kill me, Fed," the man said.

"Alright," Garcia said and then had Brittany stun him. He ran down a hall, turned, and ran down another, trying to piece together the layout based on what he had seen from outside. He finally found the capsules, just as ground troops transported in wearing full space suits. Garcia had hoped he had seen the last of them. Brittany fired warning shots at them, forcing them to take cover, providing Garcia an opportunity to investigate the pod entry mechanism. It had to be a warning shot because Garcia feared if one of the suits blew up the whole station would go, given the purity of the oxygen. The storm trooper types ducked for cover, and Garcia jumped into a capsule. Brittany followed. She closed the hatch via Garcia's instructions as he strapped in. She pulled a lever and then they were away. They dropped away faster than he had expected, but he was happy at the prospect he would soon be on the ground. Nothing felt more solid than a planet, especially after your ship had been destroyed right from under you.

It was a rough ride to the planet. The whole capsule vibrated and shook as if it might come apart. Flames encapsulated the pod as it plummeted through the atmosphere, licking past the window. The interior of the capsule heated up and it began to rain in the cabin. The water was no doubt the accumulation of water vapor from people breathing on the space station. They were really going to have to improve their environmental systems if they wanted their space station to last longer, he evaluated. The capsule's descent slowed, the parachutes opened, and the capsule seemed to come to a halt. Brittany took Garcia's hand.

"We're okay," he told her, attempting to reassure himself as well.

The capsule splashed down in an ocean, disappeared beneath the surface, and then rose as the raft began to inflate. It rocked at the surface as Garcia undid his restraints. He didn't know how far from shore he was but he figured with the use of his HROV, he could get out of this pretty easy. He opened the hatch and peered out.

Soldiers in wet suits, armed, weapons at ready with the sound of safeties going off, aimed at him. There was one man in a space suit similar to those who had boarded the Philadelphia, standing aft of the soldiers. It was a sleek, modern design, made for comfort on planet side or in space.

"Surrender or die," came a voice from the speaker system on the space suit.



Morning came to Central Park as Kletsova lead her team into the heart of the city. They knew it wasn't 'the' Central Park, but the cityscape of New York was unmistakable. The Iotians had gone out of their way to recreate the Earth city. Where they had received their information to do so was still a mystery. Had they constructed it all from the visual images from the TV shows they had obtained? Could they have gotten it from their book of Gangsters? Could there have been a more elaborate waste of resources, Kletsova asked out loud. Recreating a city was not efficient. Trini observed a man getting money from an ATM machine, embedded into the side of a building.

"We're going to need some money to survive here," Trini said.

"If I had a tricorder, I could have that ATM over there just spit us out enough to get by," Lenar said.

"That would be stealing!" Nikita said.

"We have to survive," Kletsova said.

"Tam wouldn't have stolen money," Nikita said. "And neither would Kirk. When Kirk was stuck on Earth in the 1930's he went to a shelter and he earned his money in order to fund his mission. I read that in one of Tam's book."

"Another Aeneid," Trini said. "You read that?"

"I've read everything Tam ever published," Nikita said with pride. She had to wipe her eyes again.

"You're being to idealistic, Niki," Kletsova said. "We may have to steal to survive, or at least get us started. Perhaps there's a pool hall we can go gamble at."

"A shelter might be an option," Lenar said.

Niki stopped at the corner to reread a sign. "Keep up," Kletsova told her.

"I think I have a legit option for us to earn some money," Niki said, pointing to the line of people and the sign.

The cadets paused to read the sign. The sign detailed auditions for a reality TV show, titled, "So you want to be a rock and roll band." A man handed them a pamphlet and continued to pace back and forth along the line answering questions. The pamphlet provided more information about the show's format. The most important item was that the contestants would be provided room and board at the hotel across the street from the studio.

"What do you think?" Niki said.

"They'll feed us and provide us with a place to sleep," Kletsova said.

"Um, excuse me, but aren't we supposed to be hiding?" Trini pointed out.

"What's a better place to hide than right in plain site?" Nikita asked. "Besides, when this airs on TV, it will make it easier for my mom to find us."

"It has just the kind of perverse sort of logic I would expect from Tammas," Lenar said.

Nikita burst into tears.

"Shhh," Trini said, hugging Niki to her. "We all wish he were here. Hell, we'd win this competition hands down."

"But he's not here," Kletsova snapped. "It's time to move on with life. We have a job to do. And our number one priority is to get Niki through this alive."

"Don't you think that's a bit harsh?" Trini asked.

"How dare you? Do you think I don't miss him, too?" Kletsova asked.

"We all do," Lenar said.

"So, let's do this," Niki said. "Let's win this contest for Tam."

Niki gave them all an imploring look as they mulled it over. Trini nodded first, then Lenar. Kletsova gave in. "Alright."

"And, no matter what happens, we're all in this together," Niki said. She put her fist out.

Trini put her hand on top of Niki's. Lenar put his hand on top of hers. Kletsova looked around the street and tried to take in the enormity of it all. In some ways, it was very much like home, but then, it was also completely alien and dangerous. A man passed by wearing Star Fleet uniform, from Kirk's era. It was a gold shirt. He even had a communicator and a phaser from the same era clipped to his belt. They all stared as he went by.

He stared back. "Take a photo, it'll last longer," he snapped.

"Is that a costume?" Kletsova asked Lenar.

"I hope so," Lenar said. "You want me to go talk to him?"

"No," Kletsova said, having made her decision, taking Niki's hand. "We have an audition to attend. What do you say, Niki? One of the songs we recently practiced?"

"I have a particular song in mind. If you get me a pen and paper, I'll write down the chords," Niki said.

"Alright," Kletsova said. "Get in line."

They had progressed to the front of the line when Kletsova returned with a paper that had once been the brown paper bag covering a wine bottle. She handed Niki this and a pen.

"What took so long?" Trini asked.

"No one wants to share," Kletsova said.

"Alright, your turn," a man said. "This way. Where's your instruments?"

"We were hoping you'd supply them," Kletsova said.

"Another loser band, here," the man announced.

A woman approached them. "What planet are you from? You always come to an audition unprepared?"

"Um, there was an accident and our instruments were blown up with our spaceship," Kletsova said.

"Can you help us out?"

"If it weren't for the state law saying we're required to give everyone a fair shake, you'd be booted to the curb now. You can use the instruments on the stage if you can tune them," the lady said. "You've got two minutes."

They made their way to the stage and started to choose their instruments, passing a contestant that was crying because she had been interrupted and rejected before she even got to the chorus of her song. Several of the judges were yawning and a few disparaging comments were directed towards Lenar and his spots by other contestants. Niki picked up a guitar, strummed it, and put it back in favor of another. She quickly got it in tune, matching it to the piano that Lenar was playing. Trini picked up a tambourine. Niki then tore the bag and handed Lenar and Kletsova the chords and rhythm.

“Let me start, and then you jump in and stay with me,” Niki said.

“Sometime today, people,” one of the judges said.

“Don’t Cry Out Loud, by Melissa Manchester, Earth, 1979,” Niki introduced her song as she began to play the guitar. She belted the chorus as if it applied to her, giving it a bit of punk rock edge. “Don’t cry out loud. Just keep it inside, learn how to hide your feelings. Fly high and proud, and if you should fall, remember you almost had it all.”

Niki gave them a signal and they finished abruptly. There was silence. The judges conferred amongst themselves and then one of them stood and pointed towards an exit. Niki nearly cried, but she bit her lip and stood up straight, letting the song give her strength.

“Through that door, down the hall and to your right, for stage two of your audition, leave the instruments,” the judge said.

Niki shouted and jumped.



Garcia and Brittany had been handcuffed with their hands behind their backs and forced to kneel in the raft, probably for their own safety. The raft traversed over the swells approaching what appeared to be an aircraft carrier. The swells, and Garcia’s position, made it difficult to make out the details as they approached, and when he was finally permitted to stand up, the ship was against them like a wall of a sky scraper. Brittany and Garcia were escorted directly to the flight deck where they were put on a plane and launched from the carrier. The space suit accompanied them, along with four armed guards. Two of the guards sat across from Garcia, and one to either side of him and Brittany. The space suit reclined aft.

Garcia evaluated his situation. The aircraft was pressurized and still climbing. There was a pilot and copilot visible. The guards were beginning to show signs that they were relaxing, but no one had spoken a word to them since they were apprehended. There were parachutes at the far wall.

“So, is this a meal flight?” Garcia asked.

“No talking,” the space suit said.

“Not even a coke and pretzels?” Garcia asked.

One of the guards across from Garcia hit him in the mouth.

“That was unnecessary. You already have me in custody,” Garcia said.

The guard hit him again.

“You know, he considers that foreplay,” Brittany said.

The guard across from Brittany hit her.

“Hey,” Garcia protested. “She’s a lady.”

The guard pounded Garcia a couple times, causing him to slip off the seat so that the guard next to him had to haul him back up. The seat was just barely a seat, folding down from the fuselage of the aircraft. The distance between the Garcia and the guard facing him was just perfect for his foot to connect to the groin of the man sitting directly opposite of him, he thought as he plotted his escape. If he could overpower them, he could certainly fly this aircraft.

“Just sit down and shut up, Fed,” said the guard, putting him back in his seat.

Garcia was now convinced that they believed they had him right where they wanted him. He took control of Brittany and had her hands become immaterial just long enough to allow her cuffs to slip off. She caught them to prevent them from making a sound. He leaned into her, feigning hurt from his injuries. They permitted this and her hand slipped behind his back, elongating in an unnatural fashion for a human, but not so unnatural for a hologram, and pinched the chain linking his cuffs so that they were no longer joined. Acting as one, they both attacked. Each planted a foot in the groin of the man across from them, hard enough that that they could stand and kick the faces with the other foot, simultaneously grappling with the men to either side of

them. Garcia's rendered his man unconscious and turned to the suit, who was only now getting into the action. Once Brittany's man was unconscious, she found one of her hand held phasers and stunned both pilots. The plane dipped, causing Garcia to stumble. Brittany found the autopilot and turned it on. The suit grabbed a phaser and fired at Brittany. The beam passed through her and Garcia turned her completely invisible so as to make the suit believe he had succeeded in killing her.

Unfortunately, the beam of the weapon had been set to a much higher setting than was necessary for merely incapacitating a person. By design or accident, the results were the same: the beam passed through Brittany and scored a direct hit on the door. A portion of the door to the aircraft disintegrated and the rest of the door collapsed and blew away. Garcia's life belt snapped on. Invisible Brittany was instantly sucked out, as well as Garcia. It was all a whirlwind in his mind, but as he fell he had time to relax and regroup his mental faculties.

Garcia was still close enough to Brittany to maintain contact via his neural implant. He maneuvered her closer to him, bringing her so close that she was able to grab him from behind. She eased up against him and then locked her arms and legs around him. Once they were in tandem, he created a holographic parachute which erupted right from the clothes on her back. At just above three hundred meters, the chute was as fully deployed as it ever would be. The full chute extended out beyond the holographic projector's sphere of influence, but it was sufficient to slow his descent towards the snow capped mountain. Garcia put Brittany's legs against his, and created a holographic snow board, locking their feet together. As soon as the snowboard touched the ground, Garcia canceled out the parachute program and it faded away. Acting as one, the two of them descended down the side of the mountain, avoiding trees and rocks. They shot over one ledge which required the reactivation of the chute to get to the next snow bank. They again touched down and the parachute vanished. Garcia brought them to a sliding halt at the bottom edge of the snow drift. From there down, it would be walking amongst ever greens, across pine needles and patches of snow and dirt.

The snow board vanished and the two of them separated, both physically and mentally energized. Brittany yelled with wild joy as her programming took charge again. She hugged and kissed Garcia. "God, that was so much fun!" Brittany said, and kissed him again. "You really know how to show a girl a good time."

To help calm himself down, he returned the kiss, escalating the shared passion of the moment. They fell to the snow and enjoyed each other's company surrounded by the earthy smells, the brightness of the day, and savoring the contrast of warmth from direct sunlight against their skin and the cold of the ground and the cool, crisp mountain air. It would have been a perfect moment had he not been obsessing over a particularly annoying song: "Afternoon delight," by Starland Vocal Band.



Nancy Carter forced herself to her feet. She was a Star Fleet Officer, and by God, she was going to behave like one. There was nothing left for her to do but to continue checking doors for a possible escape. She opened a door and was horrified to find animals suspended in air. She was uncertain if they were stuffed, like hunter trophies, or were immobilized by some sort of stasis field. She allowed the door to close and moved to the next one. She had been tempted to enter several of the rooms to examine the technology she had seen, but she had pressed on, hoping to find something more familiar or useful. So far, she had been lucky to have not come across any more creatures, like the one that had eaten Newel. The next door she opened presented her with an interesting sight. A lone man, woman, and black cat were held suspended in mid air, perhaps a meter apart from one another. They seemed to be in a state of suspended animation, or so it seemed, for there was a light aura about them that suggested a stasis field. The man and woman were both nicely dressed, but their outfits were extremely dated. She recognized the coat and tie from memories of pictures in history lessons. She couldn't place the female's outfit. It was colorful, like a clown's costume in many ways. It was swirling patterns of clashing oranges and yellows. Her mini skirt was anything but modest and she wore white hose. Nancy did like the scarf, though. The cat had a pink collar with a metal, heart tag.

Nancy hesitated. Should she enter? "Hello?" she asked.

No response.

Nancy looked both ways, made her decision, and stepped into the room. The door closed behind her. She circled the people who hovered approximately a centimeter above the floor. The cat was suspended



nearly half a meter, exactly the right height for her to pet it, which she did out of reflex, a desire to comfort herself as much as the cat.

Touching the cat broke the field and the cat sprung to life. No sooner than it hit the floor, it leapt back into the air, hissing and spitting, bouncing off Carter's belly. Carter was not hurt, but startled. The cat went from her to the man, breaking the field and setting him free. The cat continued from him to the floor to the wall and towards the girl in the miniskirt, and then back to Carter, screeching and mewling something awful. Carter backed away, bracing herself for a fight, not sure if the cat would strike before the people. The cat arched its back and spit.

"Easy," the man said. "This is obviously not our abductor. If I'm not mistaken, she's Star Fleet, judging by the uniform. Twenty fourth century?"

"Who are you?" Carter asked.

"My name is Gary Seven," he said, introducing himself.

The oddly dressed girl nudged him.

"And this is Roberta Lincoln," Gary went on. He picked up the cat. "And you've already met Isis."

"Pleasure to meet you," Roberta said, offering a hand.

Carter was weary of the handshake.

"We're not going to hurt you," Gary said.

"I still don't understand who you are and why you were being held prisoner in here," Carter said.

"My name is Gary Seven, supervisor 194. I was protecting Earth from an invasion of aliens known as Omegans, when I got a call from a fellow agent that Omegans had been seen on her planet. Roberta and I transported over to assist against a possible invasion of her planet when we were intercepted by these aliens and incarcerated. That is as much as I can tell you," Gary said.

Carter seemed dubious of the story. "It's a bit grandiose, don't you think? You say you are protecting Earth from an alien invasion, and yet I find you immobilized in an alien artifact hidden inside an asteroid in the Iotia solar system."

"Iotia? Isn't that the planet you were hoping to land us on?" Roberta asked.

"Indeed," Gary said. "Perhaps it is not too late to complete our objective."

"Objective?" Carter said.

"Find the Omegan's base of operation and destroy it before they destroy Iotia prime," Gary said.

"Why would they want to destroy Iotia prime?" Carter asked.

"They don't really care if they destroy Iotia prime or not, they just merely interfere with cultures in such a way as to produce circumstances that would lead a world towards self destruction in order to study and evaluate the results," Gary said. "In addition to their experiments, they're collectors, of a sort. They abduct people and animals, perform experiments, and then release them back into the wild to watch and record the results."

"Experiment!" Carter said. "Can you describe one of these Omegans?"

"They come in a variety of sizes and shapes, but the most common, the drone or worker, is about a meter and half tall, gray in color, with large black eyes," Gary said.

"I saw one!" Carter said. "They were wheeling a man strapped to a gurney through a hall way."

Isis mewed and Gary petted her. "Yes, I believe you're right. This might be the base of operation, in which case, we need to do is find their power source, shut it down, and then make a hasty escape," Gary said.

"One of the exits leads to the Horizon," Carter said. "If we can find that exit, I have shuttle available, and we can return to the USS Philadelphia Freedom."

Gary mused. "Very well. Let's proceed by first finding the Omegan power source."

"Why do I feel like you're just making this up as we go along?" Roberta asked.

"Because you don't know as much as I do, and I don't have the ability or time to educate you about everything you need to know to survive in this Universe," Gary said, simply, as he studied the door.

"You know, Doctor Who treats his companions much nicer," Roberta said.

"Doctor Who is a fictitious character on BBC," Gary reminded her. He removed a pen from his pocket and pointed at the door. It opened. "You two stay close behind me."

"These Omegans must not be very smart if they didn't take your receiver from you," Roberta said.

“What’s an exceiver?” Carter asked, following her new friends. Though she knew nothing about them, she felt better having them with her, for now.

“It’s one of those things he doesn’t want to educate me on,” Roberta said. “Come, let me tell you some stories.”

The cat mewed. “Yes, quiet would be better, Ms. Lincoln, if you think you could manage that,” Gary said. “This way.”



General Hammon entered one of the detention cells where a group of the prisoners were being held. He was escorted by four armed guard. “Which one of you is an engineer?”

No one responded.

“Fine, kill the short ugly one,” General Hammon said, indicating Brock.

“Nooo!” yelled Brock. “Please, I’m not Star Fleet. I’ll tell you anything you want to know. Just don’t hurt me.”

“Shut up, Brock,” Lt. Osaka said.

Brock fell to his knees, gripping the General’s pants leg. “You’ve got to separate me from them. They’ll kill me to keep me quiet. They don’t want you to know what I know.”

“Remove him,” said the general. “Now, is there anyone else here that might want to talk? It will go much easier on you if you cooperate.”

“Let us return to our ship and we’ll leave,” Lt. Osaka said.

“Your ship has been destroyed,” the General said.

“Damn you...” Cadet Williams said. The officers held him back.

“Please, I didn’t destroy your ship. I wanted to capture it,” Hammon said. “We want warp technology. We were willing to do it the easy way, steal it, but your Captain Garcia set the self destruct sequence. So, now, we have to do it the hard way. And you’re not going to like the hard way.”

“Captain Garcia?” Williams asked.

“We can’t give you technology,” Lt. Osaka said, ignoring the ‘Captain Garcia’ remark. “We have a law that forbids us from sharing technology with underdeveloped cultures. We’re not allowed to influence how your society develops.”

“Yeah, right. What do you take me for? A fool? Well, we have a law that allows us to torture and execute alien invaders,” Hammon said. “So, if you don’t want to cooperate, we’ll find alternative methods to getting what we want. Guards?”

General Hammon exited the room, followed by the guards. The door shut behind them.

“Do you think he’s telling us the truth?” Lt. Simmons asked.

“About what? Torturing us or that Captain Garcia blew the ship up?” Lt. Osaka asked, making a fist.

“They’re quite capable of torturing us,” Counselor Lester agreed. “They will have no qualms about it.”

“Well, if all they want is warp drive, maybe we should give it to them,” Williams said. “They’re close to getting it anyway, from what I understand.”

“You give it to them and you will have signed our death certificate,” Osaka said.

“And it won’t stop there. Warp technology is just the starting point. They’re going to want more concessions and we’re bargaining tools,” Lester said. “Provided there is any one of us left when Star Fleet arrives to bargain for us.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

While visiting a local mall, invisible Brittney, under the guidance of Garcia, lifted him some clothes for him to better blend into society. She brought him loafers, Kaki pants, a cotton shirt, a black leather jacket, and a pair of mirrored sunglasses to the rest room where he was hiding in a stall. She stole a back pack to keep his uniform in, since he didn't want to leave it. She also brought him a "cell" phone. Using the tricorder on the HROV, he reprogrammed the cell so that he could access it with his implant, and so that they could remain in touch using the local cell phone and wireless internet network. The map of the network suggested that he and the HROV could be on opposite sides of the planets and still communicate in real time and no one would be the wiser.

"Are the glasses necessary?" Garcia asked.

"Absolutely," Brittney said, pinching the tag off. She remained invisible to everyone but him. "You look wonderful."

"Why thank you," Garcia said. As they exited the mall, he went up to an ATM machine and held his back pack open to the money slot. Using his implant, via HROV, he accessed the ATM machine and instructed it to empty its contents into his pack. He walked away with forty seven thousand dollars. The sounds of helicopters in a search pattern resounded in the late afternoon sky. The Iotians were no doubt expecting to find his body.

Without a parting farewell, he and Brittney parted ways. She went down the stairs to the metro line, destination and protocols programmed in. She would remain invisible and report back to him periodically concerning her progress. He could also check in on her at any time and override whatever she was doing. While she headed off on her mission, he crossed the street and bought a motorcycle with a portion of the cash he had "borrowed," so that he could be off on his own mission: to reunite himself with his friends and take care of Niki until they were rescued.

Night brought with it a cool breeze as Garcia descended the mountain into the desert valley below. A shooting star zipped across the heavens. The sky was full of stars which defined the horizon for him, with the bike's light illuminating just enough of the dark road for him to navigate. A song trespassed upon his mind, "On a dark desert highway, cool wind in my hair, the warm smell of colitas, rising up through the air..." and he wondered, what the hell are colitas? Without warning, the light on his bike went out and the bike's engine died. He coasted to the side of the road. When the bike refused to start and he was unable to trace the source of the problem, he gathered his pack and was about to walk away. Suddenly, he was illuminated from above.

Garcia looked up into the light, shielding his eyes trying to make out what it was that hovered above him. It wasn't a helicopter of that much he was sure.

"Are you one of us?" Garcia asked. He brought his badge out of his pocket and held it up to his mouth. "Garcia to unidentified craft. Are you Star Fleet?"

Garcia felt a moment of vertigo as the light around him grew brighter until it was as if he were standing in light. All around him was blinding white, even the floor. He found himself unable to move. Had he been transported? he asked himself, feeling strangely groggy.

A female, wearing a toga and gold bands around her arms, stepped up to him, smiling enthusiastically. "Tammás Garcia," she said, kissing him. "DNA print confirmed, definitely Tammás. And not a copy."

Garcia tried to move, tried to communicate.

"Shh, don't resist," she said. "It'll just make it harder on you. Why are you here? You aren't considering violating your prime directive and interfering with the Iotian culture, are you? Of course you are. It's in your nature to meddle. I wonder if this is a tangent that Hades expected, or just mere chance. So many permutations. Either way, you're in his domain and I can't free you at this juncture. Not without giving away my own game."

She touched his face, musing silently. "But perhaps I can help you resist the programming. They'll use you for their own purposes, you know. No matter what you do, it will serve them," she said. She put her face against his and whispered in his ear. "My name is Harmonia. You can make a difference here. You have my support, my love, and my songs. Save the Iotians, if you can. My light shines through you. Good luck, Tammás."

Harmonia kissed him, lingering for only a moment before backing up. "You best take him to Hades now, before he suspects I am meddling again. Meddling melody. How fun is this?"

Garcia felt himself lifted and his body turned horizontal. Shadows approached him and they inserted probes into his nose and mouth, but he couldn't protest or even scream. It took all of his energy just to remain conscious. Every now and then he imagined he saw an oval face with dark, dreadful eyes, but he quickly forced himself to think of other things. He forced himself to think of Harmonia and the beauty of her voice and face instead.

Garcia managed to turn his head. What he saw made him weep from fear and joy. It was McCoy! A younger McCoy, but it was definitely McCoy

Two orbs of light flew in and two men appeared over top the orbs, in a manner not unsimilar to a transporter. They were perfect specimens of the human figure, as if Micahael Angelo had carved them out of stone. And they were wearing togas, just as the female apparition who had greeted him had been.

"Hades, I asked for a McCoy piece. This is not a McCoy piece, it's a Kelley piece," one of them complained.

"McCoy piece or Kelley piece, it's all the same genetically," Hades responded. "I should know. I cultivated this line myself.

"But I paid you for the last of the McCoy pieces to finish my collection," the other argued. "You said you could provide it before the McCoy piece left the space time continuum, and now that it has, I want my piece."

"And I intend to give it to you, Dionysus. The personality matrix for the last of the McCoy piece resides in this vessel here," Hades said. "I intend to transfer it to the Kelley piece."

"But the Kelley piece is obviously too young to be the last of the McCoy piece," Dionysus lamented. "It won't fit the collection."

Hades lifted a hand and the "Kelley" piece yelled. His back arched off the table it was on, his hair and fingernails grew, and his skin grew more wrinkled before their eyes. He slumped into sleep. "Now, is that better?" Hades asked. "The vessel is now aged to match that of the McCoy piece before he departed the space time continuum."

"Will the piece still carry the Kelley personality?" Dionysus asked.

"The McCoy personality matrix will be dominant," Hades assured him. "You won't notice a thing."

Hades clapped his hands and his minions fell to work. "Quickly, now. Transfer the McCoy matrix to the Kelley piece so we can return the Garcia piece to the wild."

A person appeared, accompanied by a rolling crack of thunder. "You have violated the rule structure. We agreed there would be no more contact with societies that have warp technology."

"Ah, Apollo, it's so nice to see you again," Hades said.

"You had no right to capture him," Apollo said.

"He was on Iotia and they don't have warp technology," Hades said. "That makes him fair game."

"A technicality and you know it," Apollo said.

"I think someone is still upset from the last time he encountered humans," Dionysus laughed. "What's wrong? Still got a little Kirk stuck in your craw?"

"I will go to Zeus on this," Apollo said, stepping up to Hades.

"Go right ahead," Hades said. "The Iotia Experiment is mine and I can play it however I see fit. You wasted your turns on frivolous pursuits. Who cares if they want us or love us? You've always had this tendency towards anthropomorphizing your pets. All I want to know are the results to my statistical analysis. I have not violated the rule structure, but I'll blow the whole thing up rather than see you interfere with Iotia any further."

"All I care about is that you follow the rules," Apollo said. "Cultures that have developed warp technology are off limits."

"That wouldn't even be a rule if you hadn't reached out with your hand and grabbed a starship!" Hades protested.

"Irrelevant, I want him returned immediately," Apollo said.

"Please, you don't give a damn about rules as long as you get your way. You lost your bet a hundred years ago. Now get out of my domain before I smote you," Hades said.

Apollo raised his arm and flipped his wrist in a sign of contempt. He vanished in a dissipation of light that was more show than necessary.

Dionysus laughed. "How much for a copy of the Garcia piece?"

"I can only make one copy at this juncture and I'm keeping it," Hades said. "I have to return the other to the playing field or take on a penalty."

"Are you giving it a mission?" Dionysus asked.

"Garcia? Of course. I have to do something to counter Apollo's interference on Iotia. He thinks I don't know what he did, but I know," Hades said.

"Are you sure you won't part with the Garcia piece? I'll trade you a Seven of Nine piece for it," Dionysus said. "Everyone wants a Seven of Nine Piece."

"No, everyone wants a piece of Seven of Nine. Watch your semantics," Hades said. "Besides, your copy of Seven is a future Seven. I prefer the pre-Voyager Seven."

"I'll throw in a Locutus of Borg," Dionysus said, swirling a drink conjured out of thin air.

"And how, pray tell, did you acquire a Locutus of Borg piece without violating the rule structure?" Hades asked.

Dionysus gave an evil grin. "I made a copy of it while it was being transported from the Borg ship to the Enterprise. Technically, copying energy patterns in a transporter energy wave does not violate the rule structure. How did you think I acquired my Seven of Nine?"

"I wasn't going to ask," Hades said, mulling it over. "Very well. I will trade you my copy of the Garcia piece for the Seven of Nine and Locutus of Borg pieces. Bring the two of them to a storage cell."

"Wonderful. See you in a few," Dionysus said, and vanished in a flourish of energy.

Hades caressed Garcia's head. "I was hoping to do much more with you, but this is a good trade. Minions?! Make a copy, and insert the mission objectives into the one you're returning to the Iotia playing field. And let's try not to get it backwards this time, alright. The other goes to the trading floor."

"Wait," Garcia managed to say.

Hades turned back to him, amused. "You are really something else. I should have done more Kelvan experiments."

"Why?" Garcia struggled.

"Why? To learn and understand," Hades said. "Metaphor. Computer programs and holodeck adventures. Your biological nature is to us what your computer programs and holodeck creations are to you. You are merely interesting phenomena and simulations that we can develop and use to help better understand this thing called life."

"We are people. This is not right," Garcia said.

Hades laughed. "Yes, yes, we are also trying to understand better this moral dilemma associated with the programming. That's why there are rule structures in place. Zeus is the keeper of the rules and ensures that we play within the boundaries of that structure. Our rule structures are comparable to your Prime Directive. You can understand this. And, contrary to what you interpret Apollo's words to mean, I am operating within the boundaries of my prime directive."

"There can be no justice as long as rules are absolute!" Garcia adapted a quote.

Hades laughed. "Ah, yes, the Picard assertion. Nicely played, but irrelevant at this juncture. Not applicable to this situation. Besides, in any given scenario, the annihilation imperative, which seems to be inherent in human DNA, trumps the Picard assertion."

"But why destroy worlds?" Garcia asked.

"We don't destroy worlds. You destroy worlds. We only set the stage and watch it play out and record the data," Hades said. "When the playing field is destroyed, we will begin again somewhere new. We'll transplant the most endearing and provocative pieces in order to see how the game develops under different circumstance. You should be happy to learn that no matter what happens, you will be preserved. You are a collector's item, very endearing and provocative. We will bring you back as many times as there are scenarios that we can imagine to place you in."

“Let the Iotian people go,” Garcia begged.

“Ah, the Moses gambit,” Hades said. “Also not applicable to this scenario. Further, we have not been able to deflect the tangent initiated by the Horizon incident. Character insertion has failed to deviate the outcome to any significant degree. We predict a total social implosion within three to twelve months. It’s very interesting, especially knowing that you may be the catalyst that brings the final scenario into play. Isn’t that nice to know? Not that you’ll remember. That might adversely influence the game. Against the rule structure. It’s been delightful meeting, you, Jude. Love your game. But I got to go. The amount of data I’ve collected needing to be analyzed just keeps growing in leaps and bounds. I’m sure we’ll meet again, though.”

Hades disappeared. Shadows carried McCoy away and then they returned for Garcia. He felt himself drawn along, powerless to resist, through corridors, up elevators, down corridors, through openings, and finally stored in a room. The lights dimmed, the shadows departed, and he found himself alone, paralyzed but aware. At least, partially aware. He felt himself drift in and out of consciousness, unable to even access his implant to discern the passage of time. Mentally struggling was proving useless, so he calmed his mind, focusing, reaching out with his senses in an effort to understand his prison better. He was basically trying to see the confines of his room without light and without the ability to turn his head. All that left him was smell and temperature and fantasy, and he could not allow himself that luxury for fear that he would be lost. He had to stay focused on whatever sensations he could actually perceive.

“How is it you are able to resist the paralysis pheromones so easily?”

Had he not been immobilized, Garcia would have jumped. “Hello?” he tried to speak.

“You are capable of communicating without the need of an audio component?”

“Yes,” Garcia said. “Who are you?”

Garcia was answered with a smell. It was so specific of a smell that he could spell the chemical formula. Though he could not reproduce the smell biologically, or pronounce it, he could mirror it with an abstract thought.

“You are not human.”

“I am a Kelvan human hybrid,” Garcia said, able to translate the Kelvan word into a memory of a smell, as he was familiar with the chemical messengers of his own species.

“I am familiar with this species. Why have you chosen to limit yourself in human form? The Kelvan form is far superior to the one you are residing in.”

Garcia puzzled over this. “I don’t understand.”

“The human’s ability to abstract seems to be mostly limited to the ability to form and utter words, mixed with physical gestures. Since there are only so many sounds, combinations of sounds, and so many gestures that one can string together to form an abstract, your ability to communicate is therefore limited. Using chemical formulas to represent an alphabet and abstractions is more efficient. Why have you chosen this form?”

“This form was chosen for me. Can you free me?” Garcia said.

“From your form or your confinement?”

“From my confinement,” Garcia clarified.

After a time of nothing happening, Garcia asked his question again. “Will you free me from my confinement?”

“No. You have been commissioned in a trade between two of the non-corporal entities. Freeing you could have serious detrimental repercussions to my well being.”

“Who are you?” Garcia asked again. Again the answer came in the form of a specific smell. “But who are you? What is your species called?” The answer was again in smell form, with a minute change.

“If you are looking for an auditory nomenclature, your species has several non specific labels for my people. Grays, Pleiades, Omegans, Preservers... All of these descriptors are vague and meaningless without visual olfactory and mental components.”

“Why are you holding me here?” Garcia asked.

“I am not holding you here. The non-corporal entities have claimed possession of you, as they do all of my people. We are their slaves to do with as they please.”

“I don’t understand. Explain,” Garcia asked.

“History?”

“That would be nice,” Garcia said.

There was a silence to which Garcia asked if the presence was still there. What he didn’t know was that the silence consumed days. “I am still present. I am considering how to respond. My species is multifaceted. We are each born to a specific job, a caste system if you will. There are the laborers, those which you call grays, or drones. There are the warriors. There are nurse maids. There are scientists. There are males for breeding. There are workers. There are princesses, those who would be queen, and then there are the queens. Only queens and princesses are capable of telepathy. And each queen’s ability to use telepathy is biologically restricted to within its own hive. Not from hive to hive. Do you understand this?”

“You are a queen?” Garcia asked.

“I am a queen. A time ago, a time before your species had even evolved, before your sun had even shot its first rays past its condensing particulate cloud, my people were. We listened to the night and we heard voices. Some of us heard the voices better than others and we soon learned how to channel these voices. These voices are not part of the time space continuum. They are non-corporal entities from outside the Universe.”

“There is nothing outside the Universe,” Garcia argued.

“By your limited definition, yes. But these non-corporal entities do reside outside. Not from a coexisting plane or dimension, but outside. I can not describe outside to you. I only know these entities reside there.”

“Like Q?” Garcia asked.

“I know no Q. I only know those that we have let in.”

“You mean the gods? Who did you let in?” Garcia asked.

“All of them. We let them in to us. We allowed them to use us to perfect our technology and to guide us to better living. The technology grew to the point where the non-corporal entities, the gods as you call them, could manifest themselves through the technologies. They no longer required us to gain access to this Universe. Still, they preserve us as slaves, to care for their technology and to ensure that they will always have access to this Universe.”

There was a long pause in which days passed.

“Do you know this person?” asked the voice, giving Garcia the olfactory nomenclature.

Garcia recognized the smell of specific pheromones and a visual association came up in his mind.

“Her name is Nancy Carter. She is a friend of mine. Why?”

“She has freed some pieces and is roaming, unsupervised through out the station,” she answered. “Her party has secured a campsite for resting, from where they are mounting their expeditions and stealing food from a storage area. I will have to capture them soon and report this to my superiors.”

“Please, don’t harm her.” Garcia pleaded. “She has a child. She is my friend.”

“And the others?” she asked.

“I don’t know the others, but please,” Garcia begged.

“They are causing no harm at the moment, so I will delay,” she said.

Garcia became quiet as he processed the information. More days passed. He had been assaulted with smells and images that he was unfamiliar with, but he was confident in the translation that his mind offered. And, he was confident that the plan he was devising to escape would work.

“It won’t work,” the gray queen said.

“How do you know if you don’t try?” Garcia asked. He blinked away a few more hours.

“We can not block them. Even if we destroy the technologies here, they still have us. My species is spread throughout the Universe and so is their technology.”

“Maybe I can teach you to block them,” Garcia said.

“It is not possible.”

“I learned to block the thoughts of others in order to maintain my core personality. You can learn this trick,” Garcia said. Garcia demonstrated, giving his thoughts away freely, opening himself up to this Queen entity. His body pulsed with convulsion as the Queen and his mind became one. Her intellect surpassed even

the Kelvan's intellect. Her mind was immense and he would have been lost if it were not for the Queen's ability to understand and separate herself from him, using the technique she had gained in the mind meld.

An answer was a long time in coming. "Would you be willing to negotiate for your freedom?"

"Yes," Garcia said.

"If I allow you to escape, you will take with you three drones and a princess, each carrying an egg, and allow them to colonize a planet within your Federation, giving them access to warp technology so that the rule structures that the non-corporal beings currently play under can not interfere with their developing culture?"

"I am willing to do this," Garcia said.

"You will give your life to see them escorted to safety?"

"I am willing to die trying. I have a condition as well," Garcia said.

"I am listening."

"I want to take McCoy with me," Garcia said.

"My understanding is that the McCoy piece left the space time continuum. His return to the space time continuum at this juncture would be troubling to a species as superstitious as yours. Even the gods avoid bringing pieces back to the playing field so soon after they've been removed. It often radically changes the vector of their experiment invalidating the data set."

"What do you mean has left the space time continuum?" Garcia asked.

"Death," the queen responded.

"This point is non negotiable. I take McCoy with me or I don't even try to leave," Garcia said.

Silence. It was hard to tell how much time went by. "You will need assistance."

"Can you help me?" Garcia asked.

Three illuminated spheres, the size of golf balls, descended from the ceiling. They brightened and flashed and when Garcia's eyes adjusted, he saw his hallucinations. Duana, Ilona, and Deanna Troi.

"This is the stuff that Gods are made of," the queen said.

Garcia began to laugh. It bubbled up from deep within himself, rising to the surface and literally freeing his body from the immobilizing affects of the pheromones which had been incapacitating him. The laughter washed away his fear.

"I do not understand this phenomena. What is this thing you do?"

"It's laughter, humor, the release of tension and fear to be replaced with joy and peace," Garcia explained, sitting up.

"What brings you this joy?"

"The gods are holograms," Garcia said.

"Tam?" Duana said, waking up. She touched him. "We're alive and physical?"

"HROV's," Garcia said. "The non-corporal entities are using holographic remote operating vehicles to interact and study our Universe. They must interact with the technology through some sort of telepathic communicator chip. If we can find the source of their power, we may be able to take them off line."

"Is that how we're got here?" Ilona asked.

"These specific orbs of manifestation are calibrated to Garcia's thought patterns," the queen said.

"Your mental companions can utilize these HROV's to facilitate the McCoy rescue."

"We'll need weapons that can go up against trans-dimensional beings that are capable of interfacing with holographic technology in order to block their manifestations in this universe," Garcia said.

"And just where do you think you're going to get a Kaluza-Klein particle laser generator?" Ilona asked.

"The same place he got us. We just materialize whatever we need," Duana said.

"You should not waste your energy," the Queen said. "You can sustain your form indefinitely, but you must take on fuel. Manifesting other tools and materials takes energy and I recommend you restrain yourself until you have become accustomed to how much energy you can expend before you need to refuel. Here are the weapons you requested, Garcia."

Three grays entered the room, each carrying a weapon. They placed the weapons on the floor, backed away, and bowed. Each of them wore a papoose, carrying an egg tied to their chest. A fourth creature entered, also carrying an egg, but she was much different from the drones. She stood 2 meters tall, and had a



mixture of human and alien characteristics. She had blond hair, blue eyes, and though her skin was grey, there seemed to be a golden tint to it that sparkled when she moved.

"I am Princess Rgthrol, a hybrid," it said, using telepathy and olfactory components to communicate with Garcia.

"Um, Tam, do you see a family resemblance here?" Duana asked.

"In order to block the potential possession by the non-corporal beings, it was necessary to make a hybrid using Garcia's genetic structure, infused with bits of his personality and memory matrix," the queen said. "It is not perfect, but it is all I could deliver on short notice. If your assistance is conditional on rescuing the McCoy piece, then you must move fast, while he is still within my Hive. The gods trade frequently."

"You're a dad?!" Deanna asked.

"This is just disgusting," Ilona said, shivering.

"I will accompany you," the princess said. "These are my workers and the eggs necessary for beginning a new hive. I will be the one to start the new colony. It will be necessary for you to kill any other grays that you encounter, for they will try to stop us. The gods will be against us once we leave this room."

"I don't wish to kill any grays," Garcia protested.

"You must. It must appear that I am trying to stop you. And I will do so, if I can," the Queen said.

"Umm, that seems like the standard odds," Duana jested. "Grays and gods. All we're lacking are Klingons, Borg, and Romulans."

"This is not a time for humor," Ilona snapped. "We're in great peril!"

"Perhaps this would be an easier game if we had access to the holographic computers that control the environments in this hive," Duana said.

"I might be able to get past the information exchange protocols," Deana said. After the Deanna program had achieved its mission goals in Garcia's mind, it had become idle, but now that she had actual physical form and a mission, she seemed as bright and as enthusiastic as the real Deanna Troi.

"There isn't time," the Princess said. "We must hurry."

"Alright," Garcia said. "Take me to McCoy, Princess."



"Look, how many times do we have to go over this?" Brock asked. "I am a member of the Ferengi Alliance, not a member of Star Fleet. If you will allow me to contact my people, I would be willing to broker a deal for an exchange in technology. And I assure you, it would be a far better deal than what the Federation would give you."

"What do you mean by that?" General Hammon asked.

"What do I mean by that? Have they offered you any technology?" Brock asked.

"No," the General said.

"Have they offered you any kind of service or products?" Brock continued. "Again. No. They're not interested in exchange or making money or long term business arrangements."

"What are you saying?" Captain Romano asked. "The Feds are communists?"

"Communists?" Brock asked. "Oh, communists! Exactly. The Ferengi Alliance is a capitalist operation and the Federation is a communistic operation."

"I knew it. The Book said we got to watch out for the damn communists!" Romano said.

"That doesn't make sense," Jay said. "The Feds are the ones that gave us the Book."

"Maybe things changed since they gave us the Book," Captain Elmont offered. "Maybe the Russians won the war."

"Look, forget about the Book," Brock said.

"Hey, that's the Book you're talking about!" Elmont said, standing up.

Brock cowered back. "Nothing personal against the Book, of course," Brock said, quickly. "I mean, I have my book, the Rules of Acquisition, so, I'm sure your book is a similar kind of book."

"The Rules of Acquisition?" Captain Elmont asked.

"Yes, remind me to sell you a copy. All I'm saying is, what has the Federation actually done for you? They drop a few tidbits and leave you in the dark, while they continue their expansionist policies and spread

their communistic philosophies over the whole galaxy. You guys seem to understand the value of currency. The Alliance could use another member state like you, fighting the evil Communists,” Brock said.

“Your Alliance would help us against the Feds?” General Hammon asked.

“Absolutely,” Brock said. “Of course, there are some small legal matters we would need to tend to, some miscellaneous fees, and...”

“You mean we have to pay the Alliance to help us?” Jay asked. “Don’t you want to fight Communists simply because they are Communists?”

“When it comes to capital, you got to know the value of the coin, my friend,” Brock said. “Money talks. Sure, you guys are probably good warriors and all, but what good are you in a fight against communism if you don’t understand the value of cold hard currency? The best warriors are also resource managers and currency is a symbol for resources. It’s a symbol for power. It’s a symbol for magic, if you want to be superstitious about it. Power, magic, resources all sums up to the same equation, the one with the most wins. I didn’t just buy my way through officer’s school and into a first officer’s position because I inherited a lot of money. No, it was a capitalistic venture, which I bought into. Sort of like an investment. Now, if I were to broker this deal between you and the Alliance, I have to have some compensation for my time. My time is valuable. Time is money. And, quite frankly, you’re wasting my time.”

“You bought your first officer position?” Captain Elmont asked.

“Is this like a pyramid scheme?” Captain Romano asked.

“All the best business and military ventures are pyramid schemes,” Brock said. “Think about it. One leader at the top, a bunch of soldiers slash accountants at the bottom, and mediocre in the middle. The better you are at strategy and finances, the faster you move to the top.”

“That makes sense,” Elmont said.

“But what can you do for us now?” Jay asked.

“I would be willing to take a look at your industries and gross domestic products and point you in the right direction,” Brock said.

“How about freeing us from our dependency on oil?” Romano asked.

Jay shoved the man. Romano scowled back.

“It’s alright,” Brock said. “It’s a fair question. You guys don’t know me or the Ferengi, and you probably are a bit jaded from dealing with the Federation. Tell you what I’m willing to do.”

Brock removed his boot and rotated the heel around to reveal a secret compartment. Jay drew his weapon and aimed. Brock raised his hands, one with the boot, to surrender. “Hey, easy, I’m just getting out a piece of paper here. See,” Brock said. “Paper. Harmless. But written on it is a formula for an antimatter drive, with a cold fusion back up generator. Now, it’s written all in pure mathematical formula, so you’ll have to have some engineer type figure out how to build the components, but it’s a start. A good faith exchange until members of the Alliance arrive to sell you working models.”

Jay examined the paper and handed it to General Hammon. General Hammon inspected it, skeptically. “We’ll get back to you,” he said, and excused himself and his men.

Brock put his hands behind his head, leaned back in his chair, and smiled. It was going to be all too easy.



The grouping of pods hovered just beyond the comet, close enough to the shuttle craft that they could use its emergency transporter to move people. They found the Horizon a comfortable temperature, but the floors and bulkheads were all wet with the recent thaw, and water dripped from the ceilings. It would be at least a day before the environmental systems recovered the moisture through its filters. Two more crew members had died but there had been sufficient supplies in the medical facility to stabilize the remaining injured. The medical personnel were not happy about the primitive equipment, but they coped. A ship wide search had been conducted for Newell and Carter, and though they didn’t find them, they did find the artifact.

Sharlow stared into the artifact that Burke had opened.

“You don’t suppose they went in there, do you?” Sharlow asked.

Burke tried his comm. badge, but neither Carter nor Newell answered.

“Alright,” Sharlow said. “I want guards posted here. Also, get two volunteers to go inside. I want to know what we’re facing.”

“Aye,” Burke said.

Sharlow returned to the Horizon where she was met by Cadet Maxwell. “It will take us a month to generate enough heavy water to run the fusion generators, but once I do, I think I can get the impulse engines online. Minimum, just enough to get us to Iotia to mount a rescue.”

Sharlow had no intentions of getting them that close to Iotia, but she kept this thought to herself. The thoughts of rescuing their fellow crew mates was motivating them to get the Horizon fully functional. “Where are you getting the fuel from? Replicating it from the shuttle?” she asked.

“No, mam, that would take too long, and would be a waste of the shuttle’s power system,” Cadet Maxwell said. “What I propose to do is take an Away Teams outside the ship, use phasers to melt through the comet. We’ll collect the water vapor and gasses through vents on the ship and through vacuum tubes we’ll carry with us. This proposal does two things for us, it gives us the water necessary to make deuterium, and, it will free the ship from the ice locking us in.”

Sharlow sighed. It was the best plan she had heard all day, and probably the least dangerous. “How many people do you need?”

“Using ten people and phaser rifles, I could have the Horizon carved out of the ice in two weeks, round the clock shifts, six hours a shift. We could do eight, but working in these old suits is going to be tiring enough and they lack the nutritional delivery systems for longer stays,” Maxwell said. “Mind you, that’s just minimally freeing us from the ice. It’ll take us another week of just heating a section of the comet to collect the necessary deuterium.”

“Make it so, Maxwell. Pick the team and run it by Burke for approval,” Sharlow said.

“Aye, Captain,” Maxwell said, saluting.

“And Maxwell, tell everyone to stop calling me that,” Sharlow said.

“Yes, Mam,” he said, and went about his business.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Ensign Tammis Parkin Arblaster Garcia felt the warmth of sun shining on his face, which began to rouse him from a comfortable sleep. It was a sleep from which he wasn't ready to wake up. He was dreaming and he wanted to stay in the dream. In the dream he was surrounded by love and light, chasing a melody, but most important, Sarek was there. He knew it was a dream because Sarek did a very peculiar thing, very uncharacteristic of the Vulcan. Sarek hugged Garcia.

"I'm so happy to see you," Garcia cried in his arms.

"I am happy to see you, son," Sarek said. "But you must go back."

"But I want to stay with you," Garcia said.

"It's not your time," Sarek said. "You have unfinished business."

"As a man of logic you must concede that business is never finished, so it doesn't matter if I stay now and return later or never return," Garcia argued.

Sarek laughed. "That's why I love you, son. Your logic is impeccable," Sarek said. "Now, you must return. You have a mission and it's imperative that you finish it. Let her light shine."

The more Garcia struggled to stay in the dream, the faster it left him. Sarek drifted back as if Garcia were falling backwards through a tunnel. The sounds and smell of the real world started to filter through his senses, along with a pain in his forehead which caused him to squint. The smell of farmland was pressing on him and there was the sound of people moving through a field, talking loudly. He opened his eyes and stood up. He blinked. Had he fallen asleep riding his motorcycle and crashed through a farmer's cornfield? And why had the farmer cut such a strange opening into his field? Men emerged from the standing corn, weapons raised. They were wearing Star Fleet Uniforms, circa 2266. They were all red shirts with the security patch. He blinked as if this action might force him to wake up.

"Down on the ground!" someone yelled at him, waving a phaser at him.

Garcia looked around to see who they might have been talking to, and noticed there were red shirts coming at him from all angles. Had he crashed through a time portal?

"I come in peace," Garcia said, raising his hand in a Vulcan gesture of friendship. "Are you Fleet?"

"I said on the ground, now!" the red shirt leader said again.

"Just shoot the bugger!" someone else said.

And someone did. Garcia took a hit with a phaser set for stun and the world was a brighter place before he lost consciousness. When he woke up, he found himself tied to a hard, wooden chair. A solitary light shone down from above, swinging lightly. The curvature of the lamp shade on the swinging light suggested a tunnel and Garcia tried willing himself to return to the light. It was futile gesture, marked by the slaps of a man standing over him.

"He's up," came a voice in the dark.

Someone leaned into him. "Can you sing?" was the question

"Yes," Garcia said.

"Well, start singing, then,"

"What?" Garcia asked

"You heard the man, make a like a canary," said another.

"What song?" Garcia asked, trying to clarify his question.

"Either you start singing, or you'll be swimming with cement galoshes. Capish?" said the other voice.

"Capish," Garcia said. He had now recovered enough that he had ascertained his situation and was beginning to anticipate his escape. He was inside of a barn of some sort, the smell of hay and dust was heavy in the air, with a touch of the bitter sweet smell of horse-grain and molasses. He resisted an urge to sneeze. There were maybe seven people around him, probably all armed.

"Carry on my wayward son. There'll be peace when you are gone. Lay your weary head to rest, don't you cry no more," Garcia began to sing.

His efforts were met with fists to the face and stomach. "Wise guy, are you? You better start singing about the crop circle. This is the fourth crop you ruined in less than a week. Now, are you part of a fraternity getting its jollies, because the boss might be a little more forgiving if he can send you a bill."

"Crop circle?" Garcia asked.

A guard hit him on the head. "Yeah, the one we caught you sleeping in, you dope."

Someone approached. It was the sound of good leather shoes against cement, a light echo suggesting the building was constructed of galvanized steel. The sound of metal cigarette lighter and the turning of flint was the cue for an open flame. There was the brief hint of a face, cigar being lit, and a wide brim hat pulled low and off center, the tempered orange flare of the cigar, and then darkness.

"This the man?" came the voice.

"Yes, Boss," came an answer behind Garcia. "He was sleeping right dead center of it."

"That takes guts, kid. I'll give you that. Stupid, but guts," the cigar smoking man said. He blew smoke in Garcia's face. "Who are you working for?"

Garcia was at a loss on how to reply. "I require more specificity," he stated.

One of the men standing at his side demonstrated his physical prowess, punching Garcia hard in the mouth. "Watch them fancy words, kids. This ain't no sesame street."

"I apologize," Garcia said. "I meant no disrespect."

"Then answer the Boss's question."

"I don't understand the question..." Garcia tried to explain.

Garcia was hit again. "We caught you red handed," said one. Hit again from another angle. "Think we're fools, do you."

"That's enough boys," said the cigar man. "We're wasting our time with this one. Jim? Come with me."

Garcia listened to the sound of boots against pavement receding, counting the steps to get an idea how far it was from him to a possible exit. A door swung open and bright sunlight poured in through the door, bright enough to white out the cigar man and just enough to illuminate the red shirt of the man behind him. Dust particles migrated through the sun beams. The red shirt nodded, taking the revolver out of his holster.

"I understand, boss," the red shirt said, and headed back to Garcia. The door fell shut behind the man and darkness filled the world beyond the reach of the light hanging over Garcia's head.

Garcia understood, intellectually, that if he were to escape, it needed to be now. Emotionally, however, he was strangely unconcerned. And it wasn't his normal OCD death wish delaying him from taking action. He simply knew he couldn't die.

"Tam, now would be a good time to manifest some telekinesis," Duana said.

"They can't kill me," Garcia said. "I'm on a mission from god."

"What?" the red shirt asked. He chuckled, raised the gun, took aim, and then pulled the trigger.

The Emergency Life Belt that Garcia still wore around his waist had another function other than sustaining a breathable atmosphere around him. It also tracked and deflected micro meteorites. The oncoming bullet fit the definition of a projectile that would do damage and so the belt clicked on just moments before the object would have penetrated Garcia's forehead. The bullet was deflected. The adrenaline rush of having been shot at, regardless of his previous lack of concern, triggered his fight or flight response. Garcia kicked his chair backwards so that it would fall. Simultaneously with the fall, he sent a psychic burst of energy into the chair which caused it to break, loosening the bonds that had held him to the chair.

Garcia rolled backwards and came up in a flash, kicking the red shirt behind him in the nose as he pushed off the floor with his hands. Once on his feet, he came up swinging with pieces of wood from the chair, scoring a direct hit to another red shirt in the neck. Simultaneously with hitting another red shirt, he threw a piece of the chair with his other hand and hit the red shirt with the gun squarely in the forehead. The man went down like Goliath. Garcia dived, rolled, and came up on the last red shirt and administered a Vulcan nerve pinch. The man fell to the floor without knowing what hit him.

All was quiet, minus the swinging of the light. Garcia brushed himself off, popped his fingers, popped his neck, and quietly departed the premises. Duana looked at Ilona and shrugged. They followed.



Second Lt. Marvin Thomas and Cadet Third Class Afuahamango stepped over the threshold of the Horizon's flex bridge into the Artifact. Their comm. badges ceased to work on the other side. They looked back to Brooke for orders.

"Are your tricorders working?" Brookes asked.

“Minimally,” Thomas said. “We can use them to record our steps so we can find our way back.”

“I would prefer using line,” Afu said.

“Look, just keep your turns to a minimum,” Brooke said. “If you find any signs of life, other than Carter and Newell, you high tale it back here. The guard will open the door every ten minutes. And just so you understand this, we can’t afford to send a rescue teams in after you, so I expect you to come back on your own power.”

Thomas and Afu nodded.

“Good luck,” Burke said, the door closed.

Thomas and Afu witnessed the door disappearing before their eyes, as if they were on a holodeck. That’s how they understood it, at least, but when they reached out to touch the wall, they found themselves surprised that there was no wall. They pushed on past the point where there was absolute certainty that they had passed through the wall.

“Maybe we should go back and wait for the door to open,” Afu said.

Thomas scratched his head. “This doesn’t make any sense.”

“We’re dealing with alien technology,” Afu said. “Maybe it doesn’t make sense to us because we’re human and we think a certain way.”

“Physics is physics,” Thomas said.

“Explain warp technology to a cave man,” Afu said.

“It’s still physics,” Thomas said. “A solid entry point is a solid entry point.”

“Okay, so perhaps we stepped through a transporter beam? Or maybe the doorway is a portal into the center of the hall, like the Iconian Gateway but with only one fixed delivery point,” Afu offered.

“Or maybe you could be quiet and let me think,” Thomas said.

Afu fell silent. This officer was obviously taxed further than his mental capabilities were able to carry him. He had had a rough several days. But then, they all had. Afu was disappointed to discover that even experienced officers were human.

“Alright,” Thomas finally said. “You go that way, and I’ll go this way. Stay in line of sight for now.”

There came the sound of a door opening and closing. They both looked either way, their weapons raised.

“Just an automatic door somewhere,” Thomas said.

“Or maybe ten minutes is up and they opened the door back to the Horizon,” Afu said. “And because we aren’t in the same place, we can’t see it.”

“It hasn’t been ten minutes yet,” Thomas said.

“Maybe it hasn’t been ten minutes here, but maybe ten minutes has passed there,” Afu said.

“Time is time,” Thomas said.

“That’s not true. Time slows the closer you get towards a source of gravity. And, we could be inside a warp bubble, which means time might flow differently here than outside,” Afu said.

“Please, we’re not in a warp bubble,” Thomas said.

“Then explain why it looks as if the corridor stretches into eternity on either side,” Afu said.

“It’s an optical illusion created by the holoemitters,” Thomas said.

“You’re sure we’re in a holodeck?” Afu said.

“It’s the only thing that makes sense,” Thomas said. “Now, you go back about three meters, and wait until the door opens again. I’m going to go that way for a bit, but I’ll stay in line sight.”

“I think we should stay together,” Afu said.

“I think you should do as you’re told. We were told to explore, we’re going to explore,” Thomas said. “Now, you, three meters that way.”

Afu complied. When he turned back around, Thomas was no longer in line of sight. “Oh, bloody hell,” he mumbled. “Lt.?” he called. No answer. He pushed forward, slowly, watching for some sign of a trap. He found none.



Brock sat at the desk they had supplied him, rubbing his forehead. “This is horrible,” he mumbled. They had given him his own secretary and she was sitting on his desk ready to take notes. She leaned forward

and rubbed his ear to help soothe him, as he had instructed her to when he was showing signs of stress. “How can you guys have built such a wonderful industrial complex and not know anything about market forces? You’ve wasted so much resources trying to recreate America. I would understand if someone had become immensely wealthy doing so, but you guys are barely breaking even. Why would they do this?”

“I don’t know, sugar,” she said. “I just take notes and type letters.”

“As it should be,” Brock said. “At least they got that part right. I still think you should take your clothes off. You’d be more comfortable.”

The secretary giggled.

“Alright, I want you to bring me these top ten corporate executives. I need to talk with them,” Brock said.

“Okay, sugar. I’ll get this memo right out,” she said, popping her gum. She uncrossed her legs and swung herself off the desk.

“And tell those other two secretaries to get in here. I want my coffee and my back massage,” Brock said.

“Sure thing, sugar,” the secretary sang compliantly.

“And my dad said a military career would stifle my business creativity,” Brock snickered, excited about the prospect of returning home as a new economic force to be reckoned with.



Garcia got out of the car, thanking the person for the lift. She smiled and waved and then drove off. He walked the remaining distance up to the front gate, where a guard stepped out of a shack to greet him.

“Hello,” Garcia said. “I would like to speak to Gene.”

“Name?” the guard asked.

“Tammias Parkin Arblaster-Garcia,” Garcia said.

“Um, you’re not on the list. You’ll have to leave,” the guard said.

“It’s really important that I speak with him,” Garcia said.

“Sorry, you’re not on the list,” the guard said.

“How do I get on the list?” Garcia asked.

“You’ll have to speak to Gene about that,” the guard said.

“Okay, may I do so now?” Garcia asked.

“No, you’re not on the list,” the guard said.

“Thanks,” Garcia said, and walked away.

Garcia was aware of the guard watching him as he headed back down the street. When the guard returned to the shack, Garcia did a quick jog to the wall. With a little jump, and a foot against the pillar, his hands hit the top of the wall and he vaulted himself over the fence. He just barely cleared the bush on the other side. He also didn’t see the guard returning to the street to look for him.

The Guard at the gate phoned house security. “Hello, is this Michael? Yeah, I think we have a security breach. I can’t verify it, but I think this guy just went over the fence. You want me to go ahead and call the police? Alright, I’ll let you handle it then.”

Back at the house Michael picked up his radio. “Hey, Tim. You copy?”

“Yeah, Mike, what’s up?” the radio echoed.

“Let the dogs out. And then you and Roxanne meet me out front,” Michael said. “We may have an intruder.”

“Alright boss,” Tim said.

Michael looked across his array of security monitors, pausing only when he found the intruder.

“What’s wrong?”

He looked up at the woman speaking to him. “Sorry, Majel. We have an intruder. You and Gene might want to go to the safe room.”

“He’s taking a nap and I don’t intend to disturb him. Can you deal with this?” Majel asked him.

“Of course,” Michael said. “I’ve already released the dogs. Stand by. Tim? He’s in grid five. Stand by. Ma’am, if you’ll wait here. I’m going out.”

Majel nodded and sat down in Michael's chair. She watched the intruder approaching, just as calmly as if he lived amongst them. He saw the dogs but didn't even pause. The dogs ran right up to him, bowed playfully at his feet, and then escorted him back, some following him and some running ahead and then back to make sure he was still following. He didn't even pet them or reach out his hands to them. It was as if they recognized him as their pack leader. They merely accompanied him as easy as he had run with them every day of their lives. Majel shook her head, amazed, and a little peeved at the dogs for not doing their job. But then, she also figured, anyone who could tame her dogs without so much as flinching might deserve to at least be listened to. She got up and headed out front.

Michael stepped forward as Garcia approached, weapon drawn. It was a magnum, from the looks of it, and it was cocked and ready. Tim and Roxanne followed, just a little behind and to the left or right, their weapons raised as well.

"Halt!" Michael yelled.

Garcia stopped. All the dogs stopped right behind him, barring their teeth at the three guards, their rightful owners.

"It's imperative that I speak with Gene," Garcia said.

"Down on the ground, now!" Michael said.

Garcia raised his hands to show that they were empty. "I come in peace, unarmed."

"I will use lethal force if you don't comply," Michael said. "Get on the ground!"

"I think he means it," Duana said.

"I think he looks better as a Klingon," Ilona said.

"What are you talking about?" Duanna asked.

"Don't tell me you don't see it," Ilona protested.

"Would you please be quiet," Garcia said.

To that, the dogs stopped growling. They even sat down. The one to Garcia's right whined a little and pawed at his leg. Garcia scratched the dog behind its ears, and it laid down at his feet, looking mournfully up at him.

"What did you do that with my dogs?" Roxanne demanded.

"Have we met before?" Garcia asked her.

"Please!" Ilona said. "You mean to tell me that you don't see the resemblance between her and Torres?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Garcia said.

"My dogs should have ripped you a part," Roxanne said.

"Stand down," Majel said, coming up from behind.

"Majel, he's dangerous!" Michael said.

"Yeah, the dogs are terrified of him," Majel said, and chuckled a little. "How did you do that, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Her voice sounds familiar," Duana said.

"Hello! She's the voice for the computer!" Ilona snapped.

"Mother?" Deanna Troi resolved out of the background. "Oh my god. This woman is an imposter. For starters, she's completely human. No telepathic abilities at all."

Garcia sighed. "Majel Rodenberry I presume?" Garcia asked, stepping forwards, extending his hand in a human gesture of greetings.

Michael raised his weapon and stepped forwards.

"I said put it down," Majel said, pushing his arm down and stepping forward to greet the stranger.

Garcia took her hand and kissed it lightly, bowing. "It is a great honor to meet you. I am sorry for intruding, but it is paramount that I speak with your husband."

"My husband is taking a nap and I don't wish to wake him," Majel said. "What is this about?"

Garcia considered the best tactic and decided on the truth. "My name is Tammas Parkin Arblaster-Garcia. I am a member of Star Fleet, and a representative of the United Federation of Planets. I have come seeking the aide of your husband to save your planet from imminent destruction."

Michael lifted his gun back. "He's crazy."



“He’s one of them Conqueror groupies,” Tim said.

“I think I believe him,” Roxanne said.

“So do I, and from this point forward, he will be considered our guest until I say other wise, so holster your weapons!” Majel snapped. Her guards complied, but only Roxanne seemed pleased about it. “Would you come inside, please? Roxanne, I know it’s not in your job description, but would you please get a tray of cookies, glasses and some lemonade, and meet us in the study. Come with me, my dear boy. So, tell me about this Star Fleet.”

“Would you find out what he did to my dogs?” Roxanne reminded her.

“Yes, start there,” Majel asked, leading Garcia by the arm.

“I merely showed no fear and ignored them,” Garcia said. “A dog can not attack someone who is calm and assertive.”

“I have heard that, but you know, outside of Ceasr Milan, I don’t think anyone has ever demonstrated that to my satisfaction,” Majel said.

“I’m sorry, Caesar Milan?” Garcia asked.

“You really don’t know him?” Majel asked. “You are a visitor to our planet.”

Majel welcomed him into the house and showed him to the study. It was a nice size library, a desk at one side, and a grand piano at the other. The room had several large plate glass windows and a sliding glass door leading to a patio that allowed large amounts of sunlight to warm the room.

“Make your self comfortable,” Majel said.

“I don’t think Gene would approve,” Michael said, from the door way. He watched every move Garcia made. Tim mirrored him from the other side of the room, scowling at the intruder.

Garcia touched a key on the piano while looking at the sheet music. “Wow. I didn’t realize there were words to this song. Did Gene write them?”

“Yes,” she said.

“A person would have to have a good vocal range for this,” Garcia said, playing a bit of the melody before moving on. “Nice.” He made his way over to a particular shelf of books. One was ‘The Book.’ Gangsters of the 20’s and 30’s. The original piece of cultural contamination from the Horizon was boldly displayed, but Garcia was attracted by the other books on the shelf. There was “the Gospel according to Spock,” and “the Gospel according to McCoy.” “Philosophies?” Garcia asked. Another title, “Over the Horizon, the myth about aliens and the government conspiracy to control the world.” “Interesting,” Garcia said, leafing through it a bit before putting it back. “Kirk and the New World Order,” he read the title out loud and put it back. The next one was “Kirk and the Golden Mean.” The dust cover was extremely catchy. It had a photo of Kirk, Spock and McCoy. Kirk was prominent on the cover, centered and forward, arms crossed over his chest. Spock was smaller, back and to the right, and McCoy was smaller, back and to the left. It was very symbolic of Kirk’s command. He was the center, the golden mean, the balance between Spock’s logic and McCoy passion. Though McCoy and Spock were wearing blue, their counterpoint positions reminded him of his mental companions, Duana and Ilona. His guardian angels, as he had come to regard them. They were not true manifestations of light and dark, with him being a balance, but the metaphor seemed obvious now that he was looking at this photo of the “Trinity” as another book referred to them. The photo of McCoy brought out some sadness. He hadn’t seen or heard from McCoy since he had crossed over into the light. He wondered if McCoy had crossed over and decided to stay.

“Are you okay?” Roxanne asked, offering him a glass of lemonade.

Garcia returned the book and accepted the glass. He smiled, graciously. “Thank you for the drink and your concern. I can’t get over the feeling that I know you from somewhere.”

“You can’t be that dense,” Ilona muttered.

“I think I would have remembered meeting you,” Roxanne said, smiling, not a little flirtatiously.

“Okay, I’m out of here,” Ilona said. “Scotty, beam me up.”

“Good luck, Tam,” Duana said, winking and giving the thumbs up. She and Ilona disappeared into transporter beams. Deanna took one final look at the imposter and turned to exit via a holodeck door.

“You seem a bit distracted,” Roxanne said.

“I am okay, now,” Garcia said. And quickly added, “That you’re here.”

Roxanne blushed and turned her head slightly.

“Am I interrupting something?”

Garcia turned to witness the man he had come to see enter the study. Majel stood and took his hand and kissed him lightly on the cheek. “Did you have a good nap, dear?” Majel asked.

“I did, thank you,” Gene said.

“Honey, I would like to introduce you to our guest,” Majel said. “He claims to be a member of Star Fleet and a representative of the United Federation of Planets.”

Gene had a good laugh at that. “Right. Very good,” Gene said.

“I’m not kidding dear,” Majel said.

“My name is Tammias Parkin Arblaster Garcia,” Garcia introduced himself. “And it is true that I’m from outer space. I believe you might be in a position to help me, but I need to have the answers to a few questions first. If you don’t mind?”

“I find it hard to believe that you’re from outer space,” Gene said.

“Why is that?” Garcia asked. “I would think because of the encounter with the Horizon and the Enterprise, and the television series you created and produced, you would be the person most likely to believe me, and be willing to help. That’s why I came here.”

“Well, for starters, you look human,” Gene said. “What are the odds that the first alien race would be human?”

“Astronomical,” Garcia agreed.

“So, how do you explain your appearance?” Gene asked.

Garcia retrieved a book from the shelf, the title of which explained it all. “Chariots of the gods?” he asked.

“Are you saying that Iotia is a long lost colony of the Federation?” Gene asked. “We’re like the missing thirteenth tribe of a once rag tag fleet making its way through the heavens, fleeing evil terminator type robots of our own creation? That would explain a lot.”

“No, I am not saying that,” Garcia said.

“Perhaps your people came here and genetically altered the primates, changing their evolutionary path, and now you have come back and started breeding with us?” Gene asked.

“You have a fertile imagination,” Garcia said. “The truth is, no one has come up with a suitable explanation for the human presence on this planet. You are human, but there are some minor discrepancies in the genetic information, which suggests a deviation in our evolutionary paths starting approximately one hundred thousand years ago.”

“But that doesn’t make sense,” Gene said. “Our scientists have shown that we share a common genetic history with all the life on this planet. There’s only a two chromosome disparity between us and the chimpanzees, for example. That suggest we evolved on this planet.”

“There is a race known to the Federation as the Preservers,” Garcia said. “It is believed that they transported a sample of all of Earth’s life forms here, bringing sufficient numbers of samples to recreate the Earth’s biosphere on this planet. We have found several other planets that fit this pattern.”

“But why?” Gene asked.

“No one in the Federation knows. We’ve never met a preserver,” Garcia said. “This is speculation on my part, but perhaps the Preservers believe life to be so fragile that it was too risky leaving it to evolve on a single planet.”

“So is the Earth the source of our biological genesis and evolution, or was Earth seeded as well?” Gene asked.

“That’s a great question. It is a question that has been hotly debated ever since Darwin first proposed his theory of evolution,” Garcia said.

“Let’s pretend for a moment that I believe you’re from Starfleet,” Gene said. “What would you want from me? I’m just an ex cop that had an idea for a good pirates in space series. I wanted it to be a wild west, wagon train to the stars, but the studios shot me down.”

“I need your help to save your world from self destruction,” Garcia said.

"Alright, I'm game. Anything to save the world from destruction," Gene said, obviously not convinced.

"Don't be sarcastic, dear. It doesn't become you," Majel said.

"Why did you write the Star Conquerors in a way that made Starfleet out to be adversarial?" Garcia asked.

"Like I was saying, I didn't originally write it that way," Gene said. "Surely you know my history."

"I really don't think he does, honey," Majel said.

Gene walked over to his desk and sat down. He leaned back in his chair and sighed.

"Look, I believe that Kirk's intentions were to put us on a path towards being a more peaceful planet, more accepting of our different races and so forth. I believe there is a future where man kind has eliminated poverty, thrown out religions and politics that are destructive and beat people down, where everyone has access to food, medicine and education, regardless of race, religion, sex, age, or species, where we don't have to kill animals for food, and we're not materialistic or overly patriotic to the point that we would kill an alien or foreigner because they are different," Gene said, obvious passion in his voice.

"Comte," Garcia mumbled.

"What?" Gene said.

"Not what, who," Garcia said. "Comte is the father of sociology. He offered the philosophy of positivism and it basically boils down to an evolution of society in such a way that all needs are eventually met so that humanity can focus on the pursuit of intellectual goals. Altruism is a natural result of this evolution."

"Yeah," Gene agreed. "I'd like to know more of him. I think everyone would. And I think there are more people in this world that believe in this concept than the government talking-heads will admit to, but they keep the masses docile by serving them un-intellectual crap in the media, and distracting and placating them with the promises of goods and services which don't build character, and I also believe they keep the people divided by keeping us focused on race and politics, preying upon our fears of different, or other, using vague references to 'them' and 'they'."

"Conflict theory, perhaps Marxism," Garcia said. "People are separated from the wealth by an expanding market of competition and are kept fairly docile. Religion and television are the opiates of the masses."

Gene stood up. "Yeah," he agreed.

Garcia had no further questions or comments, for he was certain he and Gene were on the same page. "So, what happened to your show?" Garcia asked.

"The corporation took it over," Gene said. "I wrote a pilot, pitching a kind of space opera, and they shot it down saying it was too cerebral, that nobody would watch it. So I wrote another, showing them what humans could do if they worked together. They shot it down. But they kept the characters, based on the Kirk myth, and ran this show about space pirates from hell. It lasted three seasons, and that was with me fighting every inch of the way to throw some thought provoking stuff in every episode I could. They finally fired me and are making all the money off my show in syndication, which, I would like to point out, is still the most popular show ever written and produced."

"What would you say if I told you I agree with your philosophy and the way the future could be and I would like to get that message out there by bringing back Star Conquerors," Garcia said.

"Oh, it'll never happen," Gene said.

"What if I can make it happen? What if we did a show, say, a hundred years after Kirk, and we show how the world had changed and for the better. We'll call it the New Conquerors."

"I'm telling you, they won't let you get that message out," Gene said. "I've tried."

"Gene, I'm on a mission. I want to bring the original crew back together and do a two to three hour movie that neatly explains all of the Conqueror episodes and brings it back in line with your original vision," Garcia said.

"Even if you got the rights to produce the show, you could never get all the actors back together," Gene said.

"Will you work with me if I make that happen?" Garcia asked.

“Why do you care so much?” Gene asked.

“You had a vision and you reached out and touched the hearts of the people. The underlying message of your series is still out there, easily assessable in the minds of your fans, and I believe we can tap into that and change the world,” Garcia said.

“So Bill can take credit for that, too?” Gene asked, making a reference to a documentary on the cable history channel that Garcia wasn’t familiar with.

“Let him,” Garcia said. “I don’t think you have to worry about that. It was your vision that pulled all of this together. The people you chose had an influence, no doubt, but it was you who brought them together to breathe life into your ideas. But even if Bill wants all the credit, it’s okay as long as the objective of raising the awareness of humanity is met. You created the vehicle and Bill flew it home. Let’s run with that. As for the studio, we can give them what they want. We’ll even show them how dark the world can get, using reverse-psychology on them, and then bring out your vision in full force. They want pirates and evil and conquerors, we’ll make it so bad that even they will be scared.”

“That might work,” Gene said, sitting on his desk.

“And while we’re doing that, we’ll rework some of your original episodes, make them the way you wanted to do them, and release them as the ‘lost episodes’ and make them available on DVD or by internet. Even if we have to do the whole project underground, knowing that your message is that good I believe we will get it out there.”

“I don’t have the kind of funding to do this,” Gene said.

“I’ll take care of that,” Garcia said. “All I need to know is that you will endorse what I do, participate, and work with me. I’ll run everything through you and you can approve it or not. You know this world better than I do, so you can have final say.”

“What do you get out of this?” Gene said.

“All of my needs are taken care of,” Garcia said. “All revenue generated by our project will go into sustaining the project. All profits above and beyond our operating costs can be distributed as you see fit, whether it’s charity or your own bank account. I don’t care. I’m not here to make a profit. I am here to change the world.”

Gene stood up, took a step forward, nearer to Garcia, and stared him in the eyes. “You’re serious, aren’t you?”

Garcia stepped forward. “I’m very serious.”

“If you are Star Fleet, why the Long Silence?” Gene asked.

“Ever since Kirk, politicians and committees have been arguing on how to resolve the issues posed by the Horizon incident. It is our fundamental belief that societies should be allowed to wither or prosper on their own merit without intervention. Your society was a peaceful place before the Horizon. The Book, as your people refer to it, altered your history so drastically, due to a severe misunderstanding of the content and context in which it is to be read, that we had no idea on how to fix it. Kirk’s solution was the best he could come up with at the spur of the moment, but ultimately it has left you in the exact same position that the Horizon incident left you: a society based on extreme competition for resources. There is still time to reverse this trend. There is still hope. I believe that your people, the masses that you mentioned, are ready for a change based on your original vision for Kirk. The audience is tired of all the macho games that get people hurt and killed, that increases the disparity between the wealthy and the poor, and will eventually reduce all people to poor as the only means of increasing profit is to lower wages. It’s not about greed, it’s just the way the system works, but more than that, you are on the verge of a technological change that will either see your people more prosperous than ever before, or totally destroy you. It is my job to make sure the latter doesn’t happen.”

“Will you stay for supper?” Gene asked, putting out his hand to shake on a deal.

“It would be my pleasure, Mr. Roddenberry,” Garcia said, accepting Gene’s hand.

“I have one condition if you are successful in getting the New Conquerors on the air,” Gene said.

“And what’s that?” Garcia asked.

“There is this producer at the corporation, by the name of Rick Berman,” Gene said. “He’s always wanting to blow things up. Don’t let him blow up my Enterprise!”

Garcia laughed. "I will keep that in mind."



"What would you have us do?" Gates asked. "Buy out the other companies and set up a monopoly of one product?"

"No!" Brock said. "You aren't listening to me. Of course, you buy up all the other companies, but you leave the other products and logos and services out there so that you give the illusion that people still have choices. Take the soap industry. There's only four soap manufactures in the world, but there are thousands of soap products on the shelf. Make it one manufacturer and ten thousand products. Even if you only change the color of the product or the shape of the container that it comes in, just as long as you make people think they have a choice, people will buy. It keeps them so distracted just trying to keep up with the Joneses, they don't see that you're consolidating everything."

"What about Winter Solstice?" one of the other CEO's asked. "Should we eliminate that?"

"Are you kidding? It's the best marketing ploy I have ever seen. You should have it twice a year!" Brock insisted.

Everyone jotted down more notes.

Another CEO coughed, raising his hands, "But if Gates buys up all the other company's, what happens to us?"

"That's life in a free market. You sink or swim," Brock said. "Look, you buy, sell or get the hell out of the way! You, there, in the cell phone markets. What you should do is give some phones away free to get some customers, you'll make it all back in service fees. Then, offer them insurance for their phones, and apply the insurance profits towards improving the phone technology."

"But what if their phone breaks?" the CEO asked.

"Your insurance policy should read something to the effect that it will replace that particular phone... but by the time that phone breaks or is lost, you've already come out with the new styles of phones, and for the customer to upgrade, he pays a small service fee, and then start a new insurance policy on his new phone," Brock explained.

"But don't you think all of this materialistic endeavors is a waste of resources?" one of the CEO asked.

"Kill him," Brock said. "No, I take that back. Just throw him out. He doesn't get it. More is good, all is better! We're not here to question or pass judgment on people's morals or lack of morals, or more specifically, lack of discipline. We're here to exploit them. If they want a new car, we give it to them. If they want a new cell phone we give it to them. But the way to keep them coming is to charge them service fees and maintenance fees. Build them a new computer and give it to them for free, but then charge them for using the programs, and make new and better programs and have them buy the upgrades, make new games that can't play on their old systems so they have to buy a new one. Charge them to play games over the internet. That market hasn't even begun to see its full potential here yet. Make them portable music devices and charge them to download songs."

"Wait, that will put the music industry out of business!" another CEO objected.

"Who cares? If they can't keep up with modern times, they deserve to die," Brock said.

"There will be legal battles in that arena," said another.

"Just make sure our lawyers collect all the fees. Hell, there's only one judicial branch, right? It all comes back to us anyway," Brock said. "Remember, a deal is a deal, but a contract is a contract. I'm giving you pearls here, gentlemen, pay attention."

"Giving us pearls?" Gates asked. "Free advice is seldom cheap."

Brock hugged the man. "That's why you're my favorite student," Brock said, wiping a tear from his eyes. "You guys would be wise to listen to this man."

In the back of the room, the General watched the meeting of the country's top executives. Jay tapped him on the shoulder and together they stepped out into the hall for a private chat. "What's the word?"

"They think they can build it," Jay said.

"Really. How long?" General Hammon asked.

"About a month," Jay said.

“That’s wonderful. Let’s keep hush hush until we see it working,” General Hammon said. “No need to raise the hopes of our people only to find out it has some bugs to work out.”

“Agreed,” Jay said. “What shall we do with the Star Fleet prisoners?”

“Keep them on ice for now,” the General said. “We might still have an opportunity to negotiate with Star Fleet for technology.”

“Agreed,” Jay said. He saluted and headed off. “Should I continue to put pressure on some of them to see what we might learn?”

“Just between you and me?” General Hammon said. “Yes.”



Brittany entered the Oval Office at the White House. Her program observed things from many different levels and she was taking it all in, looking for alarms and hidden security features. Her tactical program quickly ascertained all threats, identifying the weapons and the guards and the office security cameras, while at the same time the Brittany personality matrix was amazed by how detailed the Iotians were in recreating the White House from nothing but pictures that they had gleaned from the Horizon’s books, and perhaps from some of the movies they had somehow come across. If she hadn’t known any better, she would have believed she was still on Earth and in her own time. Another bit of information slipped through and she could see that the Oval Office had energy conduits running through the walls to help shield against transporter use. Apparently the Iotians didn’t want Star Fleet using transporters to abduct their president, or beam an Away Team in. That might cause a snag in one of her mission objectives. She would have to let Garcia know.

Before long, the Presidential staff left the President alone, and Brittany observed the man as he settled in to read a newspaper and drink some coffee. She made a call to Garcia and a moment later he answered. She felt the subtle shift of control as Garcia took control of the situation, control of her, which she compared to the gentle caress of the sun on a cool day. She went with it, reveling in the immersion of his spirit with hers. With a brilliant display of lights to resemble a transporter wave, Garcia made Brittany visible to the president. Though it was her body that the President saw, and her voice that the President heard, technically, it was Garcia who was speaking with the President. It was as if she were watching the whole scene from outside her body.

Brittany/Garcia was dressed in an outdated Star Fleet uniform. “Hello, Mr. President,” she said.

“What? Uh! How did you get in here?” he stammered.

“Do you really think your shielding could prevent our transporters from working?” she asked.

He secretly reached for an alarm, but she caught it and raised her weapon. “I wouldn’t do that if I were you. I want you to scoot back away from the desk and put your hands in your lap where I can see them,” Brittany said, walking closer to him.

“What are you going to do to me?” the President asked.

“Not what you would like, I’m sure, President Clinton,” she said.

“Who?” he asked.

“Just a small joke. Forget it. You and I need to negotiate,” Brittany said, sitting on his desk. She crossed her legs.

“Negotiate?” he repeated, swallowing.

“I want you to release the Star Fleet officers you are holding prisoner,” Brittany said.

“What prisoners?” he asked, playing innocent.

She put a boot in his crotch. He groaned. “Do I have your attention?” He nodded, so she continued, “You’re holding some of my people hostage. The first thing I want to know is that they’re being treated well.”

“A few of them died during transport, and a few have died due to the injuries they received during our boarding operation,” the President said. “We have a hundred and seven in custody.”

“If any more die, you and I are going to have another talk,” Brittany said, putting pressure into his groin. “You understand me?”

He nodded, swallowing.

“Relax. If I wanted you dead, you would be dead already,” Brittany said. “I will be back to negotiate their safe release. Make sure they stay in good health.”

And with that, she disappeared. Technically, she was still present in the office, floating back up to the ceiling in stealth mode so she could observe. A man entered the office to bring the President a cup of coffee.

“Are you okay, Mr. President?” he asked.

“Get General Hammon on the phone, now!” the President snapped. “And I want guards in here, immediately.”

It went exactly as Garcia had predicted. The Brittany personality felt a twinge of love and admiration for the man, with the feelings and the exact time and location being recorded by the HROV’s subroutine program. She also recorded the phone number and completed a GPS trace.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

There was a lot of good conversation and laughter over dinner and some not so secret glances exchanged between Roxanne and Garcia. After dinner they retired to the living room where Majel turned on the television. Wanting to watch her show and listen to her husband's conversation, she kept the volume of the TV low. Garcia was explaining about his ship, the Philadelphia Freedom, and how he came to be on the planet's surface. He had listened to some ideas Gene had had for his original show that hadn't panned out and the hopes for revisiting them. They talked non stop like long lost friends. Gene was a very welcoming, generous soul, and was very attentive to Garcia's needs. Majel was sincere and gracious host, as well. Garcia felt as if he had come home. His ideas about Gene having access to a parallel universe didn't pan out as he had hoped, leaving his investigation into how this planet turned onto its weird tangent wide open.

One of the interesting things they discussed was the Star Conqueror cults. They were clubs of people who had adopted certain philosophical points of interest, usually carrying them to extreme. They were named for the colors of their shirts. The Red Shirts were a Para militaristic organization, pretty much devoted to gang warfare. The blue shirts were devoted to logic and reason and the elimination of all human emotion. The Gold Shirts were more eccentric and esoteric, with members divided into three camps, which were lightly considered to be leaders, mavericks, or opportunists. Each took their roles quite seriously.

"So, do you know where your friends are staying?" Gene asked, sipping sun tea.

"No," Garcia said. "That's my next priority, to find them."

Though the television was low, Garcia immediately recognized the voice that began to sing out. "Rescue me, take me in your arms, rescue me, I want your tender charms..." came from the television.

"This is Iotian Idol," Majel said, noting Garcia's sudden interest. "They're showing the bands that are currently auditioning to be on the show. I'm hoping this one makes it."

Garcia looked from the TV to Majel then back to the TV. He stood and approached it. His friends were on television. At the conclusion of the song, an announcer introduced them again. "And that is our new band that has just passed preliminaries. If you like Star Fleet, and think they have a shot at the title, you can cast your vote now by calling..."

Garcia stifled a laugh by cupping his mouth with his hands. His free hand touched the image on the television. His friends were alive and well and on television. "I need to go there. Can you help me?"

"You want to go there?" Majel asked.

"Those are my friends!" Garcia said.

"I can drive you there," Roxanne volunteered. "I could have you there in two days tops."

"Oh, that would be wonderful," he said, taking her hand and shaking it enthusiastically.

"You could spend the night," Majel offered. "Get a fresh start in the morning."

"Your offer is tremendously kind," Garcia said. "But if its okay with Roxanne, the sooner I can get there, the more at ease I will be about my friends and their safety."

"It's okay. Let me get a few things," Roxanne said, excusing herself.

"I'm sorry, I do have to leave," Garcia told Gene. "This is important. But, I'm already formulating a plan for how I am going to make all of this happen. And I will be in contact with you." He went for a pad of paper and picked up the nearby pen. "You can reach me at this frequency..."

"Frequency?" Majel asked.

Garcia thought about it. "My cell phone number?"

"Why is it, Majel, that all the guests that we really like tend not to stay long and all the guests we would rather hurry their departure stay too long?" Gene asked Majel.

"I don't know," Majel said.

Majel and Gene both gave Garcia a hug, something he hadn't expected. "You come back and stay with us, okay?" Majel said.

"I will," Garcia said. "And thank you so much for everything."

"You ready?" Roxanne asked, having just thrown the essentials in a bag.

"Yes, thank you," Garcia said, and thanked Gene and Majel again. He just couldn't seem to part without shaking their hands one last time.



Everyone went out to the car which was in the front drive. Roxanne whistled once and Sparky, the German Shepard, appeared and leaped into the back seat as soon as she opened the door.

"You sure you don't want me to accompany you?" Tim asked her.

"No, we'll be fine," Roxanne said, giving Tim a look that suggested he should back off.

Garcia settled down into the passenger seat and before Roxanne turned off onto the main road, he had fallen asleep, his head against the passenger window. Roxanne turned the radio down to let him sleep.



Lt. Marvin Thomas had not expected the floor to open underneath him. He slid down a ramp and landed quite neatly on the floor. The ramp had such an incline that he would not be going back up the ramp, and yelling had failed to get Afu's attention. He turned to one of the four doors that he had to choose from. He placed his hand into the groove and opened a door. The room was empty but there was another on the far side. He made his way towards that, not caring that the door closed behind him.

Afu found the down ramp the same way Lt. Thomas had. After contemplating his situation, he too chose a door, but where Thomas had gone right, he had gone left. The room he chose was not empty. Suspended in air, and lined up in columns and rows, were a number of animals which he recognized from Earth. Old Earth. Many of the animals were now extinct. He recognized a Dodo bird and a saber tooth tiger.

Mixed in amongst the animals was a human being, a female. He paused and then moved to verify he had indeed seen a human being.

Afu stepped inside the room and the door closed behind him. He didn't care at the moment, as he was preoccupied with the human. His scans didn't register a life, but it also didn't tell him that she was dead. He moved towards her, careful not to bump into any of the creatures. He could see an aura around each of the animals now that his eyes had adjusted to the dimly lit room. Out of curiosity, he touched the woman with the point of his rifle.

The light encapsulating her vanished with a "pop" and she fell to her feet. Her eyes grew wide and she screamed. As she did this, she also backed up into a fox. The fox fell, and no sooner than it hit the floor it took off running, brushing up against a "Spotted" owl, which took flight touching the saber tooth tiger. It was all chaos after that. Afu fired at one of the animals as it lunged for the woman, who was about to run away except the sight of the mammoth had caused her to freeze.

Afu grabbed the woman by the arm and hurried her towards the far wall, away from the saber tooth tiger which was fighting with a large reptile that Afu didn't recognize. It was almost impossible to hear anything amidst the noise of the animals crying and screeching, and the room was beginning to smell of urine and feces being passed out of fear or as a deterrent to being eaten. Afu found a door, opened it and pulled the girl through with him, firing at any animals that tried to follow. The door closed, shutting out the chaos.

"Are you hurt?" Afu asked her.

She only cried and tried to shut down, wanting to fall to the floor. Afu didn't allow her to fall. He needed her to be able to function. He held her up, slinging his weapon and then drew her to him into what he hoped she would perceive as a simple hug of reassurance. He patted her back and tried to soothe her with a calm voice. After a moment, she did calm, and he looked at her, wiping her tears with his thumbs.

"Are you okay?" Afu asked again.

She nodded.

"Who are you?" Afu asked.

"I am Erika," she said, meekly. "Forgive me, master. I will obey you."

"Whoa, what do you mean, master?" Afu asked.

"I was thrown into the volcano to serve you, master, so that you might spare my village," Erika said.

"Oh, dear, god," Afu said. "Are you telling me you were sacrificed to a volcano god?"

"I was the most beautiful of my people and chosen to serve you," Erika answered. "I am sorry if you find me unattractive."

"You are attractive," Afu assured her, wondering why a tribe would throw their most beautiful citizen into the Volcano. To keep men from fighting over her and causing social rifts would be Garcia's sociological explanation, no doubt. "But you need to know, I am not a god."

"But I saw you throw lightning at your pets," Erika told her.

Afu sighed. "Stay close to me. I'll explain everything later. Or try to," Afu said.

Elika stepped into Afu, trying to do as he bid her. He sighed, put some distance between them, but then took her hand and led her to a door. There were four to choose from and one led back to the animals. He felt bad about the animal's situation, but there was little he could do about it now. The door directly across from the animal chamber led to a brightly lit room. It was lit with what appeared to be daylight streaming in from a glass window. Only it wasn't a glass window. Afu led her around the arch and determined that the day light view was only on one side. He returned to the other side, letting her hand go to retrieve his tricorder.

"It is very beautiful," Elika said. "May I pick a flower?"

She stepped towards the opening but before he could pull her back she had crossed over. He immediately followed her, completely on instinct, grabbed her hand, turned around to take them back, but the arch was gone. He rolled his eyes heavenward and whimpered.



The Princess led Garcia and his team into the portal chamber. She went straight to the controls and caused the scene in the arch to change. It went from a green country side to a familiar setting of Earth, a beach in San Francisco.

"Is this an Iconian Gateway?" Garcia marveled at the technology, not the fact that he recognized the beach. It was the very spot he and Trini had first met Rivan.

"We had it before the Iconians. In fact, they stole this technology from the gods," the Princess said. "It is one of the reasons why they are extinct. We can escape through here once we acquire the McCoy piece."

"Alright, which room?" Garcia asked.

The Princess opened a door, entered a hall, and made her way through several rooms, down another hall, and into a room with three doors. The first door opened up to reveal a room full of dead presidents. Only they weren't dead; they were merely suspended in stasis. Fifty American Presidents hovered in the air.

"This way," the Princess said. "The McCoy pieces are back this way."

Garcia paused trying to comprehend the magnitude of what he was seeing. His theories explaining all the worlds with parallel social evolutions was confirmed. Omega Four had the US Constitution because the founding fathers had been there, or at least, copies of them had been, psychologically altered sufficient to fit the unique circumstances of that world's environment. His paradigm was suddenly shaken to its core foundation. Was Earth the origin of humanity, or was Earth just another experiment. Maybe Earth's years in isolation, so far removed from other planetary civilizations, was purposeful. A quarantine, or better, a control group! The entire Earth history could be a control group allowing a group of time traveling aliens to pluck individuals as they saw fit for closer examination, or to conduct experiments elsewhere.

"We can't leave these people here," Duana said. "We have to rescue them."

"We can't rescue them! Imagine the chaos that will ensure when you wake them up and try to get them to follow you back through a portal!" Ilona said.

"She's right about that, Garcia. They will be confused and possibly a danger to themselves. If we rescue them, we have to do it one at a time," Deanna said.

"You can not take them" the Princess said. "They belong to the gods. Rescuing them was not part of our agreement."

"We can't just leave them here!" Duana protested.

Garcia made a decision. "We're going to rescue McCoy. We'll figure the rest of this out later."

Ilona seemed pleased that Garcia had sided with her. She let Duana know it with a smug glance. They entered the next room and found a second shock. There wasn't just one McCoy. There were dozens of McCoy, lined up and ranked according to age, starting from an infant and linear through to the last McCoy, the one Garcia had watched die.

"Would the real McCoy please stand up?" Duana asked.

Garcia looked at her crossly and then turned to the Princess. "Explain this."

"All are McCoy. These are copies made of the original as it passed through the timeline. The god collecting these pieces believed each of these moments brought with it a special revelation that might be useful if seeded onto another world of his making, as well as bargaining power for future trades. Their memories will be conditioned for whatever situation the god selects and then the piece will be released into the

playing field. The gods analyse and record the results. The Presidents of the United States have been very popular pieces. So was the Mark Twain piece. They have many copies of him,” the Princess explained. “All of the McCoy pieces were captured during transport. His aversion to being transported increased his value as a collector’s piece.”

“We can’t rescue all of them for the same reason we can’t rescue all of the Presidents,” Deanna said, knowing the look on his face.

“But I can’t just leave him here! All of him?!” Garcia said.

“Tam,” Duana said, gently touching his arm. “As much as I hate to agree with Ilona on this, there is only one McCoy here that you have come to rescue. The one that knows you. Him.”

“But they’re all him!” Garcia said.

“Yes, but there is only one him that is all of them, and that’s him,” Deanna said. “He is all of those other selves, rolled up into one. Why don’t we wake him and ask him what he would have us do.”

“That sensible,” Ilona said.

Garcia went to the last of the McCoys and interrupted the stasis field. McCoy landed on his feet and fell forwards into Garcia’s arms. “No more mind melds,” McCoy pleaded.

“I need a wheel chair!” Garcia said.

“Right, I’ll just pull one out of my ass,” Ilona said.

He stared at her. “You’re holograms. One of you can become a wheel chair!”

“Well, don’t look at me,” Ilona said.

“I’ll do it,” Deanna said.

Deanna coalesced into lights and solidified into a wheel chair. Garcia put McCoy into the chair and knelt down in front of him.

“Papa? Can you hear me?” Garcia asked.

“I’m very tired,” McCoy said.

“We really should be leaving, now,” the Princes said, heading towards a door.

“But we came through that way,” Duana pointed.

“We must exit this way,” the Princess said, hurrying her little drones along.

Garcia followed the Princess into the next room, the wheelchair following him followed by his two side kicks. Garcia froze, bringing his weapon to bear on the Borg in his way.

“They’re in stasis,” Duana said. “Let’s move on.”

“Are you kidding? Kill them now,” Ilona said.

“We must hurry,” the Princess said.

As they hurried into the next room, the drones yelled, fell back, and turned to protect their eggs. The Princess froze. Garcia pushed past her, stepping between her and the man preparing to harm her. Garcia raised his weapon and aimed it at the human who was dressed in slacks and a tie, holding what appeared to be a ball point pen.

“Out of the way,” the man told him.

“Put down your weapon,” Garcia said.

“He is going to kill us!” the Princess said.

“Put down your weapon, now!” Garcia repeated.

“Hey, Gary, I think that’s the Horizon’s crew next door?” Carter said coming into the room. “Tam?”

“I’m going to tell you one last time to put down your weapon or I will open fire,” Garcia said.

“Tam, he’s on our side,” Carter said. “Gary, please, he’s one of us.”

“He’s protecting the Omegans, that makes him one of them,” Gary said.

“Put down your weapon, Gary,” McCoy said.

“Doctor McCoy?” Gary and Carter said simultaneously.

Roberta entered. “Hey, I think I just saw another Star Fleet Officer going the other way back there,” she said. “Oh, um, sorry to interrupt. I’ll just ease on back out of here.”

“Nobody moves!” Garcia said. “What’s it going to be, Gary?”

Gary noted the other two weapons pointed right at him and knew he wouldn’t win a fire fight. Garcia nodded and Duana slipped by him and took the weapon from Gary.

“Okay, now, you, Gary, sit there. Everyone else in this room, now,” Garcia said. “I want to know what’s going on. Carter, we’ll start with you.”



After thanking Roxanne profusely for everything, Garcia made his way to the hotel where his friends were staying. The hotel didn’t allow him to enter, so he went around back and made his way into the hotel, first through the laundry depository, and then via the kitchen. He made himself at home by grabbing a jacket and a tray as he exited into the main dining area. As luck would have it, his people were eating breakfast, so, after delivering the meals he was carrying, he went over to his clan and asked them, “Are they serving you well?”

Nikita screamed, leaping up from her chair so fast it flipped it over. She hugged him tight and sobbed openly into his chest. Kletsova and Trini latched onto him, too, both laughing and crying. Lenar stood there, smiling from ear to ear. Hotel staff came up to inquire into the nature of the ruckus and they were assured everything was fine. Lenar stole a chair from a nearby table and added it to their table so that Garcia could have breakfast with them. Nikita pulled her chair closer, not wanting to let him go. The first story they wanted, which Lenar expressed well enough, was “How the hell did you make it off the Freedom?” Garcia obliged them by telling them the story as he was helping himself to pancakes from Niki’s plate.

“Without a suit?!” Trini asked, dubiously.

“You’ve got to be the bravest man I have ever met,” Lenar said.

“Oh, there was no bravery there. That was pure survival mode,” Garcia said. Reaching for a piece of cheese. He removed the red cellophane and tossed the cheese in his mouth. His face displayed his displeasure at the taste.

“You’re suppose to take the wax off it first, silly,” Niki said, laughing.

“Wax?” Garcia asked.

Niki demonstrated by removing the cellophane from the piece of cheese and then removing the red wax by pulling the tab. The yellow cheese was on the inside.

“Why would they wrap it twice?” Garcia asked.

“They do a lot of bizarre things,” Kletsova said. “We thought we would go to grocery store next door to get a few simple food items with the allowance they gave us. We were so overwhelmed with all the options to choose from we ended up not buying anything!”

“Do you know they actually have a gang of Red Shirts that control the streets in this city?” Trini asked.

“I’ve met them,” Garcia said.

“So, what’s the plan, boss?” Lenar asked him.

“We’re going to win your contest,” Garcia said. “And change the world. I’m on a mission from god.” His friends stared at him, dumbfounded. Nikita laughed. “That’s from that movie, right?”

“Uh?” Garcia asked. “Oh, yeah, I guess so.”

“Oh. Movie reference, should have known,” Trini said. “Oh, Tam. It is so good to see you alive.” And she started crying again.

“That was a very nice arrangement of ‘Destination Unknown,’ Niki,” Garcia said. “I think that’s what got you onto the show.”

“I thought it best to try and stay with something 80’s, since that seems to be the most popular here with the people my age,” Niki said. “You really liked it?”

“Are you going to eat that?!” he asked Kletsova, and then helped himself to her toast. “You think they have peanut butter on this planet?”



“Princess, can you get us back to the Horizon?” Garcia asked.

“Yes,” she said. “But I think it would be better to use the portal.”

“I’m not going through the portal,” Carter said. “I’m going back to save my daughter.”

“I agree,” Garcia said. “Our number one priority is to our crew. I am a Doctor and they will probably need me and McCoy.”

“I haven’t logged any medical hours in years,” McCoy argued.

“I am sure you can advise us on the Horizon’s medical technology,” Garcia said.

“Just how old do you think I am?” McCoy snapped.

“Look, we’re not going anywhere until I destroy this hive,” Gary said.

“I’m not going to let you destroy this hive,” Garcia said. “There are people in here. We’re going to rescue them.”

“These people are just copies of people. Their absence will not affect the time line in the least,” Gary argued.

“I am a copy!” Garcia said. “McCoy’s a copy. For all we know, you’re a copy.”

“Wouldn’t you like to be a copy to,” Duana sang, picking a popular jingle from her head.

Garcia cowed her into silence with a look. “Should I care any less for your agenda just because you might be a copy? Very well, then, since you agree with me on that part, then you have to agree as long as there are humans here, copies or not, we are obligated to rescue them,” Garcia said.

“If we don’t get out of here soon, the gods will discover us and none of us will be leaving,” the Princess said.

“I know none of you want to hear from me, but I think we might need to split up,” Roberta said.

“Maybe McCoy could escort the princess and her drones back to Earth through the portal, Carter and Garcia can go back to the Horizon, and Gary and I can finish our mission objectives here.”

“Again, I can not allow Gary to complete his objectives as long as there are human beings here that can be rescued,” Garcia said.

“We’re wasting time,” Ilona said.

“I agree. If I assist you in rescuing these people, will you assist me in destroying this hive?” Gary asked.

“I don’t think its right to destroy the hive,” Garcia said.

“Garcia,” the Princess said. “This hive was doomed the moment the queen chose to help you. The gods will surely destroy her. Or worse.”

“We don’t have time for a philosophical dilemma, Tam,” Ilona said. “We got to act. And I vote for blowing this place up. That leaves one less place for these gods to attack us from.”

“The hive isn’t the enemy, Gary,” Garcia said. “And they’re not gods. Can’t you see that?”

Isis meowed and Gary nodded. “Yes, Isis. I know he’s right, but that doesn’t change our orders,” Gary said.

“When you’re in the battle field, you sometimes have to make decisions contrary to your orders,” Garcia said. “We’ve learned something about this enemy. For starters, they aren’t the enemy, but a tool of the enemy.”

“I will help you rescue these people, no strings attached,” Gary said. “Roberta, I want you to go to Earth with McCoy.”

“But,” she began, but he stopped her.

“Alright, let’s move,” Garcia said.

The Princess led them back to the portal. Roberta and the princess helped McCoy to walk up the steps to the arch. The wheel chair became Deanna once more. Garcia withdrew his communicator from his pocket and gave it to McCoy. Before McCoy stepped through, Roberta’s arm in his, Garcia gave him a hug.

“I love you, Dad,” Garcia said.

“I love you, Tam,” McCoy said.

“Don’t forget to send back the Calvary,” Carter said.



Scientists were scurrying around the Oval Office taking reading when General Hammon entered. The President walked right over to them

“You assured me no one could beam in,” the President said.

“No one should have been able to beam in, Mr. President,” the General assured him. “Now, they could have had advancements in technology, or they may have found a weakness in our anti transporter technology. I’ll have my men on it.”

“And how do you propose to keep me safe in the meantime?” the President asked.

“Well, Mr. President, technically speaking, if they wanted to kill us, they could,” General Hammon said. “And there wouldn’t be anything we could do to stop them. Hell, all they have to do is sit back and fling asteroids at us from a safe distance. And if they have another ship in orbit, it would have to be cloaked, and if they have that ability, we wouldn’t have seen the other two ships coming at us. My best guess is that they don’t have a mother ship, but have one of their shuttles in orbit. That would be much easier to hide. And without the mother ship, it has no where to go. I doubt it’s any real threat.”

“I want you to secure those hostages. Treat them well, of course. But I don’t want them found, you understand?” the President asked.

“I understand,” General Hammon said. “Can I be of any further assistance to you?”

“Dismissed,” the President said.

The General excused himself. Unbeknownst to him, he was followed by an HROV. It even rode in the car with him, learning a great deal about Generals and secretaries in the process.



“Sharlow, someone’s hailing us!” Burke said.

Sharlow came out from under the console where she was working on one of the components. “Really? Star Fleet?!”

“I can’t make it out,” Burke said, trying to adjust the gain on the signal. “Hang on.”

“This is DaiMon Tolro,” came the voice. “You will withdraw from the artifact.”

“DaiMon Tolro, this is Lt. Commander Sharlow,” Sharlow said. “We are in need of your assistance. Can you call Star Fleet for us and request a rescue?”

“I am willing to consider your request, after you surrender the artifact,” DaiMon Tolro said.

“What artifact?” Sharlow asked.

“Wrong answer,” DaiMon Tolro said. “Engage tractor beam, and pull that old junk out of there.”

“No wait!” Sharlow screamed.

The ship lurched beneath their feet, and she stumbled grabbing for anything to hold onto. A piece of the comet was dislodged and the string of life pods detached from the ship. The shuttle drifted away. Several of the men in spacesuits were set a drift. Two died when the sheets of ice fell and breached their suits. The Horizon was suddenly free of the comet for the first time in over two hundred years.

“Depressurization in the shuttle bay,” Burke announced. “And in Engineering.”

“Damn it!” Sharlow yelled. “Tolro! You have just killed members of my crew.”

“The next time I ask you to move, perhaps you’ll comply,” Tolro said. “This discovery is way too important to leave in the hands of the Federation, where it will be lost in years of secret research or put in storage, when I could sell it on the market and see returns immediately.”

“As far as we know, there is nothing over there, but some of my people,” Sharlow said.

“If I find any of your people, I will consider rescuing them, for a small fee,” Tolro said. “This is one artifact that Star Fleet will not box up and claim they’re studying it when all they’re doing is keeping it out of the hands of their enemy.”

“Cut him off,” Sharlow demanded. “I want to know how many he killed, and assess the damage. Tearing us from the ice like that couldn’t have been good. And we had people out there in suits. See if you can get the shuttle on remote to pick them up. If not, they’re as good as dead.”

“Maybe we can find a working torpedo,” Burke said.

“Let’s start with saving our own, assessing the damage, and if we have time, start building our defenses,” Sharlow said. “Because I bet you anything, he’s going to want to search this ship for any items he thinks we might have already recovered.”



“I can’t believe they’re letting you perform with us,” Lenar said, examining himself in the mirror. He didn’t like wearing the red shirt. Garcia was wearing gold, and one gold was enough. “I thought you would have to sit this one out.”

“I guess they liked my version of Sail Away, by Styxx,” Garcia said.

“Yeah, and I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that,” Lenar said. “The lyrics to that song suggest that aliens are synonymous with angels. I hope that you’re not trying to suggest that we as aliens are here for

some divine intervention, because if you are, I am compelled to protest. The people are confused enough without us suggesting the Federation is run by deities.”

Garcia was about to respond, but thought better of it and turned to the makeup artist. “Are you sure this isn’t too much makeup?”

“I know my job, sugar,” she said. “You just do the singing and trust me to make you look good.”

There was a knock at the door and the girls entered before anyone answered. Niki ran right up to Garcia and hugged him. “Tam, there is a live audience out there.”

Garcia looked at her. “So?” he asked.

“How can you be so heartless?” Kletsova asked.

“Heartless? What do you think performing live on camera means? There is probably going to be several million people watching us,” Garcia said.

“Actually, we’ve been drawing sixty million per episode,” the makeup artist said. “World wide, three hundred million.”

“And this is supposed to calm Niki down how?” Kletsova asked.

“I don’t think I can do this, Tam,” Niki looked up into his eyes. “Before it was just taped on a stage, but now...”

“Hey,” Garcia said, touching her chin. “You are a member of Star Fleet, and you will perform to the best of your abilities, drawing on the training you’ve undertaken. I am your commanding officer and I will not allow you to enter a situation where I know you can’t succeed.”

The door opened. “You guys are on next,” he said. “Let’s go.”

“Niki, just stay with me,” Garcia said, touching his forehead to hers. “We’re of one mind, one heart. Group hug, everyone.”

Niki was the focus of the hug, but it was good for everyone. They went out towards the curtains, where they waited to be ushered on. Meanwhile, the judges were still critiquing the last performers. One of them was extremely harsh.

“Tam?” Niki said, squeezing his hand. “Is that Paula Abdul?”

“No,” he assured her.

“She looks like Paula Abdul,” Niki insisted.

“Stay focused. Just like we talked about,” Garcia said.

“Okay, let’s get you in your places on stage. Curtain up in twenty seconds,” the stage director said, moving them to their instruments. He started a countdown at ten, used sign for the last three and then the curtain came up.

Lenar brought them in gently with the key board, and Nikita sang, soulfully, like only a dreamer could, “Over the Rainbow:”

Somewhere over the rainbow, way up high  
There’s a land that I heard of once in a lullaby  
Somewhere over the rainbow, skies are blue  
And the dreams that you dare to dream really do come true  
Some day I’ll wish upon a star  
And wake up where the clouds are far behind me  
Where trouble melts like lemon drops  
Away above the chimney tops  
That’s where you’ll find me  
Somewhere over the rainbow, bluebirds fly  
Birds fly, over the rainbow  
Why then, oh why, can’t i  
If happy little blue birds fly  
Beyond the rainbow  
Why oh why can’t I

The tune faded slightly, changed keys, and Garcia began to sing “Believe In Yourself,” from the Wiz, as sung by Dianna Ross.

If you believe  
Within your heart you’ll know  
That no one can change

The path that you must go  
Believe what you feel  
And know you're right because  
The time will come around  
When you say it's yours (It's yours," band echoed.)  
Believe that you can go home  
Believe you can walk on air  
then click you're heels three times  
If you only believe, then you'll be there (you'll be there)

And then, to the audience's surprise, the two songs joined together, with both Garcia and Niki singing their songs simultaneously, in a rare melody.

**If you believe in yourself  
Somewhere over the rainbow,  
Right from the start  
Birds fly, over the rainbow  
Believe all the magic that's inside your heart  
Why then, oh why, can't I  
Then you will have courage,  
To last your whole life through  
If you believe in yourself,  
If you believe in yourself,  
If you believe in yourself  
The way I believe in you.  
If happy little bluebirds fly  
Beyond the rainbow  
Why oh why can't I (can't I)  
Somewhere, believe.  
Believe there's a reason to be  
Believe you can make time stand still  
You know from the moment you try  
If you believe  
I hope you will**

**Believe in yourself right from the start  
You'll have brains  
You'll have a heart  
You'll have courage  
To last you're whole life through  
If you believe in yourself  
If you believe in yourself  
If you believe in yourself,  
As I believe in you  
Believe in yourself, when you believe in yourself  
If you believe in yourself, the way I believe in you**

The audience met the end of the song with a standing ovation. Simon raised his hands to try and quiet the audience down and he frowned at the Star Fleet Singers, who were in a group hug. "Well, that was an interesting little surprise. You didn't say anything about doing a melody," Simon said.

"That would have defeated the purpose of the surprise," Garcia said.

"Obviously they didn't fill you in, but this is where I talk, and you listen," Simon said. "Now, you obviously have a little bit of talent, or we wouldn't have allowed you to make these last minute changes to your band, but last minute changes to your song of choice will not be tolerated."

"We stayed within our time constraints," Garcia said.

"It's not about time. It's about staying on track and performing what you said you would perform," Simon said. "Further, I really think you should lose the tambourine girl, for she's nothing but eye candy. And you really should reconsider your costumes. Niki, your hair is hideous, and your skirt could be lifted about four inches..."

"That, sir, was uncalled for," Garcia said. "You can make comments about our ability to perform music all you want. All other comments will be directed to me."

"You talk to me like that again, and you're out of here," Simon said.



“You talk to her like that again, I’ll kick your ass,” Garcia assured him.

“Tam,” Kletsova said, touching his arm. “We’re on live.”

“I think you all did splendidly,” Paula said, trying to change the direction things were going.

“You would stand up for him,” Simon said. “What, do you think this Garcia is? Boyfriend potential?”

“Where do you get off insulting her like that?” Garcia asked. Kletsova and Lenar stepped to either side of Garcia as if to hold him back should a fight ensue.

“This is my show,” Simon said. “Just what do you think you’re going to do about it, music boy?”

“Come up here and I’ll show you,” Garcia said.

“Tam!” Lenar said. “You’re over reacting.”

Simon climbed up on stage and took a swing at Garcia while Kletsova and Lenar were holding him back. Garcia took the hit without protest, and it was hardly a hit considering he had been floored by Klingons that were twice as strong as humans. Of course, the fact that he was a Combat Ki Master helped him to take hits while simultaneously reducing the likelihood of sustaining injury or experiencing pain. Simon waved his bravado at the cameraman and to the applause of thousands in the audience. Garcia gave Lenar and Kletsova one look and then they let him go. Simon turned around to find Garcia no longer hindered. Simon took one hit and went down.

“Come on, we’re out of here,” Garcia said, heading off stage.

“Where are we going to go?” Trini asked.

“I have a place,” Garcia assured her.

“Tam, I think you were out of line,” Kletsova said. “What’s got into you?”

“He was out of line,” Garcia corrected. “We’re not selling sex. We’re selling music, and for him to suggest Niki should lift her skirt is more than just harassment, its tantamount to child porn.”

“It’s his job to be harsh,” Kletsova said. “Part of having character is being able to take a few insults. I think you need to go meditate and calm your ass down. You’re just under way too much stress.”

“I’m in charge here,” Garcia said, rounding on Kletsova. “And it’s my job to look out for Niki’s well being.”

“Excuse me? I think it’s our job,” Kletsova argued.

“Why don’t we talk about this later, after we’ve cooled off for a bit,” Trini said and nodding towards the camera to remind them everything they say and do was being recorded.

“Stop trying to water this down,” Kletsova said. “Garcia is way out of line.”

“I think Simon had it coming,” Niki said, and then smiled at Garcia.

“Oh, no you don’t,” Kletsova said. “Tammias Parkin! Don’t encourage that line of thinking. We are Star Fleet officers. We don’t behave like this and we never hit first.”

“He hit Tam first,” Niki pointed out.

“Only because we were holding him back,” Kletsova said. “And you were taunting him, Tam. On his show! You had it coming. We don’t fight at the drop of a hat.”

“The Iotians do,” Lenar pointed out. “Technically, Garcia is just trying to fit in.”

“I don’t believe this,” Kletsova said, opening up their hotel room with a card key. She allowed everyone to enter and stood in the doorway. “Really, where are we going to go? How do you plan to feed us?”

“What would you like him to do?” Trini asked. “Go back and apologize?”

“That would be a nice start,” Kletsova said.

Paula Abdul, the show’s producer, and a cameraman entered the room.

“You can’t leave. We want you to finish the contest,” Paula said.

“That little stunt just shot our ratings up,” the producer said.

“Which one?” Lenar asked. “The song change or hitting Simon?”

“Hitting Simon,” the producer said. “You don’t know how many people have wanted to do that but have back downed for fear of being kicked off the show.”

Garcia looked at his band, considered his mission, and then nodded. “We will stay, under the condition that Simon directs any harsh comments towards me personally. The girls are off limits, and he should try to restrict his insults to the quality of our music.”

“I will see to that,” the producer said.

“Thank you for standing up for me. What I don’t understand is why you would risk your chance at the title to do that. I’m just a stranger to you,” Paula said.

“He had no right to attack your character because you disagreed with him. Winning a contest is not worth the loss of self respect,” Garcia said. “We will work, we will practice, and we will perform to the best of our ability and accept legitimate criticism, but attacking a person’s character in a public venue is unacceptable. If he wants to pull you or my team aside and say something, that’s one thing. But not on tv.”

“You mean your band?” the producer asked.

“I mean my team,” Garcia said.

“So, you’ll stay?” Paula asked.

“We’ll stay,” Garcia said.

“Thank you,” the producer said.

“Thank you,” Paula echoed. “Rest up. I’ll bring you your rehearsal schedule in the morning.”

Garcia closed the door and locked it. No one noticed that he locked it three times.

“I think she likes you, Tam,” Niki said.

“Oh brother,” Klesova said, heading towards her bed. “I’m going to sleep. Someone wake me when this nightmare is over.”

“Can we order a pizza?” Niki asked.

“Yeah,” Garcia said, and went to wash off the stage makeup.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Part of the condition to being on the show was that the contestants were watched around the clock and the captures of their activities could be utilized as filler on the actual show or made available on the internet to encourage viewer participation. The latest web based feature allowed viewers to tune in to live cam feeds to see what their favorite contestants were doing between gigs and practices. Garcia had mixed feelings about this. On the one hand, being scrutinized by anyone and everyone would detour the government from acting against them, and the greater their popularity, the better odds that they would be left alone. On the other hand, as long as they were being watched, Garcia was unable to share any information with his team, which effectively isolated him. They had no idea that he had found where the hostages were being kept and that he was currently working on a plan to help rescue them.

While part of Garcia's attention explored the military base via Brittany, mapping and evaluating the situation, the remainder of his attention was in practicing an acoustical guitar. He had roused from sleep before his clan and slipped out onto the main floor of their hotel. There was a communal kitchen and living area where the contestants could mingle. He had turned his chair towards the large plate glass window to face the sun and pretended not to be aware that people had gathered to listen as he picked at his guitar. By the time Nikita arrived and had pulled up a chair next to him, he had put together the words to a new song. Not a great song, by far, but it echoed a loss inside of him.

Traveler, take me somewhere I can see  
Lights chasing lights, like strings of pearls  
Stars dancing in the night  
To a place where time is meaningless  
And I might see him alive again.

Traveler, teach me to fly  
To see past the trappings of time  
To move beyond that which we think is real  
To go where no one has gone before  
And find him alive again.

Traveler, traveler, stop this wheel called time  
Reverse this thing we call entropy  
Phase me out of this reality  
Let me go somewhere safe  
Where he waits for me, alive, always and again.

Niki leaned up against Garcia's arm. "That was nice. Is it about McCoy?" she asked.

"I think so," Garcia said, wondering why he hadn't seen McCoy's ghost in a while. "Or maybe Sarek. I don't know."

"Who's this traveler guy?" Trini asked.

Garcia became aware of his commune around him. Everyone else in the lobby he simply tuned out. "Someone Wes was telling me about."

"Oh, brother," Kletsova said. "Not that ghost story again. Oh, please, pick me, I'm special."

"Wes is special," Garcia offered.

"So are you," Niki told him.

"She's got a point," Lenar said. "No one would disagree that you're pretty special and you haven't found it necessary to create stories of hyper dimensional beings popping up in your life to accentuate that fact."

"Just because I haven't attracted the attention of the likes of Q doesn't mean..." Garcia began.

"Exactly," Kletsova said. "And even if you did, it may not mean what you think it means."

"The thing is," Garcia began, carefully choosing his words. "I had this experience when I crashed my bike into the cornfield. It wasn't a dream. I am very familiar with the dream state, hell, I live in my dreams. I lucid dream every night. It wasn't a dream."

“What are you trying to tell us?” Tatiana asked.

“You know the stories that some people tell of an afterlife when they’ve recover from an operation?” Garcia said. “I had one. I saw Sarek and he told me I had to come back. There was something I had to do. It’s gets a bit hazy after that.”

Niki touched Garcia’s hand. “I know you must miss Sarek, and McCoy, but we’re here for you. We’re all here with you right now.”

Garcia smiled and nodded. “How did you get to be so smart?” he asked.

Garcia kissed Niki lightly on the forehead and then began to play “In My life” by the Beatles. And when he did, the net server crashed due to the number of people tuning in.

There are places I remember  
All my life, though some have changed  
Some forever not for better  
Some have gone and some remain  
All these places had their moments  
With lovers and friends  
I still can recall  
Some are dead and some are living  
In my life I've loved them all  
But of all these friends and lovers  
there is no one compares with you  
And these memories lose their meaning  
When I think of love as something new  
Though I know I'll never lose affection  
For people and things that went before  
I know I'll often stop and think about them  
In my life I love you more

“I love you,” Niki said when he finished.

Garcia touched his forehead to her forehead.

“We’re scheduled for rehearsal in an hour, so we thought we would go and watch the other band’s practice,” Lenar said. “You want to come?”

“Sure,” Garcia agreed, standing and returning the guitar to its cradle.

The auditorium was one floor up and dimly lit. Several bands were present observing the band on stage go through their practice as Star Fleet Singers made their appearance. They quietly made their way in from the back. They established their campsite about midway from the front, with Niki sitting to Garcia’s right, and Trini on his left. Kletsova and Lenar sat behind them.

“Are you feeling okay?” Trini asked Garcia.

Garcia nodded.

“You seem distracted,” Trini said.

Niki leaned forward in her chair, staring hard at the performers on the stage and suddenly gripped Garcia’s hand so tight he turned to her. “Ow,” Garcia said.

“That’s the Bangles!” Niki whispered.

“They’re not the Bangles,” Garcia said.

“They look like the Bangles!” Niki insisted. “Oh my god! We’re competing against the Bangles.”

“It’s not the Bangles,” Garcia said.

The performers stopped abruptly and a quarrel commenced. The lead was trying to keep the discussion they were having from escalating into a fight, but their vocal levels suggested it might explode any moment. One of the bands sitting in the auditorium made some disparaging comments loud enough to be heard, followed by some snickering.

“What are you two whispering about?” Kletsova asked.

“Nothing,” Garcia said.

Tatiana sighed and sat back. The performers attempted again to play the song they had been assigned. Technically, it was flawless, exactly as it had been written, however, their particular challenge was to personalize it, make it theirs, and two of the performers seemed unhappy with their progress and were

resisting the tempo and musical progression in search of something uniquely theirs. The band to the left made some more comments.

"Lenar, go stop the heckling, will you," Garcia said, standing up.

"On it," Lenar said, getting up.

"Where are you going?" Trini asked.

"I'm going to go offer my help," Garcia said.

"Oh, brother," Kletsova said, rolling her eyes. "Tam, did you ever consider it's not your place? Prime Directive might apply here."

"Trini?" Garcia asked.

"Help them," Trini said.

"Is this about the music or the girls?" Kletsova asked.

"How dare you?!" Garcia asked. "It's always about the music. First."

As Garcia approached the stage, the lead singer had had enough. "Fine, let's take a five minute break. Debbi, go get some water." She then went to the stairs at the side of the stage and sat down just as Garcia was coming up. "What do you want?" she snapped.

"May I talk to you?" Garcia asked.

She blew a puff of air, suggesting doubt in his motives, but then nodded to her left, indicating he could sit on the stairs next to her. He did and offered her his hand.

"My name is Tammara Garcia," he said.

"Susana Hoffs," she said, not taking his hand. Instead, she put her elbows on her knees and her head in her hands.

Garcia took a moment to process the information and decided that this was perhaps the opportunity he had been looking for to study the phenomena of the old Earth personalities now living on Iotia. "They're asking you to update and own the Beach Boy song, In My Room?" Garcia asked.

"Yeah," she sighed. "It's an easy enough song to emulate, but we're not happy with any of the directions we've been taking it."

"Would you mind if I helped?" Garcia asked.

Susanna looked at him as if he were an alien. "And why would you want to do that?" she asked.

Garcia understood her question. Why would a fellow competitor offer to help an opponent? "I like music, I believe in your band, I know what you are capable of, and you seem to be in a bit of a writer's block if you will, and I have some techniques that might help you get your inspiration back," Garcia said.

"And what would you want in return?" Susanna asked.

"Nothing. No strings attached," Garcia said. "And, if you feel that what I have to offer is a waste of your time, I will give you my band's rehearsal time slot for today to compensate you."

Susanna was suspicious, but the offer seemed genuine. If he backed out, she would only need go to the judges and have them play the tapes of their rehearsal to show that he did offer up his time slot for the stage.

"Okay," she said. "Show me what you got."

Garcia stood. "Niki? Come up here, please," Garcia called. Susana accompanied him to the piano.

Niki was suddenly by Garcia's side. "Oh my god, I can't believe we're actually on stage with Susanna Hoffs! Away Teams are so much fun."

Susanna seemed bewildered. "You act like you know us," Susanna said.

"Just from having watched the show," Garcia offered, giving Niki a warning glance. "Niki, calm down. And go get that guitar over there."

The rest of the Bangles gathered around.

"What's going on, Sue?" Debi asked.

"We're not forfeiting our practice, are we?" Michael asked.

"Just calm down, a moment," Susana said. "Garcia here has offered to help." "Why?" Vicki asked.

Garcia played the piano part of the song and spoke to them. "This is a song by Brian Wilson, Earth, 1963," Garcia said. "And your band seems to have an affinity towards music from the sixties. Even for the eighties, you kind of have a retro sound with a touch of modern. Now, this is the original, as you can hear. It reveals a sensitive side of the character, or perhaps the author himself, Brian Wilson, the side that we don't

often reveal in public because it can be considered weakness.” Garcia nodded to Niki. Niki accompanied Garcia on guitar, singing harmony to his lead:

There's a world where I can go  
And tell my secrets to  
In my room, in my room  
In this world I lock out all my  
Worries and my fear  
In my room, in my room  
Do my dreaming and my scheming  
Lie awake and pray  
Do my crying and my sighing  
Laugh at yesterday  
Now it's dark and I'm alone  
But I won't be afraid  
In my room, in my room

“Of course,” Garcia said, returning to just playing the music. “Just because it’s kind of soft and almost sad, it doesn’t mean it can’t be jazzed up. This is what it might sound like with a jazz tempo. Or how about a Calypso sound. Beach Boys and Calypso kind of go well together. Or, if you really want to go wild, here’s a punk rock version...”

Niki burst out laughing and was no longer able to keep up with Garcia’s changes. The bangles were unable to suppress their awe with his versatility as he rolled through several other major genres of music. Susanna motioned her girls to get their instruments and Niki handed Susanna the guitar she was using. The muse was moving Susanna Hoffs.

“He is amazing,” Susanna said to Niki.

“I know,” Niki said, biting her lip, thinking ‘I’m talking to Susanna Hoffs!’

“Are you this much fun all the time?” Susanna asked Garcia.

“No, I’m usually quite boring,” he answered. “So, what do you think? Would you like to hear another arrangement?”

“You own this song,” Susanna said. “It makes me want to be in your room with you.”

“In your room!” Niki giggled, brushing up against Garcia.

“That’s it,” Vicki said.

“What?” Michael asked. “His room?”

“Play, Garcia,” Susanna said. “A little more up beat, and try and follow me. Yeah, like that.”

If Garcia was curious about the Bangle’s presence on Iotia before, he was even more so, now. They acted and behaved as if they had been born and raised on Iotia, and yet, he seemed to be eliciting a song that he had known they had written on Earth. Because he knew the song, almost as well as he knew ‘In My Room,’ he was able to blend it into a melody. He did all of this and made it seem like it was all them making it up on the spot. As far as the Iotian’s Bangles were concerned, their singing “In Your Room” was completely spontaneous. Pure inspiration, kissed by a muse. The thought of a muse reminded him of Harmonia, sometimes portrayed to be one of the seven daughter’s of Zeus, sent to inspire men, but sometimes thought to be the daughter of Aries and Aphrodite. Whether it was gods, repressed memories coming to life, or some form of quantum mechanics, Susana nailed her song.

I love it in your room at night  
You're the only one who gets through to me  
In the warm glow of the candlelight  
Oh, I wonder what you're gonna do to me  
In your room  
I come alive when I'm with you  
I'll do anything you want me to  
In your room  
I love it in your room all day  
When you're gone I like to try on all your clothes  
You won't regret it if you let me stay  
I'll teach you everything that a boy should know

In your room  
 I'm alive when I'm with you  
 Gonna make your dreams come true  
 In your room  
 I feel good in your room  
 Let's lock the world out  
 Feels so good when we kiss  
 Nobody ever made me crazy like this  
 I'll do anything you want me to  
 I only want to be with you  
 In your room  
 In your room

Niki clapped and jumped with excitement and Susana cradled her guitar so she could give Garcia a hug. The remaining Bangles gathered around him, too, thanking him. The judges entered the stage, followed by the hecklers who were now causing a major ruckus. Trini, Lenar and Kletsova approached the stage, expecting a fight. Niki touched Garcia's hand. "Isn't that Quiet Riot?"

"I told you he was helping them. This is cheating," the heckler said.

"Calm down, Randy," Simon said. "I'll handle this. Garcia, what's going on here?"

"I was just helping them out," Garcia said.

"He admits it," Randy said, crossing his arms.

"Technically, it's not against the rules," Paula interceded on Garcia's behalf.

"Well, it should be," Simon said. "We're here to judge people's talents, not their ability to play well together."

"I would ask you not to punish the Bangles," Garcia said. "I take full responsibility for my actions and will accept whatever penalty you decide is fair."

"Who are the Bangles?" Paula asked.

"That's Ms. Hoffs band," Niki said.

"I want him penalized. He just gave this all girl band an advantage," Randy said. "And we're not going to take this!"

"Why are you making my life miserable, Garcia?" Simon asked. It was a side of Simone Garcia hadn't seen before.

"I'm sorry. I had good intentions. My mission is to bring music and harmony to the world," Garcia said. "To me, it's not about winning or losing a contest. It's about sharing and lifting everyone up."

"Who are you?" both Susanna and Paula said at the same time, both enamored with him.

Kletsova just shook her head and returned to her seat.

"I am Tammis Garcia, lead singer of Star Fleet," he said.

"Fine," Simon said. "If you help one band, you're going to help all the bands, even if it is to your own detriment. Make yourself available to everyone and if I find any evidence that you don't give your best to everyone equally, I'll throw you out of the competition."

"I believe that's fair," Garcia said. "Thank you, Simon."

Simon did a double take. "Alright, then. This is settled. Okay, Randy?"

"We practice at four," Randy growled at Garcia.

"16 hundred hours. I'll be here," Garcia said.



Sharlow and her selected staff sat around a table in the mess hall, eating rations as they held their conference. They lost eleven people when the Ferengi ship dragged them out of the ice. They managed to reclaim engineering and the shuttle bay, but they had been unable to recover their shuttle that was set adrift. The only technical gain they achieved was turning on the main viewer, which enabled them to watch the Ferengi ship clearing out more of the comet with its phasers so they could dock against the artifact.

"Any chance we can fix the subspace antennae array?" Sharlow asked.

The answer was what she had expected. There was really very little they could do with out replicators and more power.

"Alright, how about using one of the Horizon's shuttles to go retrieve the Darwin?" Sharlow asked.

"They haven't been used in over two hundred years and they have no fuel," Burke pointed out.

"Well, we can't just sit here," Sharlow said. "With the resources we have available, I need someone to come up with a plan for retrieving the Darwin."

Sharlow's comm. badge rang. "Sorry to interrupt, but I think you might want to see this."

"What is it?" Sharlow asked.

"It's a live broadcast from Iotia. Of course, it was broadcast one hundred and six hours ago, so it's not live, technically, but... Well, you really will want to see this. If you have a PADD, I'll pipe it down to you," a cadet Myers said.

Burke and the other staff members gathered around Sharlow's chair and waited for the PADD to display what Myers was all hot about. The sound came on before the picture crystallized to reveal a band wearing old Star Fleet uniforms, circa 2266. The song being sung was an old Earth song, "Come Sail Away," originally by Styx.

"What the hell?" Burke asked. "Is that Garcia?"

"He's alive at least," Lt. Ammon said.

"How could he compromise his security by being on television? He's putting Carter's child in danger," Burke said.

"Or, he's guaranteeing her safety. It's a risky gamble, either way," Sharlow agreed. "What's the line at the bottom?"

"It's an old internet navigation protocol," Ammon said. "Apparently you can log onto the shows website and view material on the contestants."

"Can we do that from here? Can we get a message to him?" Sharlow asked.

"There will be a huge time laps between signals, but I don't see why not," Ammon said. "Of course, he would have to be able to receive emails, otherwise we may have to rely on the producers to get him his fan mail, and then hope he answers fan mail. It may be possible to access one of the Iotian satellites and from there route a signal onto the internet."

"What about the buoy? Can we use that as a relay?" Sharlow asked.

"I'll get on it," Ammon said, and excused herself. "Their internet protocols are easy enough to decipher. I'll let you know if I make contact with Garcia."

"If we live through this, I'm going to kill him," Burke said.

"Now, we don't know his situation. He may be doing what he has to in order to survive," Sharlow said.

♪♪▶

The cigar smoking man opened up his cell phone and put it to his ear. "What?" he asked.

"Sorry, boss, but I think you want to see this. Turn to channel five."

The cigar smoking man clicked the channel over with his remote and propped his feet up on his desk. "What? You like this crappy music the media is serving the kids these days? If it's not Big Band, it's not music."

"No, boss, I want you to look at the lead singer, and tell me if it doesn't look like the guy we fished out of your crop circle."

The cigar smoking man leaned forward to appraise the singer and then put his feet on the floor. "I thought I told Jim to take care of him."

"You did boss."

"I want to see Jim in my office. One hour," the cigar smoking man demanded.

♪♪▶


"Ahh," Brock said. "You give the best oo-mox."

"Why, thank you," Tina, the secretary purred. "Can I change the channel?"

"Honey, you can do whatever you want if you keep oo-moxing me like that," Brock said.

Tina turned the television with a remote and returned her hands to her boss's earlobe. She hummed along with the song. "I sure hope Star Fleet makes it to the finals," Tina said. "I really like that Garcia guy."



Brock came out of his chair, his eyes wide. “Oh, bloody hell. Get General Hammon in here, now! No more Oo-mox. General. Chop chop.” He began to pace. It had been too much of a good thing and he had been too lax. If he knew anything about Star Fleet, they had a propensity for ruining the free market system. 

“Hey, Tam, your favorite show is on,” Niki called.

Garcia came over and sat by her on the end of the bed, helping himself to some of the grapes she was eating. One of the Star Conquers’ episodes was on and in the scene, Kirk was kissing Lt. Uhura.

“Wow, this must be the one Gene was telling me about,” Garcia said. “This was the first interracial kiss on prime time television on Iotia.”

“Way to go, Black Bird,” Niki said.

“Tam. We really need to work out the details of our next project,” Kletsova said. “We have to figure out a song and put together a music video, and then schedule the film equipment.”

“Oh my god, Niki,” Garcia said, kissing her on the forehead. He pulled out a cell phone. “You are my inspiration. Bring me a guitar. Hello, Gene? This is Tam. Do you have a moment? Okay, I’m going to put you on speaker phone and play you a song. I want you to put me together video clips of the actress who played Lt. Uhura and I want it to fit this song. Yes, you can tape this. If you can send me the video by next Tuesday, you’re going to get an official, ‘unofficial’ plug, if you know what I mean. Let me know when you’re ready. Everyone say hi to Gene. Is Majel there?”

“Yes,” Gene said. “Hey, Majel. Your favorite band is on the phone, Conference mode.”

“Oh, my. This is fun. Kind of like Star Conquerors,” Majel said.

“Hello, Majel. This is Nicky,” Niki said. And everyone else chimed in. “Your voice sounds so familiar,” Niki continued. “Would you mind saying something for me? Say, memory alpha, accessing...”

“I’m sorry, what?” Majel asked.

“Niki, that’s enough,” Kletsova said.

“Tam, I’m all set up to record you,” Gene returned.

“Okay, this song was recorded on Earth by the Beatles, and I know they would want this song devoted to her. This song just couldn’t have been inspired by anyone but Lt. Uhura. Here it goes,” Garcia said, playing the guitar intro before singing the lyrics:

Blackbird singing in the dead of night  
Take these broken wings and learn to fly  
All your life  
You were only waiting for this moment to arise  
Blackbird singing in the dead of night  
Take these sunken eyes and learn to see  
All your life  
You were only waiting for this moment to be free  
Blackbird fly  
Blackbird fly  
Into the light of the dark black night  
Blackbird fly  
Blackbird fly  
Into the light of the dark black night  
Blackbird singing in the dead of night  
Take these broken wings and learn to fly  
All your life  
You were only waiting for this moment to arise  
You were only waiting for this moment to arise  
You were only waiting for this moment to arise

“So, what do you think?” Garcia asked.

“I think that’s brilliant. The corporation won’t like you using the video I’ll be sending you. You know it has a copy right and I don’t own it,” Gene said.

“I know,” Garcia said. “I’m not asking permission, but I’ll get it on the air for you. I know someone that will help and then I’ll take the penalty, if any, after it airs. As of right now, I don’t think this particular

issue has come up, so there is no technical rule to stop me. It would also be nice if she could be in the audience that night. I'll see that you get some tickets. Bring the whole family."

"I understand," Gene said. "I'll have Roxanne bring the tape up to you as soon as I get it finished. A tribute to Nichelle. Brilliant."

"Thank you, Gene," Garcia said.

"I'll talk to you soon. Try not to fight with Simon, will you," Gene said.

"Yes, Sir," Garcia said. "Star Fleet out."

"Who is Roxanne?" Trini asked.

"Speaking of Roxanne, can we do that song by Sting," Niki asked.

"I thought it was by the Police," Garcia said.

"Either way, can we?" Niki asked.



"I knew he wasn't dead," Jay said, pounding a fist. "I'll kill him."

"You'll do no such thing!" Brock said. "You'll turn him into a martyr over night."

"We can't allow a member of Star Fleet to run around free like that," General Hammon said. "The President thinks I have this situation under control."

"The President doesn't need to know," Brock said. "And the situation is under control. You have him right where you want him. My understanding is he has a camera on him every minute of the day. And I have plans of my own for him. This kid is the hottest musician in the Galaxy and he just fell into my lap."

"I don't understand," General Hammon said.

"I know," Brock said, patting the general on the back. "Trust me on this. He is going to give a boost to the music industry here, which will put CEO on my list of achievements. And soon, very soon, I will have Garcia in my pocket, too. Oh, the best revenge is pure profit. A deal is a deal, but a contract is a contract is a contract."

"So, we're not even going to set up guards?" General Hammon asked.

"That wouldn't be a bad idea," Brock said. "Put him under surveillance. Monitor all his phone calls and make a profile of everyone that comes into contact with him. The surveillance team needs to be discreet. We don't want him to know he is being watched, though I suspect he already suspects he's being watched. He's not stupid. That maneuver took guts, Tam. You have the ear lobes of a Ferengi. Oh, and General, it wouldn't be a bad idea to have an elite military unit standing by to take him in if we need to. And believe me, they will need to be the best of the best cause this kid can fight. Boy, can he fight."

"Anything else we should know about him?" General Hammon asked.

"He's going to make a play for Communism, and when he does, I'm going to smack him and Star Fleet down so hard, he won't know what hit him," Brock said. "This is going to be so much fun."



DaiMon Tolro and the seven members of his crew stared into the artifact in awe. "It's huge. There must be a museum's treasure trove in there," DaiMon Tolro said.

"I think one of us should stay on the ship," Riko said.

"This is too big. I can't trust any of you to stay here alone or go in alone, so, we're all going together," DaiMon said.

"But is it wise leaving that Star Fleet Officer in the Brig unattended?" Muja asked.

"It is if you engaged the security fields," DaiMon Tolro said. "Alright. Back packs, ready. Let's move out."

They all stepped into the artifact and proceeded down the corridor. Muja yelled and they all jumped, huddling together.

"What?!" DaiMon Tolro asked.

"Look," Muja pointed, his hand shaking. "The door is gone."

"So?" Tolro said, slapping Muja's face hard. "You've been in a few holosuites in your time."

"But poor Mujal can't get laid on a holodeck, even after programming his date," Riko said, rallying quite a bit of laughter from his comrades.

“I can, too,” Muja said, pouting. “That’s right. That makes sense... This is like just a big holodeck. So, why don’t you go and open the door.”

DaiMon Tolro rolled his eyes. “Why I accepted your bids for crew members I will never know.”

“Because you needed the money to pay your taxes,” Keln said.

“Just shut up and follow me,” Tolro said.

They followed and with each step they moved slower and closer together, Tolro leading with his right hand out. Muja shook with fear.

“I don’t like this,” Muja said.

“It’s got to be here,” Tolro said.

“Maybe it’s the other way,” Doru said.

“Don’t be ridicu...” Tolro began, but his voice trailed off with a diminishing scream.

The others had been standing so close to Tolro, and each one holding onto the next, that they all ended up following their DaiMon down the ramp. Tolro got up and brushed himself off. He stared at his men, arms akimbo. They lay piled and tangled.

“Did any of you have the sense to stay up top and lower a rope down?” Tolro asked. “No, because you’re my men, and I chose people less intelligent than me because I was afraid someone might aspire to take over my business. I will probably regret that mistake.”

“Besides, none of us have a rope,” Muja said.

“No, but you have a belt, and a shirt, and trousers, and a brain, which all might come in useful someday if you learn to use them correctly,” Tolro said.

“Well, maybe the Star Fleet Officer has a rope,” Muja said.

“And what good would that...” Tolro began, and then turned around. A star Fleet Officer was standing there, pointing a weapon at him. “Um, hello. I’m DaiMon Tolro. Perhaps you remember me? One of my Officers participated in an officer exchange program with your ship?”

“How did you get here?” Lt. Marvin Thomas asked.

“Well, obviously, we fell down that ramp there, and...” Tolro began, motioning for his men to stand up.

“I meant, how did you get into the artifact?” Thomas said more than asked.

“Through the same door you... Ouch,” Doru said, looking menacingly at Keln who had pinched his arm.

“What my comrade was trying to say is that we found your friends, and offered to help them explore this great find you have here,” Tolro said, passing a glance to his men to keep silent.

“What’s my name?” Thomas asked.

“Excuse me?” Tolro asked.

“If my friends indeed allowed you to pass in here, they would have told you my name,” Thomas said. “Now, what’s my name, bitch?”

“Hey! There’s no reason to be rude here,” Tolro said, signaling his men with a hand gesture. “After all, you have only that one gun and we have,” he looked at his men and pointed at their guns, for they had obviously missed his signal, “Eight guns.”

Thomas allowed them to go for their weapons. “I see. So, what did you do to my friends?”

“Your friends are fine,” Tolro said. “I merely towed them out of the ice and set them adrift. I assure you, if you cooperate with us, I will be glad to escort you to them. For a small transport fee.”

“I’m not interested,” Thomas said.

“Well, why don’t we start with some information,” Tolro said. “You tell me what you’ve learned about this place, and I’ll share with you what we’ve learned about this place. Does that sound fair?”

“When it comes to Ferengi, what sounds fair and what is fair can be two different things,” Thomas said.

Tolro turned to his men. “Why can’t you guys negotiate like that,” Tolro asked them. He smiled at the Officer. “I can see you’re a reasonable man. We just want to find a bit of treasure. Surely, as big as this place is, there’s enough for all of us to share.”

“But DaiMon,” Muja said. “I thought we didn’t want to share with...”

“Quiet,” Tolro snapped. “Our situation has changed a little. It’s reasonable to negotiate. He’s a reasonable man. You are a reasonable man, aren’t you?”

“I will tell you this,” Thomas said. “You don’t want to open the door to your right.”

Tolro mused on this, biting his lower lip. “I don’t? Doru, go open that door.”

“But, boss, he just said,” Doru began to protest.

“I know what he said, that’s why you’re opening the door,” Tolro said. “We need to know if he’s trust worthy. There could be piles of gold plated latinum in there.”

“I mean it. Don’t open that door,” Thomas said.

“Or what, you’ll shoot us?” Tolro asked. “If you shoot one of us, one of the remaining seven will shoot you. Go ahead, Doru. Open it.”

Doru looked to the Fleet Officer, to his boss, and then went up to the door. He opened it and peered into the darkness. He turned to Tolro. “I don’t see anyth...”

A saber tooth tiger pounced on Doru and all of the remaining Ferengi screamed, some tried to climb the ramp and some tried to climb over the ones trying to climb up the ramp. Tolro removed his whip and struck at the beast. The whip released a full charge directly into its skull and it dropped like a sack of potatoes. The Star Fleet Officer was gone. Tolro waited for his men to stop their antics before gathering them together.

“Poor Doru,” Muja cried.

“It wouldn’t be poor Doru if you any of you had bothered to use your weapons,” Tolro snapped. “His loss is all coming out of your shares.”

“Sorry, boss,” they all said.

“Follow me. That Star Fleet guy must have gone through one of these doors,” Tolro said.

They entered the first room on the right, in which two figures hovered in the air, prominently and proudly displayed. There were cries and gasp and one of the Ferengi fired his weapon into the room. Tolro knocked his hand away.

“It’s a good thing you’re a lousy shot!” Tolro said.

“But, boss? Those are Borg!” Keln said.

“I see that,” Tolro said. “But I also see that they’re being held in some sort of suspended animation. Come, we’ll get a closer look.”

“Uh uh,” they shook their heads.

“You can have your weapons out, but just don’t shoot at anything unless I give the word, okay?” Tolro said, and then coerced them inside the room by bribing them.

Tolro moved cautiously closer to the Borg. He was especially infatuated with the female Borg. The others grew braver and began moving forward as they too were admiring the features of the female Borg.

“Clothing on females can be rather erotic,” Keln said.

“Maybe that’s why we don’t allow women to wear clothes. It’s too distracting,” Muja said.

“I wonder if we can reprogram her to give oo-mox,” Phlim said.

His brother Phlam agreed with the sentiments. “I’d sure like a crack at her programming.”

“The question is, how do we get her back to the ship?” Riko asked. There was a collective sigh and a scratching of heads.

“She’s floating, right?” Tolro asked. “That means she’s weightless, because she’s wearing an artificial gravity belt. So, we could easily push her back to the ship.”

“Ahh,” they all agreed. No one touched her to test the theory.

“Keln, you’re the strongest of us,” Tolro said. “Bring her.”

“I don’t think so, DaiMon,” Keln said.

“I don’t pay you to think, Keln. You pay me to think,” Tolro said.

“I know, but, I’m afraid,” Keln admitted.

“We’ll protect you,” Tolro said, looking to his men for support.

His shipmates supported him. “Yeah, you bet, of course,” showing their weapons.

“Okay,” Keln said. Which is one of the many reasons why Keln wasn’t the Captain.

They all gathered around the female Borg and watched as Keln placed his hands on her rump and gave her a bit of a shove. The female Borg came forwards as if pushed off a platform and landed on her feet. She turned to orient herself and all the Ferengi, including Tolro, screamed and ran from the female Borg. One of them managed to touch the male Borg, freeing him from his stasis as well. Every wall had a Ferengi pounding against it, a couple of walls had more than one Ferengi, pleading to be rescued.

"What?" the female Borg began.

"Resistance is futile," said the male Borg, moving towards its first victim. "You will become one with the Borg."

Keln's scream doubled in octaves.

"Shoot at them!" Tolro screamed.

They all turned and shot. The female went down immediately, but the male had shields that absorbed the energy, slowing him for a moment in his pursuit of Keln.

"He's adapted!" Tolro said.

Keln took another breath and screamed even louder, sobbing, as he pounded on the wall. His hand accidentally fell into the groove and a door opened. He disappeared through it before it was completely opened. The male Borg followed him. The door closed behind them.

Tolro sighed. "That was close," he said.

"Hey? I got her!" Riko said. "I got her with a stun!"

"You were using stun?" Tolro asked, and was disappointed to see Riko admit that he was. "Are all of your weapons on stun setting?"

"Yes, DaiMon," they admitted.

"May the Great Treasury buy away my pains," Tolro sighed.

"But you told us, phasers on stun, boss. You said it's safer that way, DaiMon," Riko said.

Tolro knew not to argue that point with them. He went over to the female Borg. Sure enough, she was still alive. He removed a number of plastic ties out of his pack, put one around each of her wrists, and a third to bind the two together, making an impromptu pair of cuffs. He did the same for her ankles.

"Well, at least this hasn't been a total loss," Tolro said. "Help me drag her, boys. Maybe we can find an antigrav sled while we're in here."



"None of this looks familiar," Carter said. "Are you sure we're going the right way?"

"The Princess was very clear on her instructions," Garcia said. "We can find a room and take a break if you want."

"Well, I think we've been going in circles," Ilona protested.

"So, do I," Garry said.

Garcia opened a door.

"This room looks familiar," Duana said.

"Really?" Carter asked. "It looks like every other room we've opened on this floor."

"Wasn't this the American President's room?" Duana asked.

"If that's so, where are the Presidents?" Gary asked.

"Um, Tam," Carter said, grabbing Garcia's arm.

"What?" he asked, turning to look at her, and then followed her gaze, while simultaneously registering the voices of Duana and Ilona, to either side of him, using profanity.

"What?" Gary asked, coming out of the room Garcia had held open for him.

"I am Locutus of Borg," Locutus said, his head turning mechanically so that his laser point flashed across Garcia's eyes. Behind him American Borg Presidents began filing out, like toy soldiers methodically moving towards a goal. "You will become one with the Borg."

Garcia raised the weapon he had been given by the grays and fired. He saw the beam of energy hit the lead President, George Borg, but it had no affect.

"Um, Tam," Gary said. "If that's a Kaluza-Klien particle beam weapon, it's only good against hyper dimensional beings."

"Retreat," Garcia ordered.

“Gone,” Carter said, running away, followed by Gary.

“We can buy you time,” Duana said, taking up a fighting pose.

Ilona and Deanna took up the same pose. “Go, Tam,” Deanna said.

“What are they doing?” Garcia asked.

The Borg hadn’t bothered to pursue them. George Borg opened a door, and Adams Borg went in to clear the room.

“They’re taking over this base, room by room?” Ilona asked.

“Bloody hell! Who would have freed the Borg?” Garcia asked.

A door opened across from the room that the Adams’ Borg was clearing. A McCoy Borg entered the hall, followed by a Ferengi Borg.

“I think we should leave now,” Deanna said.

“Damn them!” Garcia said.

“Come on, let’s go,” Duana said, taking Garcia by the arm. “Ilona?”

“I got to help him!” Garcia protested.

“You did. It’s over. Let’s go,” Ilona said.

A door opened beside them and Lt. Thomas stepped out. “Garcia?”

“Shoot the Borg,” Deanna ordered.

“Borg? Holy crap!” Thomas said, complying with the order. He dropped the Ferengi Borg with one shot. The young McCoy Borg required two sustained shots to overwhelm its shielding and kill it. It staggered, fell forwards, and twitched before going completely limp.

Garcia screamed, grabbing for his head. He cried from the pain from the unintended mind assault by the queen of the hive, as she announced “My drones are being captured. I am lost.” It was the most pitiful cry he had ever heard. They were just drones, but she cared about them none the less and it was just coincidence that it coincided with the death of the young McCoy Borg.

“Get him out of here!” Thomas ordered, thinking Garcia was affected by the loss of McCoy.



When The Boss, the CEO of the company that produced the reality TV show, requested Garcia’s presence Garcia complied. It was a luxurious office, looking out over the Iotia’s New NewYork’s skyline. Garcia was amazed at how much energy they had devoted to recreating New NewYork from the pictures they had gleaned, originally from the Horizon book, then later on from the movies that had just mysteriously picked up from the air. The Iotians had thought it was due to them being so close to Earth that they had received their radio and television signals, but the truth was more complicated. Garcia suspected that there were aliens here providing them with information, but he still lacked the proof. The CEO rose to greet Garcia, laughing, hugging him warmly, which struck Garcia as odd, having never met the man personally. It was the kind of warm greeting a mob boss might give you before giving you the kiss of death.

“My name is Elliot Mann. I’m the Mann, if you know what I mean. Can I get you a drink, my friend?” Mann asked.

“No, thank you,” Garcia said.

“Oh, yes. No alcohol, right?” Mann asked. “Interesting. Be seated. Please. How about a cigar? Cuban?”

Garcia leaned over to smell the cigar. “I do like the smell, but I feel like I would be wasting it, since I wouldn’t smoke it.”

“Well, put it in you pocket for show,” Mann insisted. “Hell, take two or three. Give them to a friend.”

“Thank you,” Garcia said.

“I guess you know why I called you up here?” Mann said.

“Yeah,” Garcia said. “The video I put together was a composite of copy righted material. The judges decided Star Fleet should be thrown out of the contest. You disagree and are going to find some loop hole to keep me in.”

Mann laughed. “I agree with the judges. In fact, I’m the one that insisted you be thrown out.”

“I see,” Garcia said, standing. “I’m sorry to waste your time.”

“Please, don’t take it personally,” Mann said. “Sit down. I want to offer you a contract.”

"I don't understand," Garcia said, sitting back down.

"You were a shoe in to win the contest," Mann said. "I have never met a more brilliant musician than you. And the stunt of helping all your opponents, classy! That took guts. I want to offer you a music contract."

"You mean my band," Garcia said.

"No, just you," Mann said.

"Sorry," Garcia said. "It's all of us, or none of us."

"I like that about you. Loyalty," Mann said. "It's a rare quality these days, which actually increases your value to me. I believe if we have a contract, you'll actually honor it."

"If we can agree to some terms, yes, I'll honor it," Garcia said.

"Well, let's start it off this way," Mann said. "What would it take for you to become my employee?"

"To start with," Garcia said. "Complete freedom to write, direct, and produce anything I put together, whether its music or a movie script."

Mann chuckled. "You're asking for a lot."

"Let me ask you this. What do you want?" Garcia asked.

"What do you think I want?" Mann asked.

Garcia sat back in his chair, twirling one of the cigars in his hand. "At first, I figure you wanted money. But, you really have all the money you could ever want. I can make you tons more, of that I am quite positive, but it's not what you want. At least, not directly. It's more likely you want control. Control of people, control of the market, perhaps control of the nation or world?"

"You're a very perceptive man," Mann said.

"Sometimes, to get control, you have to give up control," Garcia said.

"And you think that giving you free license to do as you please with your creativity will help me attain my goals?" Mann asked.

"Not directly, but I can arrange for that to be a secondary goal of my own," Garcia said.

"Alright, I'll concede control for now, what else do you want?" Mann asked. "Women perhaps? You are quite the ladies man, judging by the rumors."

"You shouldn't trust all rumors," Garcia said. "And I can get my own ladies, thank you."

Mann chuckled. "That you can. You're a Kirk if I ever saw one. So, talk to me. What do you want?"

"I want to produce for you a new reality television show, starring my Band. I want you to record us twenty six hours a day, seven days a week," Garcia said. "We'll make the show kind of like a modern day Partridge Family. We'll give tours and we'll have musical guest come to our studio home and do lots of good music together. People will be able to tune in and watch us on the net at any time of the day, minus our sleep period, or download clips of the show or music, using a special new format and protocols which you will license to distribute and charge for service."

Mann leaned forward on his desk. "I'm intrigued."

"I want our studio home to be in a sky rise, on the top floor," Garcia said. "I want my band protected. I'll want a helicopter on the roof for emergency exits and a van in the garage. I want the entire floor of our studio home to be a movie set, where I can work at my convenience, and I want to be in control of hiring who comes and goes on my set. I want a super computer."

"Whoa," Mann said. "A super computer? That probably costs two hundred million dollars?"

"NASA is selling their out dated super computers for 76 million. That will suffice," Garcia said.

"What do you want with a super computer?" Mann asked.

"This is between you and me," Garcia said. "But I am going to create digital movies that are so convincing that you would think they are real actors, and after I create and install the software. I should be able to provide you with two movies a day."

"You're joking," Mann said.

"Take a chance on me and find out," Garcia said. "You know the money side of the music deal alone is going to give you enough of a return that this request will be paid off in no time."

"This is all you want, I trust," Mann said.

“One more thing,” Garcia said. “It’s paramount that you buy the rights to Star Conquerors. I am going to bring the series back, updating it for a modern audience. I know for a fact that those space pirate reruns are making them a fortune because they don’t have to pay any royalties. Well, since my actors are going to be mostly all virtual, you’re going to save even more money, and we’re going to reopen this franchise big time.”

“Who are you?” Mann asked.

“My name is Tammias Parkin Arblaster-Garacia, and I’m a member of Star Fleet,” Garcia said.

“Wait here. I’ll get the lawyers to draft the papers,” Mann said.

Mann stepped outside his office and picked up the secretary’s phone. “Yes, I want to speak with Brock. Brock? I got that deal you wanted.”



In celebration of their new gig and changing status, Garcia was buying Star Fleet dinner at a fancy restaurant. It was the first place “out” that they had actually been since they started the contest and Niki was the most excited. The waitress brought them their drinks, setting a coke down in front of Niki and Garcia, a room temperature beer in front of Kletsova, warmed cranberry juice for Lenar, and a glass of unsweetened tea for Trini. The waitress hovered to see if there was anything else she could bring them only to witness Garcia spit his coke out, making a face.

“Tam!” Kletsova instantly complained, the recipient of much of the coke he had spit out.

“What is this?” Garcia demanded.

“It’s a coke,” the waitress assured him, concerned about upsetting a star.

“You spit your coke all over me!” Kletsova complained.

Garcia set the coke in front of her. “That is not coke.”

“Yes it is. I promise,” the waitress said, growing a bit panicky.

Kletsova sipped at the coke, but found no problem with it. She set it front of Lenar.

“Which one?” Garcia asked. “The original coke or the original coke after the new coke, which really didn’t taste like original coke?”

The Tammias commune looked at Garcia as if he were an alien. Lenar tasted the coke, seemed pleased with it, and took a bigger drink, before setting it in front of Trini.

“Oh, no,” the waitress said. “It is the original original coke.”

“The original original coke, as in like the 1930 coke,” Garcia clarified. “With cocaine in it?”

Trini turned her head to spit the coke on the floor.

“Yes,” the waitress said.

Garcia immediately took Niki’s coke away from her.

“Hey!” Niki protested.

“No more coke,” Garcia said.

“But I like the taste,” Niki argued.

“No more coke!” the entire Tammias commune told her, simultaneously.

“Geeze, Louise,” Niki said. “Alright.”

“Take the cokes away, and bring two lemonades, please,” Garcia said.

“Okay,” the waitress said. “I’m really sorry for any misunderstanding.”

“No worries,” Garcia told her. He held his speech till the waitress departed. “Everybody, this is the first moment, and perhaps the last, that we will be off camera, so I would like to participate in an old fashioned prayer.”

His friends looked at him, suspiciously.

“Just link hands and close your eyes,” Garcia said.

They all linked hands and closed their eyes. The moment their eyes closed, they found themselves standing in what appeared to be a white room.

“Where are we?!” Trini asked.

“I initiated a light mind meld. I need to talk to all of you, but I can’t risk us being overheard. Though we’re off camera, I know we are being monitored,” Garcia said.

“We’re in your mind?” Niki asked. She closed her eyes and thought about flying. She literally began to levitate off the floor. “Oh my god. This is incredible! It’s better than a holodeck.”



“Tam! Niki, feet back on the floor,” Kletsova said, switching her attention to Niki just for a moment. “Is this dangerous?”

“No. Not to any of you, at least,” Garcia said. “But it’s necessary. I know where they’re holding our crew hostage...”

“Hey?” Duana said, entering the room, followed by Ilona and Counselor Troi. “Aren’t we invited to this party?”

“Hallucinations, Star Fleet singers. Star Fleet singers, hallucinations,” Garcia introduced them.

“We’re not hallucinations,” Ilona protested.

“I’m Deanna Troi,” the Counselor Troi program introduced herself. “And this is Lal, Duana, and Ilona.”

“That explains a lot,” Niki said, understanding why Garcia was in love with Deanna Troi.

The Tammass commune looked to Niki for an explanation that didn’t come. “I said, feet on the floor, Niki,” Kletsova said.

“But how often do you get to be in a Garcia dream sequence and be lucid?” Niki protested. “It feels like swimming.”

Garcia tried to get them back on track. “I am devising a plan on rescuing the crew.”

“How do you know where the crew is?” Lenar asked.

“He tracked them down using his Brittany ho-remotely operated vehicle,” Ilona said, emphasizing her use of the word ‘ho’ to mean whore.

Garcia sighed. “Hey, this is my mind you all are visiting, and I will have control here. Ilona, be nice. Everyone, listen up. I can’t maintain this level of intimacy and focus too long without there being repercussions,” Garcia said.

“But it’s not that often we have visitors,” Duana said.

“I hear music,” Niki said. “Is it always like this in here?”

“No one mentions the crew, or that I am planning a rescue, or you will give it away,” Garcia said. “We will be on camera all day and everyday, and your ability to act normal is going to help me with my diversionary tactics. I will need each of you to play along and be ready for cues from me. I don’t know how this going to play out, but we are being watched, by at least two factions. There is definitely a contingent of red shirts following me, and no doubt a government agency watching over me. I wouldn’t be surprised if there isn’t a few other factions spying on us as well.”

“And don’t forget the aliens,” Counselor Troi said.

“What aliens?” everyone asked.

“What, he didn’t tell you that we were abducted?” Troi asked.

And then they were back in their own bodies, eyes opened. Garcia had broken the link, withdrawn his hands, and was leaning into the table, squinting his eyes.

“Tam?” Kletsova said, touching his shoulder, sincere concern on her face.

“I got a headache. Just give me a moment,” Garcia said.

“What was Troi speaking about?” Kletsova asked.

“I don’t know,” Garcia said.



Captain Jean Luc Picard and Lt. Commander Data stepped down off the transporter pad, where Lt. Commander Riker waited to greet them. “Welcome back,” Riker said. “Captain. Data, I expect Worf is eager for you to collect Spot.”

“Of course,” Data said. “I will go and get him now.”

As Picard headed for his quarters, Riker followed and began to fill him in on the details from his absence.

“I’m sure it’s all there in your report, Number One,” Picard said. “I’ll read it later. Right now, I am eager to get some quality sleep in my own bed.”

“Oh? Are you saying the Klingon beds weren’t to your liking?” Riker asked, with a bit of smirk.

“I didn’t complain,” Picard said.

“Of course, not,” Riker said.

"Is there anything else?" Picard asked.

"Yes, Sir," Riker said. "One thing. It's not an emergency, but I thought you might like to know. A Star Fleet communiqué reports that they've lost contact with the Philadelphia Freedom. She's several weeks over due to report in. It may be nothing, but I thought you might want to know."

"Thank you," Picard said.

Picard entered his quarters and set his pack down on his desk. He stood there in the darkness of his room, waiting for his eyes to adjust, his mind drifting. What little light there was came from stars and a computer terminal. The stars began to move as the Enterprise came about, and then the points of lights stretched into lines and spun into their spectral signatures. Picard touched his comm. badge.

"Picard to Counselor Troi. Please report to my quarters," Picard requested.

"On my way," Troi answered.

"Picard to Riker," Picard called, having already made his decision.

"Riker here," Riker answered.

"Change course for the Iotia system. Maximum warp," Picard said.

"Aye, Captain," Riker said.

Captain Picard sat down in the chair next to the couch. When the door chime rang, he invited Troi in and she entered, waited a moment for her eyes to adjust, and then sat on the edge of the couch nearest to Picard.

"How did your meeting with Spock, go?" Deanna asked.

"Fine," Picard said. "You're close to Tammara Garcia. You would know if he died, right?"

"You've heard that the Philadelphia Freedom is overdue to report in and you're concerned for Garcia's well being?" Counselor Troi asked.

"I feel like I should be more concerned than I am," Picard said. "But I feel strangely secure in the fact that Garcia is alright."

Counselor Troi didn't say anything.

"As you know, Sarek and I have shared thoughts through mind melds," Picard said. "I learned quite a bit about his relationship with Garcia. And right before I departed from Spock, he and I mind melded, and again, I learned quite a bit about Garcia. Is it possible that the bond that they shared with Garcia was somehow transferred to me, or that I now share in that bond? Even minimally?"

Counselor Troi pursed her lips. "It's possible, yes. But I think it more likely..."

"Captain Picard," Riker interrupted. "Incoming communiqué from Star Fleet, Priority One."

"Pipe it to my quarters, Number One," Picard said.

"You want me to leave?" Troi asked.

Picard motioned her to wait as he stood and put himself in front of the viewer he frequently used for official business. The Star Fleet Call sign and tone appeared briefly and was replaced by the image of Admiral Leonard H. McCoy. Troi came off the couch, her mouth agape. Picard was a bit flustered, but he hid it well.

"No doubt you are surprised to see me alive and kicking again," Admiral McCoy said.

"Something like that," Picard agreed.

"Well, you can thank Garcia for pulling off that little magic trick," McCoy said. "And that's why I'm calling you. I want you to go to Iotia, best speed."

"We're en route as we speak," Picard said. "We should be there in approximately five days."

"So, I'm not the only one with surprises today," McCoy said.

"Apparently not," Picard said. "How is it possible?"

"That I'm alive? Pull up a chair and I'll fill you in on what I know," McCoy said.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Welcome to your new home," Paula said.

"This place is huge!" Niki said.

"You should see the set," Paula said. "It takes up two entire floors. They've already begun construction on the Star Ship Tam requested."

"Yes, good, old, eccentric, Tam," Tatiana said. "You just have to love him."

"The super computer is one floor down, Tam, but you have access to it in the study, and there are desks there for all of you, and the latest in desk top computers," Paula said. "If you find time to answer some fan emails, that would be great. You could spend a life time catching up with that."

"Niki, you should start a FAQs page for us," Tam said.

"On it!" Niki said, saluting.

"Your bedrooms are over there, and the kitchen over there," Paula said. "I am personally available if you need anything, speed dial, number one. The kitchen staff will send up any food items you request in the dumb waiter. Umm, what else? I guess that's it, unless you can think of anything else."

Garcia kissed her hand. "Thank you, Paula. You've been wonderful."

"It's not hard, Tam. Working with someone as pleasant as you is very rewarding. You know, except for the time you hit Simon, I don't think I have ever seen you angry," Paula said.

"You're very kind," Garcia said.

"And, don't forget, I'm picking you all up at 8 tonight for a party," Paula said.

"We're going to a party?" Niki asked, clapping her hands.

"No," Garcia said. "We're not."

"Yes, you are," Paula said. "It's in your contract. See you at 8."

Everyone exchanged pleasantries, and when she was gone, they all settled into their furniture, with a touch of a sigh as if they were home and could finally relax.

"A real life celebrity party," Niki beamed.

Garcia picked up his guitar and started strumming. "We need a theme song, folks," Garcia said.

"Can't you give it a rest?" Kletsova said. "You're just non stop."

"Sorry," Garcia said, continuing to play. That wasn't the sound he was looking for, so he switched songs.

"How about my theme song?" Niki said.

"No, that's your song, not our song," Garcia said.

Niki agreed and rocked in her chair. Everyone looked at each other. "Tam, we've been meaning to speak with you and we didn't get a chance at dinner yesterday to discuss it."

"Go ahead," Garcia said, picking away another familiar melody, at least, he thought it was familiar. "I'm listening."

"Have you been feeling alright?" Trini said. "You've been acting peculiar."

"I have a lot on my mind," Garcia said. "It's not easy saving the Universe as we know it."

"Yeah, well, none of us read minds," Kletsova said. "Do you mind filling us in?"

"I think we should stay focused on our original questioning," Lenar said. "Tam, you seem to be displaying more and more signs of OCD. We're concerned."

"I understand," Garcia said, not letting up on the music.

"How about that song Gene wrote?" Niki asked.

Garcia began playing it on the guitar, imitating a group called Tenacious D, at a slightly quicker tempo than the original. He sang the lyrics: "Beyond the rim of the starlight, my love is wandering in star flight. I know he'll find in star clustered reaches, love, sweet love a star woman teaches. I know, his journey is never, his star trek, will go on forever. So, my friend, searching the starry sea, remember, remember me. Remember me. Cha cha cha."

They all shook their heads in agreement. No, the song wasn't them. Kirk maybe, but not them.

"You're ignoring our concerns," Lenar said.

"I'm not ignoring you. I need you all to trust me," Garcia said. "I assure you, before this is all over I'm going to seem a lot more strange."

“Does this have anything to do with your mission from god?” Kletsova asked. “Or seeing Sarek or this alien abduction?”

Garcia hesitated, the music stopped. “At the risk of sounding crazy, I had, for want of a better name, a spiritual experience. It’s either that, or I was abducted by aliens,” Garcia said, making a joke of the last part.

No one laughed with him.

“Oh, please. Is it really that far fetched that I might have had a moment of clarity so intense, an epiphany if you will, that I was able to see the big picture here and come up with a solution to all our problems?” Garcia asked, emphasizing the word ALL.

“How about Calling All Angels,” Niki offered another song.

“Do you two know any modern day songs that we can relate to?” Kletsova asked.

Garcia and Niki exchanged a good humored glance, and then to Tatiana they answered by shaking their heads ‘no.’ “Besides,” Garcia added. “We should really stick to songs from the twentieth and twenty first century of Earth. Stay consistent with what we’re finding here.”

“Alright then,” Trini said. “So, how about ‘Generation’ by the Who?”

“Ooh, nice,” Niki praised. “Don’t mess with my generation. My next generation!”

“No,” Garcia said. “In addition to discussing our theme song, we need to discuss a plan to determine whether or not the celebrities of this planet are alien invaders, clones, or robot.”

“I suppose you have a plan for securing some DNA,” Kletsova said, trying to be funny. It came across mean and petty.

“Well, if you can,” Lenar said, clueless about Tatiana’s jest, “I can acquire common ingredients from the grocery store to break down and analyze their DNA. It would be easier if I just had a tricorder, but I can give you a comparison, none the less.”

“A comparison of what?” Kletsova asked. “We would have to have genetic samples of the original Earth artists to compare them against.”

“Yes, but I would be able to at least determine beyond a shadow of a doubt that they are indeed human,” Lenar offered.

“Hello,” Kletsova said. “Clones are still human. And as long as they aren’t clones of a clone, you won’t find any major chromosomal discrepancies.”

“How about a song by Enya,” Trini offered.

Tam thought about that and then shook his head no, but his fingers began to play an Enya melody. He stilled the strings on his guitar and then started another song.

“Oh, I know. How about the theme song from Titanic?” Niki said, clapping her hands.

“No!” Everyone was instantly in agreement on that one. Garcia slapped the strings with his right hand and quickly played another song before the Titanic song sunk him.

“Geeze. I still like it,” Niki said.

“Hey, isn’t there a song about a space cowboy?” Lenar offered.

“What is it with you and cowboys?” Trini asked.

“I am simply fascinated with Earth’s cowboy history,” Lenar said. “I must have followed every cowboy link from my search engine and I found that song. Just kind of liked it.”

“Some people call me a space cowboy, yeah, some call me the gangster of love,” Garcia sang.

“Yeah, that’s the song,” Lenar said.

“Um, no, that’s not our song,” Kletsova said.

“How do you remember it all?” Trini asked.

“I have an excellent auditory memory,” Garcia said. “I don’t even have to take notes, no pun intended.”

“Well, how about the Pauncho and Lefty song?” Lenar tried. No one liked it, so he kept on. “Um, El Paso? The Highwayman! Desperado?”

“Oh, I have heard a good reggae version of Desperado,” Trini said.

Garcia stilled his guitar strings and started singing “The Calypso,” by John Denver.

“That’s beautiful,” Kletsova said.

“And rather fitting,” Trini said.

“Okay, we’ll put that at the top of our list,” Garcia said.

“You could go with that Rod Stewart song,” Niki tried again. “Where My Heart Will Take Me.”

“Oh, you mean the Russel Watson song,” Garcia corrected.

“No, I mean the Rod Stewart song,” Niki argued.

Garcia sang the song in question:

**It's been a long road, getting from there to here.**

**It's been a long time, but my time is finally near.**

And I can feel the change in the wind right now. Nothing's in my way.  
And they're not gonna hold me down no more, no they're not gonna hold me down.

Cause I've got faith of the heart.

I'm going where my heart will take me.

I've got faith to believe. I can do anything.

I've got strength of the soul. And no one's gonna bend or break me.

I can reach any star. I've got faith, faith of the heart.

It's been a long night. Trying to find my way.

Been through the darkness. Now I finally have my day.

**And I will see my dream come alive at last. I will touch the sky.**

**And they're not gonna hold me down no more, no they're not gonna change my mind.**

Cause I've got faith of the heart.

I'm going where my heart will take me.

I've got faith to believe. I can do anything.

I've got strength of the soul. And no one's gonna bend or break me.

I can reach any star. I've got faith, faith of the heart.

I've known the wind so cold, I've seen the darkest days.

But now the winds I feel, are only winds of change.

I've been through the fire and I've been through the rain.

But I'll be fine ...

Cause I've got faith of the heart.

I'm going where my heart will take me.

I've got faith to believe. I can do anything.

I've got strength of the soul. And no one's gonna bend or break me.

I can reach any star. I've got faith, faith of the heart.

**Cause I've got faith of the heart.**

**I'm going where my heart will take me.**

**I've got faith to believe. I can do anything.**

**I've got strength of the soul. And no one's gonna bend or break me.**

**I can reach any star. I've got faith, faith of the heart.**

“Oh, I like that much better than the other,” Trini said.

“You’ll have to shorten it a bit. The average television intro is less than a minute,” Kletsova said.

“And maybe jazz it up.”

“I’m okay with it if everyone else is,” Lenar said.

“I still like my theme song better,” Niki said.

“Well, I think this is more about Garcia than it is us,” Kletsova said.

“Oh, is this your theme song?” Niki asked.

“No,” Garcia said.

“What is your theme song?” Trini asked.

“Yeah, what is it?” Niki encouraged.

“‘It’s Been a While’, by Staind,” Garcia said.

“Whoa,” Niki said. “Are you sure you’re not depressed?”

“Wait, what’s all that about?” Kletsova said.

“Not right now, I got to meditate,” Garcia said, getting up and cradling his guitar. He paused as if remembering something. “Oh, and Trini. You’re good with computers. Will you hook up a wireless gateway to the super computer so I can access it remotely, say, with my cell phone?” He said the last while scratching his head. “So, if I think of something remotely, I can download it directly from my cell phone.”

Trini’s eyes grew wide with understanding. “Um, yeah. I’ll get right on that.”

“And, I guess we need to be dressed and ready to go by 8,” Garcia said.



Garcia closed his eyes and he became Brittany. He assessed the environment through her senses, reveling in the amount of information he could take in. Her tricorders allowed him to use the full capacity of his Kelvan heritage. He forced himself not to get lost in the memories of being turned into a Kelvan and focused on what had caused Brittany to send the alert. The Iotians had relocated the Captain to an infirmary. He maneuvered over to her and evaluated her condition. Her electrolytes were low, but the intravenous solution they were giving her should compensate. The delivery system was archaic, but adequate. She had a slight fever, too. As soon as it was convenient to do so, he touched her hand and whispered to her.

“Captain Munoz, it’s me, Garcia,” Tam said. “Can you hear me?”

“Brittany?” the Captain nearly sat up.

“No, don’t get up. I’m using the HROV,” he answered her, easing her back to a reclined position.

“Keep your eyes closed. Tell me what’s going on.”

“I haven’t felt quite myself ever since they transported me off the ship,” the Captain said. “I don’t know what’s wrong. Maybe an infection?”

“I’m unable to detect any signs of a viral infection using the HROV, but then, I didn’t install a medical tricorder, and the capacity of this tricorder is limited due to the operational needs of the HROV,” Garcia said. “Is this why they have kept you in quarantine from the others?”

“There are others? How many?” she asked.

“Maybe one hundred,” Garcia said. “I’ve been working on a way to rescue you. It’s taking me longer than I anticipated, but things are starting to fall into place now. It’ll be soon.”

The Captain reached up as if to pull him closer. She looked where she imagined him to be, and without mincing words, said: “You rescue my crew, do you hear me. You get them to safety. What’s the status of my ship?”

“I blew it up,” Garcia admitted.

“You what?!” she said, nearly coming out of the bed.

“Someone’s coming,” Garcia told her.

“I was sure I heard her mumbling, Doctor,” the nurse said.

“It’s probably just the fever,” the Doctor explained. “Go ahead and bring up a recorder, just in case she says anything important.”

“Alright, Doctor,” the nurse said.

After they walked away, Garcia said, “I’m going to get you out of here now.”

“No!” the Captain said. “You rescue my crew first. If you can take me out when you take them out, fine, but don’t blow their chance for escape because of me. That’s an order. I’m the last one out. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Captain,” Garcia said. “Alright. I got to go. If you need anything, you just yell out to me. Brittany will relay the message. The antibiotics and anti-inflammatory they’re giving you should help. I’ll check in on you.”

“Thank you,” Captain Munoz said.



General Hammon was in his office, pacing. He didn’t stop when Jay entered and Jay didn’t bother to ease his tension. Jay merely stood, waiting, patiently, as the General came to terms with whatever decision he was about to make.

“Jay, I think we have established beyond a reasonable doubt, that Star Fleet has a secret base of operation somewhere on our planet,” General Hammon said.

“Is this because of the recent White House incident?” Jay asked.

“Yes,” General Hammon said. “And all these damn recent UFO sightings. It makes me absolutely crazy knowing that this Garcia chap is programming a super computer right in the heart of New NewYork.”

“It appears to be harmless,” Jay said. “As far as we can tell, it’s a completely isolated system. There’s only so many things that he can do with it.”

General Hammon stopped and looked at his most loyal commando. “We’re talking about Star Fleet here. You’ve seen the Earth videos. One guy can take a paper clip, some chewing gum, and single handedly take out the opponents and disable a nuclear bomb.”

“Do you want me to take him out?” Jay said.

General Hammon leaned into his desk. “You understand, the President will know nothing. Whoever’s involved in this will take the complete wrap if caught.”

“I understand,” Jay said. “I have their tour schedule. They’ll be flying to New LA in four days. I could make that plane disappear and make sure that there is no evidence, and, just as a precaution, should any turn up, it would appear to be pilot error. Of course, it’s possible that a Red Shirt might save us the trouble. I don’t know who Garcia pissed off, but he’s on someone’s hit list. I might be able to enable that person to follow through with a hit.”

“Either way, I don’t care. I’ll leave this in your hands,” General Hammon said. “And Jay, this conversation never took place.”

Jay saluted.



“Is he alright?” Carter asked, hovering over Garcia.

“Yes,” Deanna said. “If there were any brain damage, we would not be able to operate.”

“I don’t understand,” Carter said.

“They’re holograms,” Gary said. “Tammias Garcia is afflicted with an extraneous multiple personality disorder and with the use of this alien technology, he has somehow managed to manifest them into reality.”

“I wouldn’t call us a disorder,” Ilona said.

“Well, what happened to him?” Carter asked.

“He just screamed and passed out,” Thomas said. “We’ll just rest here for a bit. You look tired, Carter. Maybe you should try to get some sleep.”

“What I really want is to find a toilet and have a shower,” Carter said.

“Sorry,” Thomas said. “You can use the corner over there.”

“I’ll pass. How did you get here?” Carter asked.

“Afu and I came looking for you. Are you alright? Where’s Newel?” Thomas asked.

“She’s dead,” Carter said. “Where’s Afu?”

“We got separated. I fear the worse,” Thomas said. “I think we should be leaving soon.”

Garcia sat up, suddenly, startling Carter.

“Easy,” Duana said, helping him up. “Are you alright?”

“Gary, we need to destroy this complex,” Garcia said, attempting to stand.

“What about your great rescue plan?” Gary asked.

“We can’t allow any of the Borg to escape this facility,” Garcia said. “They’ve assimilated the queen and we can not allow Gray smart Borgs to escape.”

An illuminated orb flew into the room and a man in a toga appeared before them. “What have you done?!” he yelled. The voice was booming and rich as if channeled through an Opera setting, with undertones of thunder.

Garcia reacted as fast as his HROV’s. They all drew their Kaluza-Klien Particle beam weapons and fired them. The man in the Toga didn’t even stagger. To make himself appear more ominous, he doubled in size and put his hands on his hips and laughed.

“You fool,” Hades said. “Do you really think we’d used imperfect technology such as holo-emitters? This is real flesh and blood you’re firing at. You’ll pay for your insolence.”

Hades raised his hands and fired bolts of lightning, sending Garcia flying backwards across the room and pinning him to the back wall. Isis stood up and hissed.

“You have no power here, bitch-whore cat,” Hades said. “I am not blind to your disguise. Your hunting days are over.”

Hades sent the cat flying with an equally impressive round of lightening. Garcia fired his weapon again, directing Duana and Ilona to do the same. Hades turned his wrath back towards Garcia, ignoring the holograms all together.

Another orb entered and a man appeared between Hades and deflected the lightening with an open palm. It fell from his hands like embers from steel being cut with a torch.

“Enough, Hades,” the man said.

“Out of my way, Apollo. He’s mine to do with as I please,” Hades said.

“Then you should have done so while he was still in your power,” Apollo said. “Back off.”

“I will not surrender him to you,” Hades said. “You’re in my domain, now, sun boy.”

“Your domain is lost and you’ll be lucky if Zeus gives you another after this fiasco,” Apollo said.

Hades started to dissipate. “What? What have you done, Apollo? Zeus? I’m not finished yet!”

“I did nothing to you,” Apollo said. “Garcia used a Kaluza-Klien particle weapon, highly affective against inter-dimensional beings such as our selves. It just took longer to have an affect than he anticipated. Part of the time shift delay of being inside your domain. You’ll be lucky if Zeus let’s you out of the penalty box for making such a mistake.”

“That can’t be? How did he get such a weapon? Zeus?! At least let me finish the Iotian experiment. I spent all this time setting up the dominoes. I want to watch them fall. Pleaseeeee! It was going so well, too. Who would have thought that entertainers with good intentions could have destroyed a society? We’re not finished, Apollo. Garcia, we’ll meet again. Mark my words.”

Hades was growing in size, but growing fainter as he spoke, becoming translucent like a ghost and rippling like a sheet in a wind, until finally he was gone. All that was of Hades was an illuminated orb. The light went out and the orb crashed to the floor, Apollo picked it up and disposed of it down a chute. Apollo then turned smugly to Garcia. Garcia struggled to raise his weapon at Apollo.

“It will only block my access to this Universe for a short time, Garcia. And I could certainly kill you before you got another shot off. I saved you from Hades this time, but don’t think I’ve done you any favors, son of Kirk. I have plans for you yet. If you survive this place, then you can live a little longer, but I will have my vengeance on you and your blood line.”

Apollo disappeared in a blaze of glory, a whirlwind of light, leaving his orb which transported out. Garcia swallowed and slumped to the floor.

Thomas was the first one to stand up and say anything. “Holy shit, Garcia. Who did you go and piss off?”

Garcia gave his best impression of being an innocent victim.

“We need to get out of here,” Gary said, picking up Isis and petting her soothingly.

“Right, help him,” Thomas said to the girls. He went and opened the door. Outside the door were a McCoy Borg, a gray drone Borg, and a Gray warrior Borg. No one had yet seen a grey warrior, and it would have been scary enough without the Borg accouterments. Its double torso and head seemed disproportionate to the legs, and each of the four arms had a different Borg appendage. Thomas blasted the drone sending it staggering back into the warrior. The door shut. He blasted the controls, hoping that would slow them down. “We’re not going out that way.”

Deanna put her hand in a recess on the opposite wall, thinking it would open a door. An opening in the ceiling appeared and a cascade of water fell through the opening, creating a pillar of water that lead up to the ceiling. The bubbles cleared. A light shone down through the water.

“We’ll have to swim up to the next room,” Garcia said.

Carter backed away from the water. “Oh, no. Hell no. I’m not going in the water.”

Isis hissed in an agreement.

“It appears to be the only way out,” Gary said, trying to console his cat.

“I don’t care. I’ll become a Borg before I go in the water,” Carter said.

“Nancy,” Garcia tried to calm her. “I am sure whatever killed Newel is not up there.”



The door above closed and the column of water collapsed, splashing everyone. “Deanna, open it up again. I’ll go and secure safe passage and then come back and get you. I am the best swimmer, after all.”

“Excuse me,” Duana said. “But you just had a brain fart. You need more time to recover after being attacked by Hades. I’ll go.”

Borgs were pounding on the door.

“Make it quick,” Garcia said, not arguing with her.

Duana entered the tube of water, knelt down, stood quickly, and shot up through the column of water. A moment later the door closed and the column of water collapsed. Deanna reopened it and the column of water reformed.

“Let’s move closer to the column,” Thomas recommended.

No one needed much convincing given the increased pounding on the door by the Borg. Everyone moved over towards the column. The opening in the ceiling closed once again, collapsing the column of water, requiring Deanna to open it. She did this twice more before Duana descended down the column of water, head first. She had just passed the opening when the door closed and the column of water collapsed, causing her to fall. She rolled with it, and ended up in a sitting position, shaking out her hair. Garcia gave her a hand up.

“The room above appears to be empty. There’s an airspace at the top, just enough for our heads and its breathable air. There are two doors that lead out, but I chose not to open them,” Duana said.

“Why?” Carter asked.

“Well, I figured if they led to a dry room, all the water would drain out, and we wouldn’t be able to get out of this room,” Duana. “And I don’t think we want to stay here much longer.”

The door had begun to bulge inwards and an opening just large enough for the Borg Gray Warrior to get its fingers in was now visible.

“Alright, Deanna, hit it. Every one is going up now,” Garcia said. “Nancy, kick off your boots. You’re going with me.”

“Oh god,” Carter cried.

Garcia pulled off his boots and stepped into the column of water with Nancy. She was holding her nose and squinting, but she went in. Garcia took her up to the next room. Gary and Duana followed, with Isis clinging to Gary’s back. Ilona and Deanna followed them, and Thomas came up last. Nancy gulped for air as she surfaced, clinging to Garcia. Gary surfaced and Isis climbed to his head. The wet cat was a pitiful sight to behold. After they were all there, Garcia had Nancy let go of him.

“I’m going to go check out the next room. All of you stay here,” Garcia said. “Hold on to Nancy, Duana.”

“Do you want my rifle?” Thomas asked.

“Is that the special model that fires underwater?” Garcia asked.

“Phasers don’t work underwater,” Thomas said. “Oh, never mind.”

“I need to go to the bathroom,” Nancy said.

“Now might be a good time to go,” Ilona said.

“Number two,” Nancy said, looking at Ilona crossly.

Garcia patted Nancy on the shoulder, took a breath, and disappeared into the water.

“He makes it seem so easy,” Nancy said, trembling.

“He has the spirit of a dolphin in him,” Ilona said.

“Do you mean that metaphorically, in the manner of some Native American philosophy, or are you saying he’s a reincarnated dolphin?” Thomas asked.

Before she could answer, Garcia surfaced, and took a breath. “Okay, we’re not going through that door.”

“What did you find?” Gary asked.

“I found the queen mother and she’s huge. There’s no way getting around her without getting caught,” Garcia said.

“Are you sure she was the queen mother?” Ilona asked. “Because we all saw your princess, and she doesn’t seem to resemble some huge floating sea creature.”

“She must metamorphose into the next creature,” Garcia said. “Because I am certain that was the queen. And she has been assimilated. She’s so large, though, it may take a while for the assimilation to take fully, but I could tell it was her.”

“Don’t queens have servants tending to them?” Duana asked.

Carter started to cry. “Oh god. We’re trapped. I know what’s behind that next door and we’re all dead.”

Isis hissed fiercely. “There doesn’t appear to be another way out of here. We have no choice.”

“Maybe, maybe not. Assuming there is something lurking behind door number two, I may be able to level the playing field,” Garcia said, taking a stick of gum from his pocket and putting it in his mouth.

Everyone looked at him as if he were insane. He smiled, complained about soggy gum losing its flavor. Ilona asked if Garcia intended to scare the monster by blowing bubbles. Garcia shook his head and then stuck the gum on the wall at the water line.

“Stand by,” he said, and disappeared below the surface. When he returned he noticed that the water level had indeed dropped.

“What did you do?” Thomas asked.

“I opened the door to down stairs,” Garcia said. “And the water level dropped. I say we do that a couple more dozen times until we flush all the water out of this room, and then we can face whatever lies beyond on our terms.”

“Umm, the Borg are probably down there by now,” Ilona said.

“Borg can’t swim,” Garcia said.

“What makes you so sure about that?” Thomas asked.

“Have you ever seen Borg in a wetsuit?” Garcia asked, and disappeared below the surface again.

“If he doesn’t get us killed, I’m going to kill him,” Gary said.

“Amen, brother,” Thomas agreed.



“Tolro,” Phlam said, gasping. “We got... to set her down... for a bit of a rest.”

“Untie my legs and I can walk,” Seven snapped.

“Alright,” Tolro said, equally out of breath. “Put her down.”

They dropped her and leaned back against the wall.

“Hey!” Seven protested being dropped, after the fact.

“Someone put a gag in her mouth,” Tolro said.

“I know why the humans clothe their women, but why do the Borg clothe their women?” Riko asked.

“The Borg... don’t care... about women,” Tolro said, still catching his breath. “The way we care... about women. No paternal instinct.”

Muja started screaming. A Borg was approaching from their rear.

“Let’s go!” Tolro said. “No, leave her. Let’s go.”

They took off running, disappearing around the corner. Seven struggled with her binding, but it was to no avail. The door beside her opened and a flow of water descended upon her. As it washed down the hall, the approaching Borg tripped and fell in the onslaught of water. Garcia and Carter washed out into the hall and managed to get up.

“See,” Garcia said. “That wasn’t too bad.”

Sounds of phaser fire from inside the room continued, as Thomas finished off the creature within. Duana came out brandishing a phaser. “Hey, look what I found.”

“Tam?!” Carter said, pointing to the Borg on the floor.

Seven looked up at him as the water receded from around her. “Would you mind, please, untying me?”

“Duana?” Tam asked.

Duana reached down and pinched the bindings off Seven’s legs and stood her up. At the same time, down the hall, the Borg managed to recover his footing and began his march up the corridor. Duana fired. Thomas joined her in a second burst. The Borg fell. Another appeared around the corner.

“I think we should leave,” Garcia said. “Come on. This way.”

"My hands?" Seven asked.

"Duana?" Garcia asked.

"Are you sure? She's a Borg," Duana said.

"I was freed from the Collective by Captain Kathryn Janeway. I am no longer Borg," Seven assured them.

"Cut her loose," Garcia told Duana.

"What, you're just going to believe her because she dropped the name of a Captain you served under?" Ilona asked.

"We don't have time for this," Thomas said. "They've adapted."

"Follow me," Garcia instructed.

They followed Garcia around the corner, with Duana and Thomas trailing behind, firing their weapons. Carter slid to a halt, grabbing Garcia's arm. "Hey, this is it! The Horizon."

"Quick, everyone, before the door closes," Garcia said.

They rushed down the flex tube and were surprised not to find the Horizon, but the airlock of a Ferengi vessel.

"That explained the Ferengi," Thomas said. "It'll take a few minutes for me to open this control panel and hot open the airlock."

"We need to do it before they back up," Garcia said. "The ice has formed a seal against the hull."

"May I?" Duana said, and punched the control panel. The control panel fell away and she reached and pulled out the remaining mechanism. Her hand morphed to access the computer chip and the door opened.

They entered and found themselves in the control center of the Ferengi vessel. Garcia went to the controls and started going through a start up procedure. Nothing seemed to be responding.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing? You can read Ferengi?" Thomas asked.

"He's doing it correctly." Seven assured him.

"Oh, I guess you read Ferengi, too?" Thomas said.

"I do, actually," Seven responded.

"The controls have been rerouted. I've got to go to the engine room and do it from there," Garcia said.

"Wait," Gary said. "Look, somebody has to go back in there, find the power source, and blow the hive up."

"Right now, we need to save ourselves, secure better weapons, and regroup," Garcia said.

"I know where the power source is," Seven said.

"How do you know where the power source is?" Thomas asked.

"I saw the Borg creating access points along the main power grid line," Seven said. "They're preparing to establish Borg sleep chambers."

"Take me there and I'll take care of the rest," Gary said.

"Now, just a damn minute," Thomas said. "I'm the highest ranking Officer here, and I will make the determination who goes and who stays."

An open lift from the lower level rose to the command deck, bringing with it three Borg. Two in front, and one behind. The one behind was Locutus of Borg. "Your lives as you have known them are now over. From this point forward, you will service the Borg."

"Oh, bloody hell," Garcia said. "That way, everyone. To the shuttle bay."

Thomas and Duana fired at the approaching Borg, but they had already adapted their shielding. They retreated, following the others. They locked themselves into the shuttle bay, which was strangely absent of the one shuttle that it should have had.

"This is not going to end well," Thomas said.

"Over here," Garcia said. "There's one life pod left."

"It's not big enough for all of us," Seven said.

"Well, I don't think the Ferengi Engineers had humans in mind when they built it," Carter said.

"Carter, you're in. You have to be there for your daughter," Garcia said. "Seven, you, too."

"I must direct you to the main power source," Seven said.

"I was going to have you do that, whatever your name is," Garcia said.

“My name is Seven. Did you not just order me into the life pod?” Seven asked.

“No, I was talking to him. His name is Gary Seven,” Garcia said.

“Can we hurry this up?” Deanna said.

“Garcia, returning to blow up the hive is a suicide mission,” Nancy said.

“Maybe, maybe not,” Garcia said. “Um, Seven? and I may be able to get to the portal and evacuate before it blows.”

“How are you going to blow it?” Thomas asked.

Gary handed Garcia his pen. “Just twist this, push in and then pull, and then throw it on the floor. You’ll have five minutes to make your escape. And once you activate it, there’s no stopping it.”

“We still have to blow up this Ferengi ship,” Thomas said. “I guess that falls to me.”

“No,” Garcia said. “You’re in the life pod. Deanna, your mission is to blow this ship up.”

“I’m not letting you send a woman to do my job,” Thomas said.

“She’s a hologram, and if I live, she’ll still be in my head,” Garcia said. “You’re going back to help our crew, and, if need be, clean up anything that I don’t finish. They’ll need you.”

Thomas put his foot down. “I am not leaving this job unfinished,” he said. “You are a cadet, with rank, but still a cadet. I am in charge here.”

Garcia put his arm around his back. “You’re right,” Garcia said, seeming chummy. “I need you...” And then he gave him a Vulcan nerve pinch. “To not argue with me right now.”

They stuffed Thomas into the life pod. Garcia then turned to Duana and Ilona. “I want you to power down your systems.”

“What?” Duana and Ilona said simultaneously.

“If I don’t make it, your portable HROV’s may come in handy for the other Garcia on Iotia,” Garcia said. “So, power down. Now.”

Duana and Ilona both frowned equally, but they complied. Their bodies disappeared leaving the illuminated orbs that were the Preserver’s HROV’s. The spheres went dark and Garcia caught them in his open hands. He handed these to Nancy. “Make sure Garcia gets them.”

“I don’t understand,” Nancy said.

“You will,” Garcia said. “Good luck.”

He pulled the lever, the double doors closed, and then they were away. He turned to his remaining companions, Troi and Seven. “There should be a weapons locker over here somewhere. Let’s get this over with.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"Are you sure this party is such a good idea?" Trini asked, following "the commune" into the elevator. "We'll be out in the open."

"It's against my better judgment, but we were given orders to attend by the Mann himself," Garcia said. "The security at the party seems adequate. And, this will afford me the opportunity to do some more research. I want to find out more about the celebrities that grace this planet. Are they real or are they aliens in disguise."

"You are joking, right? What are you going to do? Ask, hey, are you an alien invader?" Lenar asked, his eyes glancing up towards the elevator cam as if to remind Garcia they were still on camera. "As if they would tell you if they were."

Garcia was straightening his tie in the elevator's mirror. His eyes went from his tie to his group and offered a broad smile that didn't answer Lenar's question. Kletsova, Trini, and Lenar turned to face the elevator doors as they closed, each frowning objectively at Garcia's 'mission.' Niki was the only one all aglow. She pushed the button for the ground level.

"I can't believe we're really on an away mission," Niki said. "And it's a party, to boot. And, we look so sharp!"

"I hate ties," Garcia mumbled, adjusted it one final time, and then turned to face the front of the lift. There was practically a reception waiting for them in the lobby with reporters ready to follow them towards the waiting limousine. "Don't let it go to your head, Niki. It's all an illusion which is just as likely to dissipate like the bubbles in a bath."

"Life is so strange," Niki sang.

"Oh, dear, not the Missing Person's tune again," Kletsova whimpered.

"But it's so applicable to us," Niki said.

But the damage was already done; Garcia's mind went right to the song, "Destination Unknown," by Missing Persons and the video that they had made in tribute to Missing Persons, with an emphasis on the 80's retro look. Niki only had to hum two to three notes of any one song and Garcia's mind took off with that musical tangent. The most troubling to Garcia was the fact that it was getting harder for him to resist those tangents. Thanks to Niki, a full blown musical was whirling through his head as they exited the lift and walked out into the lobby and into a barrage of press cameras flashing at them as if they were the focus of a phaser fight:

Life is so strange when you don't know  
How can you tell where you're going to  
You can't be sure of any situation  
Something could change and then you won't know  
You ask yourself  
Where do we go from here  
It seems so all too near  
Just as far beyond as I can see  
I still don't know what this all means to me  
So you tell yourself  
I have nowhere to go  
I don't know what to do  
And I don't even know the time of day  
I guess it doesn't matter any way  
Life is so strange  
Destination unknown  
When you don't know  
Your destination  
Something could change  
It's unknown  
And then you won't know  
Destination unknown  
You ask yourself  
When will my time come  
Has it all been said and done  
I know I'll leave when its my time to go

'Til then I'll carry on with what I know  
Life is so strange  
Destination unknown  
When you don't know  
Your destination  
Something could change  
It's unknown  
And then you won't know  
Destination unknown.

An hour later they entered the home of Mann, greeted enthusiastically by his wife. She led them around on a brief tour of the main floor and then escorted them out back where most of the guest had gathered to mingle and drink. After Mrs. Mann was sure they were comfortable, she excused herself to greet more guest.

"Lenar, do a security sweep," Garcia said. "Tatiana, stick with Niki."

Lenar ducked away from the group and began a survey of the security situation, looking very casual as he did so. Niki began to protest:

"I don't need a baby sitter," she said. "I'm practically an adult."

"Practically is not the same as actually, and I am not about to have you mingling with a bunch of people who take the gangster life style very seriously, even if every one here is a celebrity gangster," Garcia said.

Paula Abdul rushed up to Garcia. "Oh, I am so glad you made it," she said, grabbing him by the hand.

"Did we have a choice?" Garcia asked.

"Not really," Paula laughed, and slipped her arm under Garcia's arm and started to lead him away from his group. "Come with me. I want you to meet someone."

Before he could protest, he was dragged away as Lenar returned. "Mann's security seems to be adequate," Lenar said. "Where's Tam going?"

"Guess," KLetsova said. "Come on, Niki. Let's go hit the buffet."

The four of them filled their plates with various foods, some of which looked familiar, but tasting proved them to be not so. Trini explained the discrepancy in taste to appearance in that the Iotians could see the food and get the look, but without a recipe chances were it would not be the same. She then lamented about how none of her family ever used a recipe, or even measuring devices, and, consequently, every time they cooked it came out a little different. Niki grabbed her wrist.

"Oh my god, that is REM on the stage!" Niki said.

"R E M?" Lenar asked. "As in rapid eye movment?"

"Yes, actually. They have a really nice sound, and their lyrics are so full of meaning," Niki said, and then she spotted Garcia in the crowd. "Can I go be with Tam?"

"No," Tatiana said.

"But he's chatting with Jewel," Niki whined.

"Chatting her up, more likely," Kletsova countered. "Heads up. Man coming this way."

"Oh, that's Robert Palmer," Niki said. "We did one of his songs. All Around the World."

"That's him?" Trini asked.

Robert introduced himself to them and then he singled out Trini. "The next musicians are going to perform a tango. Would you dance with me?"

"I would love to," Trini said, putting her plate down on the table the Garcia commune had claimed.

"I'll be back," Trini told them, and walked off to chat with Robert.

Kletsova flagged the waitress. "You could bring me a memosa, please."

"Make that two," Niki said, testing Tatiana again.

Kletsova nodded to the waitress, indicating with her fingers, very little champagne in the orange juice. The waitress smiled, knowingly.

"Really?" Niki asked.

"We'll keep it our little secret," Kletsova said.

"Gee, thanks..." Niki said.

Everytime Kletsova spied Garcia, there always seemed to be a few girls hovering around him, and several men who were more likely there for a chance to chat with any of the ladies that failed to hold Garcia's interest. Martha Quinn slipped her arm in Garcia's arm and was about to lead him away for a more private conversation when Maria da Graça Meneghel, otherwise known as Xuxa, intercepted them.

"Excuse me, Star Fleet," Xuxa said, with a very strong Brazilian accent. "May I have this dance?"

"Well, I was just about to take him..." Martha began.

"I know, and I would like just one dance before you do, if that's alright with you, Star Fleet," Xuxa said.

"It's okay," Garcia assured Martha, patting her hand. "We'll talk some more later."

"Promise?" Martha asked.

"Promise," Garcia said.

Xuxa took him by the hand and led him to the designated dance floor, rather forcefully, as if to intimidate anyone else attempting to take Garcia's company. They embraced for the dance, and moved off across the floor with the first notes of the tango.

"Why are you here, Star Fleet?" Xuxa asked. "Hasn't Earth done enough damage already?"

Garcia was a little taken back. Was Xuxa questioning him as if she believed he was really Star Fleet or was she just playing along? "I don't guess I know what you mean."

"Are you really Star Fleet?" Xuxa asked.

"Of course," Garcia answered, which was verbally and technically truthful, but the tonality suggested a falsehood.

"What's your mission?" Xuxa asked.

"What's your mission?" Garcia asked.

"I'm an advocate for child and animal protection laws," Xuxa said. "I run an orphanage in New Brazil and the profits from my show help both children and wild life sanctuaries. I don't suppose you have actually seen one of my shows."

The music called for them to separate for a moment, but when he came back to her, he answered, "Why, yes. And I actually love it. I like the opening when you descend down from the UFO. Nice. But mostly I like the love and energy you provide for your audience. Lots of energy and with all the kids jumping about. There's no wondering why it's a success."

"So, why are you here?" Xuxa asked again. "What's your mission?"

"Same as yours," Garcia said. "And if you like, I would love to donate some moneys to your causes."

"What's the catch?" Xuxa asked.

"No catch," Garcia said.

Xuxa seemed suspicious. She spun away and came back in. "Aren't you violating the prime directive being here and doing the things you are doing?"

"Do you want my assistance, or what?" Garcia asked, bending her over his knee. He looked down into her eyes, trying to win her with his charm. He stood her up, spun her out and then back in.

The music stopped and she let go of him, and for a moment she seemed to be reappraising him. "I'm sorry. I came on too strong. I was thinking maybe you weren't what and who you say you are. You just came out of nowhere and blindsided this culture. A culture already too easily caught up in celebrity tabloids and Earth culture. They gravitate towards your kind of energy," Xuxa said.

"What kind of energy is that?" Garcia asked.

"Again, I was mistaken. I am sorry..." Xuxa said.

"No, what sort of energy are you referring to?" Garcia asked.

"The charismatic, high energy, evil leader type, like Earth's Hitler who nearly took over the world. I mean, it is bad enough Kirk actually did take over the world here, instituting his own form of government, but at least he disappeared and left the work in the hands of the locals," Xuxa said.

"I'm not sure I like being equated with the likes of Hitler," Garcia said.

Music began to play around them. She offered her hands to him and he reluctantly took them and they danced. He nearly stumbled as Duana and Ilona danced by, Duana winking at him. "Again, I am sorry. I was

simply skeptical about your intentions, about who I thought you might be. I mean, you have to admit, you became a sensation over night.”

“I did, and if I have any power to persuade, I hope that my presence will lead the Iotians towards a more peaceful future,” Garcia said.

“Time will tell,” Xuxa said. After the dance she excused herself.

Garcia wanted more time with her, but as soon as she was gone, another person stepped up to take her place. It seemed that everyone wanted a piece of his action. He danced with another, chatted with several people after that, but all the while, he kept an eye on his group. Trini was actually chatting with several admirers. Lenar was doing his security routine, from all appearances. That, or he was chasing people away from him with some magical aura.

Garcia spied the table where Kletsova and Niki were sitting. He headed in that direction, but it seemed for every step he made he was intercepted by guests that wanted nothing more than to make his acquaintance. One of the guests wanted to tell Garcia a personal UFO encounter and so they retired to a place more conducive to a quiet conversation. But even there, in the study in front of the fire place, a group of people gathered to listen. Mostly, they just wanted to be next to Garcia, hoping for a hand shake or even just a simple nod in their direction, an acknowledgement that he recognized their existence in this crazy world. By the time he excused himself from this new group, he was famished. He headed for the buffet table, but again he found his path blocked by an admirer.

“Hello, Garcia?” the lady asked. “I’m Shirley MacLaine.”

“A pleasure,” Garcia said, kissing her hand.

“I was so hoping to hear one of your fantastical stories,” Shirley said. “Do you do private readings?”

“Um, not usually,” Garcia said, his eyes wandering over the crowd looking for an avenue of escape without appearing as if he was trying to escape.

“Because I get a lot of flack about telling people how I have been reincarnated, but you don’t seem to care what people think,” Shirley said. “And you seem so sincere and kind. I like that about you. I almost feel like we’ve met somewhere before.”

“I’m actually hearing that a lot, lately,” Garcia said. “And I would love to chat with you about this.”

“Really?” Shirley asked. “When would be good for you?”

Garcia fished out a card and handed it to her. “I really do want to know more, but I promised someone a dance. Would you contact me at your convenience? And feel free to drop by the Garcia Commune any time.”

“I will,” Shirley said, kissing him on the cheek. “Thank you.”

“Again, my pleasure,” Garcia said, taking both her hands in his, affectionately, before excusing himself. He turned and walked right into another guest.

“Would you like to dance?” the girl asked.

Garcia spied Kletsova and Niki, still at the table. Someone was talking to Tatiana, but Niki was looking rather bored and sad. That’s when he became aware that there weren’t any kids her age present and that this was a party more for adults. But even had there been kids her age, he really hadn’t encouraged her to mingle freely, and so he felt compelled to lift her spirits.

“I would love to,” Garcia said. “However, I promised that girl over there a dance.”

“Maybe later, then?” she asked.

“Maybe,” Garcia said, trying to be sincere, and offering a gracious smile. He was beginning to feel a little frustrated. There was only so much of him to go around and he couldn’t be everywhere at once! Maybe he should clone himself next time he passed through a Kelvan transporter, he half joked.

Garcia snuck up on Niki and tapped her on the shoulder, intentionally startling her. She gave him one of her mad faces. “Don’t do that. I’m ready to go home.”

“Would you dance with me first?” Garcia asked.

“Really?” she asked, her posture improving.

Garcia answered by offering her his hand and led her up to the dance floor. They finished dancing to a song about UFO’s by the B’52s, followed by a few other popular B’52 hits, including, Rock Lobster, Roam, and Love Shack. Garcia was confused by one of the words in the Love Shack song, hearing ‘Tan Ru’ instead



of 'tin roof.' How did they know about Tan Ru? The alien probe that had had a run in with the Earth probe Nomad?

If you see a faded sign by the side of the road that says  
15 miles to the... Love Shack! Love Shack yeah  
I'm headin' down the Atlanta highway,  
lookin' for the love getaway  
Heading for the love getaway, love getaway,  
I got me a car, it's as big as a whale  
and we're headin' on down  
To the Love Shack  
I got me a Chrysler, it seats about 20  
So hurry up and bring your jukebox money  
The Love Shack is a little old place  
where we can get together  
Love Shack baby, Love Shack bay-bee.  
Love baby, that's where it's at,  
Ooo love baby, that's where it's at  
Sign says.. Woo... stay away fools,  
'cause love rules at the Lo-o-ove Shack!  
Well it's set way back in the middle of a field,  
Just a funky old shack and I gotta get back  
Glitter on the mattress  
Glitter on the highway  
Glitter on the front porch  
Glitter on the hallway  
The Love Shack is a little old place  
where we can get together  
Love Shack bay-bee! Love Shack baby!  
Love Shack, that's where it's at!  
Huggin' and a kissin', dancin' and a lovin',  
wearin' next to nothing  
Cause it's hot as an oven  
The whole shack shimmies!  
The whole shack shimmies when everybody's  
Movin' around and around and around and around!  
Everybody's movin', everybody's groovin' baby!  
Folks linin' up outside just to get down  
Everybody's movin', everybody's groovin' baby  
Funky little shack! Funk-y little shack!  
Hop in my Chrysler,  
it's as big as a whale  
and it's about to set sail!  
I got me a car, it seats about twenty  
So c'mon and bring your jukebox money.  
The Love Shack is a little old place  
where we can get together  
Love Shack baby! Love Shack bay-bee!  
(Love Shack...Love Shack...)  
Love Shack, that's where it's at!  
Bang bang bang on the door baby!  
Knock a little louder baby!  
Bang bang bang on the door baby!  
I can't hear you  
Bang bang on the door baby  
Bang bang on the door  
Bang bang on the door baby  
Bang bang  
You're what?... TAN RU, rusted!  
Love Shack, baby Love Shack!  
Love Shack, baby Love Shack!  
Love baby, that's where it's at  
Love Shack, baby Love Shack!  
Love baby, that's where it's at  
Huggin' and a kissin',  
dancin' and a lovin' at the love shack

Garcia wanted instantly to meet them, but the next artist to do sets was taking the stage and his voice was unmistakable. Garcia and Niki recognized the distinctive voice as he greeted everyone: Barry White. Niki grabbed Garcia's arm in anticipation, but bent the odds in her favor by yelling, "You're my first!" Barry saw her and smiled. "You heard the lady in Star Fleet," he said. So, Barry started the set off with, "You're my first, my last, my everything." Niki clapped excitedly. "The Ally MacBeal dance? You know it?" she

asked Garcia. He nodded and as they followed through the steps, others on the dance floor began to join them, copying their moves, creating a line dance.

The next couple of sets brought up some more energetic artists, ranging from punk and metal to big band and jitterbug. It took a while to tire Niki out, but he finally exhausted her. Towards the end, Tatiana, Trini, and Lenar, joined them. For a moment, it did seem as if all their cares were far away and that they were actually having fun. The last band to play invited Star Fleet up to perform with them, and together they performed "Life's Been Good To Me," with Joe Walsh himself. They were kept busy entertaining or dancing until the moment they left, meaning the only opportunity Garcia had to eat was on the ride back home. Trini made him a plate, Lenar got him a drink, and as their ride whisked them away, Niki slept, leaning against him.



"Yes, we're in the office. Come on up," Garcia said into the phone.

A moment later Paula entered the Star Fleet Singer's office, finding them all busy at work, slaving over their respective terminals. Niki immediately got up and hugged Paula. Garcia was hovering over Trini, watching what she was doing.

"There's got to be a full text online," Garcia said.

"No, there doesn't 'got' to be anything online. All the references suggest that the only copy is at the Library of Congress," Trini said. "And it will literally take an act of Congress to get access to it."

"What's that?" Paula asked.

"One of the oldest written documents Iotia has ever produced," Trini said. "Just doing some research for a story line Garcia wants to pursue."

"I could put a call into the President and ask to give you a pass," Paula said.

"You know the President?" Niki asked.

"No, I was just kidding," Paula said. "Don't look so glum. I can ask Mann, and Mann can talk to our local representative, and he can get you a pass."

"Thank you," Garcia said.

"Why are you interested in that stuff?" Paula asked.

"You should be interested in that stuff," Garcia said. "It's who you were before you met aliens."

"We were naïve, children. We're much more advanced now. Put away childish things, you know," Paula said, sitting on the desk. "We're warriors."

"Those who don't know history are doomed to repeat it," Garcia said.

"Those who know history know that you repeat it anyway," Paula said. "Yes, I read your interview and the magazines rebuttal."

"Tam?" Lenar called him to his terminal. "You want to take a look at this?"

Garcia went to Lenar, but Lenar's voice was so enthusiastic that it drew everyone to his station. On the screen was an image of a crop circle, only it wasn't cut into a crop, but a rain forest. Niki made a noise that suggested she was impressed.

"A satellite mapping project caught this yesterday," Lenar said. "It hasn't been officially released yet."

"How did you get access to it?" Paula said.

"Just how big is it?" Kletsova asked.

"Point five kilometers on the north south axis, and point two kilometers on the east west axis," Lenar said, choosing not to answer Paula's question.

"Impressive," Trini said. "It must have taken months for tractors to clear that area."

"No, this formation wasn't here on the first pass of the satellite," Lenar said. "And, it is in the middle of a rain forest. It's not likely that this is a man made phenomena."

"Maybe the photo is doctored," Kletsova said. "Photos can be faked, you know."

"Possibly," Lenar agreed. "The source isn't reliable."

"How long would it take to fly down there?" Garcia asked.

"Commercial airlines? Two days," Lenar said.

"You don't have time to run off into the jungle," Paula said. "You have concerts scheduled and you have guests coming."

"Tam, do you really think you would find something there?" Kletsova asked.

“Probably not,” Garcia admitted. He sighed and walked back to his station and sat down. He turned his chair towards the window and stared out at the city sky line.

“Cheer up,” Paula said, massaging his shoulders. “I got a treat lined up for you this weekend.”

“Really?” Niki asked.

“Yep,” Paula said. “Mann arranged to have you perform at Sea Park.”

“Can’t do that,” Garcia said

“Yes, you can,” Paula said. “I’ve adjusted your schedule to make it possible.”

“No, you don’t understand,” Garcia said. “I can not attend a sea park of any sort.”

“Oh, Tam,” Niki protested. “I think it’ll be fun.”

“I can not condone the confinement of sentient beings,” Garcia said. “And that’s just the number one reason I can’t attend the Sea Park.”

“So, you’re saying that it is wrong to keep sentient beings confined in small spaces?” Niki asked.

“Exactly,” Garcia said.

“Well, then, I am going to have to lodge an official protest,” Niki said. “You’re going to have to take me out.”

“You walked right into that one, Tam,” Kletsova said, whistling.

“The Sea Park is compulsory,” Paula said. “Mann owed the owner a favor and he’s cashing in by having you perform this weekend.”

“And I want to go out,” Niki said. “And let me tell you why. You Know how you can teach a rabbit to push a button by giving it a pellet everytime it complies? Well, pushing that mouse button is that button, and every picture or new web site is my pellet, and I’m getting addicted, so I want to go out, I want to meet people, I want to play games, I want to do something. Alright?”

“Fine,” Garcia surrendered. “Paula, could you have a car brought around for me, please?”

“Sure,” Paula said.

“Let Mann know that we’ll perform at Sea Park,” Garcia said. “But don’t be surprised if something strange happens. Also, I want a favor. I want access to the Library of Congress, for Trini and Lenar.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Paula said. “Can you and I sing and dance later? Just for the show?”

“It would be an honor to sing and dance with you,” Garcia said. “Tatiana, Niki, you’re with me. Trini, Lenar, why don’t you head over to the library and see what you can’t dig up.”



The parking lot for the hotel was underneath the hotel. The car Paula had produced for them was a red Mustang. Garcia tossed the keys to Niki as they approached the car. “You’re driving,” he said.

“I am?” Niki asked.

“Tam?!” Kletsova said.

“She needs to learn to drive,” Garcia said.

“No she doesn’t,” Kletsova argued.

“Yes I do,” Niki said. “This is going to be so much fun.”

“It’s a better pellet than pushing the mouse button,” Garcia said. “A learning experience guaranteed to make more neural connections.”

Kletsova held her breath and comments and climbed into the back. Niki was about to get in, but Garcia stopped her.

“No,” Garcia said. “First, do a walk around. Make sure the car fuel door is closed. Check the tires. Look for oil leaks under the car. Make sure the hood and trunk are closed. Look to see if there is anyone in your vehicle. Always do a walk around and look for obstructions you might not have seen from inside the car, like bottles or nails.”

“Really?” Niki asked. “I never see them do this on TV.”

“This is real life,” Garcia said.

“Tam, really,” Kletsova said. “It’s not like this is an airplane.”

“Same principle,” Garcia said.

Niki walked around the car, looked under the car, looked around the car, and gave Garcia a thumbs up. They then got in and Garcia proceeded to instruct Niki on how to adjust the seat and mirrors.

“Okay, fasten your seat belt,” Niki said.

“I don’t need the restraint,” Garcia said.

“But it’s the law,” Niki said. “I saw the commercial. Seat belts save lives.”

“So do airbags and inertia dampners,” Garcia said. “As well as being a good driver. The seat belts only protect you in a rear or front end collision. The odds of them protecting you in a roll over or a side hit are slim to none.”

“Then why do they make the commercials?” Niki asked.

“Because the state gets Federal money for highways, but only if they have a certain level of compliance from motorists, because the car industry had their lobbyist petition the government for watering down the safety laws, which would have made it compulsory for car manufacturers to install airbags in the first place. Seat belts were cheaper.”

“Why would they cut cost on safety?” Niki asked.

“Are we going to teach her to drive, or teach her Garcia’s list of conspiracy theories?” Kletsova asked.

Garcia sighed and fastened his seat belt. He then proceeded to instruct her on the use of the pedals, the clutch, the brake and gas, and the shifter, before they even started the car.

“Can’t I learn on an automatic?” Niki asked.

“No. Once you’ve learned to drive a manual transmission, you can drive anything,” Garcia said.

“Now, put the car in neutral and start the car. Good. Now, engage the clutch and hold it down. Step on the accelerator. I want you to rev the car’s RPM’s up to two thousand and hold it. Good. Now three thousand. One thousand. Good. Release the parking break. Put the car in first. Now, hold the RPM’s at one thousand and slowly release the clutch.”

The car began to move forwards. “I’m driving!” Niki shouted.

“Yes, you are,” Garcia said. “Now stop.”

Niki let up on the accelerator and stepped on the break. She stepped on it much too hard and failed to step in on the clutch. Garcia explained what she did wrong and had her repeat the process until she could stop without jerking them or stalling the engine. From there, he had her drive circles around the parking garage, which was empty of other vehicles on Garcia’s request. To add to her driving around the garage, he put a coin on the dash board and instructed her to make turns without the coin sliding off. Once she had proven that she had the concepts down, he instructed her to drive up the ramp. He had her practice stopping and engaging the engine on the incline before they proceeded out onto the streets.

“You’re really doing very well,” Kletsova praised her, since Garcia was apparently not going to.

“I have a good teacher,” Niki said, smiling at Garcia.

“Eyes on the road,” Garcia said. “And don’t hold the wheel so tight. Be loose. Firm, but loose. Haven’t you ever wondered why you hear about how a drunk driver caused an accident and the drunk comes out without a scratch, but the victim comes out with broken legs and arms?”

“Why is that?” Niki asked.

“It’s because the drunk is loose and flows with the accident, while the other driver tenses up, bracing for the impact,” Garcia said.

“Umm, then maybe instead of making airbags for cars, they should have a system that injects a sedative into the person right at impact,” Niki said.

Kletsova burst out laughing. “Good one, Niki,” Tatiana said.

“Okay,” Garcia said. “You’re staring at the road. Move your eyes.”

“You told me to look at the road!” Niki said.

“Yes, I want you to look at the road. Then look at your instrument cluster, the RPM’s, your speedometer, then back to the road. Look to your left at the driver passing you. Just make sure they aren’t on a cell phone, or reading a book, or eating, or putting on makeup,” Garcia said. “If they are, give them some space, because they aren’t paying attention to what they should be doing, which is driving. Notice things. Keep your eyes moving. Stay focused on driving. But relax. Relax your grip. You don’t have to choke the steering wheel.”

“I’m trying to relax,” Niki said. “Maybe if you’d tell a joke.”

“Alright. I was in Chicago the other day and I asked this chap if he knew what time it was. He answered by saying, does anyone really know what time it is. Does anyone really care,” Garcia said.

Niki laughed. “That’s really clever!” Niki said.

“I don’t get it,” Kletova said.

“It’s a song, by Chicago,” Niki explained.

“Still don’t get it,” Kletsova said.

“Oh, I got one for you, Tam,” Niki said. “What’s the favorite song of a lumberjack?”

“Too easy,” Garcia said. “Tree Falling, by Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers.”

“Oh, sweet,” Niki said. “Umm, how do you know Tony Danza is gay?”

“Who’s Tony Danza?” Tatiana asked.

“He’s a TV celebrity,” Garcia answered. “But he’s not gay.”

“Just pretend,” Niki said.

“About a clue?” Garcia asked.

“You’re favorite knight,” Niki said.

“Sir Harrison?” Garcia asked.

“No, Sir Elton John,” Niki said.

“Oh my god, Niki,” Garcia said, shaking his head sadly. “Hold me closer Tony Danza.”

Niki laughed.

“Eyes, on the road,” Garcia corrected her.

“I don’t get it,” Tatiana said. “Which seems to be par for this game.”

“The real song is ‘hold me closer tiny dancer.’ You’re just too good at this game,” Niki said. “You’re turn.”

“Okay, how about the favorite song of a plumber?” Garcia asked.

“Running down the drain, by Tom Petty, same album as the last Petty song,” Niki said. “Way too easy, Tam, got to keep away from Petty.”

“I like Petty,” Garcia said. He sang: “You got lucky, babe.” And then he and Niki sang together, “When I found you.”

“I love that video. With the cars from Logan’s run! In the video,” Niki exclaimed.

“Logan’s Run?” Tatiana asked.

“Oh, I got one,” Niki interrupted, leaving Tatiana in the dark. “What’s the favorite song of a clean voyeur?”

“I give,” Garcia said, after a moment of thinking about it.

“Washing you,” Niki said. “By the Police.”

“Calling you on that one. Sing it,” Garcia said.

“Every step you make, every breath you take, I’ll be washing you,” Niki said.

“Nice,” Garcia said. “Thanks to you, I’ll be singing that the rest of the day.”

“You asked me to,” Niki said.

“I did,” Garcia agreed. “Oh, pull over up here.”

Niki pulled up off the road, her focus intent on looking for hazards instead of admiring the frozen lake that Garcia had her pull up towards.

“Now, over there, and out onto the lake,” Garcia instructed.

Niki’s mouth went open and her eyes wide. She stopped the car.

“Have you lost your mind?” Kletsova asked him. “You don’t know how thick that ice is.”

“Actually, based on recent temperatures, and today’s wind and temperature, and the fact that this is an artificial lake with no warm currents being fed in, I believe the ice is thick enough for our purposes,” Garcia said.

“Tam, is this one of those test where you’re just evaluating whether or not I would do something stupid like drive out onto a lake just because an adult or someone I admire told me to?” Niki asked.

Garcia chuckled. “Good question. This is not a test. I authorize you to drive out onto this lake.”

“Maybe I should get out here,” Kletsova said.

“It’s pretty cold outside,” Garcia said.

“Not as cold as it is underwater,” Kletsova said.

“We’ll be fine,” Garcia said. “Niki, engage!”

Kletsova rolled her eyes, gripped the seat, and Niki drove out onto the ice, and immediately lost control of the car. It started to skid. Niki tried correcting but only accelerated the spin. After a moment of total confusion and no direction from Garcia, the car came to a halt towards the middle of the ice. Kletsova gave Garcia an evil glare.

“What did I do wrong?” Niki asked.

“Nothing,” Garcia said. “I wanted you to feel what a skid is like. Now, let’s proceed slowly, and I will instruct you on how to control the skid. For starters, when you start to skid, turn into the skid. And never hit the breaks. Release the accelerator and coast to a stop.”

“You mean turn away from the skid?” Niki asked.

“Only if you want to do another donut,” Garcia said. “But, we can do it again if you like. That’s the best way to learn.”

After Garcia got Niki up to speed, he allowed her to have a little fun by doing donuts and sudden stops, skidding all over the ice. It was all fun and games until the windshield cracked. Garcia released Niki’s seat belt and pulled her down.

“What?” Niki asked. “Did I do something wrong?”

“Stay down,” Garcia said. “Tanya? You hurt?”

“No,” Kletsova answered. “Did you see where it came from?”

Garcia’s window exploded and he ducked. Two more gunshots hit the car.

“We can’t stay here!” Kletsova said.

“Niki, crawl to my floor board, now,” Garcia instructed. He opened his door, got out, closed the door, and slid himself under the car to the other side, where he quickly got back in the car. He started the car and got it moving.

“Tanya, can you fire your phaser?” Garcia asked.

“Not through the glass,” Kletsova answered.

Another shot hit the front windshield, increasing the spider web pattern. A whole appeared in the passenger side seat. Garcia made a fist and made as if he were going to punch out the windshield. The front and rear windshields flew out away from the car from his telekinetic burst of energy. This happened simultaneously with climbing the bank of the lake. Another shot hit the car. He spun in the gravel, stirring up dust before heading out onto the road. Kletsova peered out the back, phaser in hand. There were several Red Shirts running to get a shot at their car. She managed to drop one.

“Good thing they’re amateurs,” Kletsova said.

“We’re not done, yet,” Garcia said.

That’s when Kletsova saw the van stopping to get the shooters. Several cars fell behind their mustang, and she could clearly see the driver’s wearing Red Shirts.

“What do they want?” Kletsova asked.

“They want me dead,” Garcia said.

“What did you do to them?” Kletsova asked.

“Nothing,” Garcia said.

“Tam?!” Kletsova said.

“Honestly. I didn’t do anything,” Garcia said. “Stand by,” he said, switching to his implant. He had already placed a call via his implant to his cell phone direct to Trini. She finally answered her phone.

“Tam, I’m in a library, and can’t talk...”

“Listen to me!” Garcia interrupted. “Is your lap top on and connected?”

“Yes,” Trini said, looking around to see patrons unhappy with her.

“What’s wrong?” Lenar asked her.

“It’s Tam,” Trini answered. Into her phone she asked: “What do you need?”

“I need traffic information and directions, now,” Garcia said. “We’re being pursued by hostiles. I’m just now on interstate twelve, north bound... Passing Shumont.”

Trini handed her phone to Lenar and started searching for cues. She logged into several traffic cams and saw the Mustang and the followers. She had to switch cameras to stay ahead. To get more info fast, she had to take over Lenar's computer as well. Lenar held the phone close to her so she could speak.

"Take Pilar exit," Trini said. "Bumper to bumper coming up due to an accident. And go west, you don't even want to be on the access."

"Excuse me, miss," a Librarian started to interrupt.

"Do you want me to call the police?" Trini asked Garcia.

"Now, don't be so hasty," the Librarian said, backing up. "Just try to keep it down."

"Tam?" Trini asked.

"His car has a camera and a tracer in it," Lenar said.

"Borrow that guys lap top," Trini said.

Lenar turned and grabbed the man's lap top and took it over. The man started to protest but Lenar held a phaser up. The man raised his hands to say he surrendered. "I'll give it right back. We're having a bit of a crisis. And I will pay you for your time."

The guy had nothing to add to that.

"Got them," Lenar said. "They're still moving."

"Can you get the cam feed?" Trini said.

"Got it. Four cam feeds. Which one?" Lenar said.

Trini chose the one that prominently displayed the driver. Garcia had a line of blood running down his forehead, but other than that, she couldn't tell anything other than he was alive and determined to stay that way. He was wearing sunglasses, and the wind was whipping at his scarf. She hit a second view and saw Kletsova firing over the back seat.

"Phasers on stun setting won't penetrate through glass," Lenar said.

"I don't think that's a stun setting," Trini said. "Notice the wavelength of the beam?"

"Where are the police?" Lenar asked.

"Right here," came a voice. Only it wasn't a policeman. It was library security. "I want you to shut all this down and vacate the library, now."

"My friends need help," Trini said. "You're from this area and have police skills, right? Would you like to advise them?"

Flattering the security guard's ego helped a little. He leaned onto the table and studied the screens. "That road they're on dead ends in about two miles."

"Tam! You need to turn around and go the other way," Trini said.

"Can he hear you over the wind in his car?" the security guard asked.

The blip indicating Garcia's car changed directions. Of course, Trini knew that couldn't be. It was just the technology was insufficient to be a good measure. From Garcia's perspective, he had forced the car into reverse, which spun the car around, and then forced the car back into drive. Some of that required telekinetic energy, and the only prayer he made was that the transmission didn't fall out or the engine blow up in his face. He directed the Mustang across a raised medium, just barely avoiding traffic. The pursuit vehicles didn't alter their direction as fast, but they managed to catch up before he was back on the free way in the opposite direction he was previously headed. He passed other vehicles, flashing his lights.

"Tam," Kletsova leaned forward to yell in his ear. "My phaser is out of juice."

Garcia handed her the phaser that was in his coat pocket. He fished another phaser out of his boot and handed that to her. There was another tucked under his belt, which he handed to her as well.

"Any more?" Kletsova yelled over the wind, just trying to be sarcastic.

"Is three not enough?" Garcia asked. "Stay down, Niki!"

"They're back already," Kletsova said. "They must be tracking us."

"Trini, is there a second signal coming from our car?" Tam asked.

"Stand by," Trini said. "If there is, I'm not able to detect it."

"Fine, turn off our tracker system," Garcia instructed.

"I won't be able to follow you if I do," Trini pointed out.

"I know," Garcia said. "Disable it anyway. I'll keep chatting with you."

Garcia exited again near the lake he had been using to instruct Niki in the art of driving in icy conditions.

"I got one!" Kletsova announced, having shot out the tires in the lead chase vehicle. It went off the road. "Two more to go."

"Tatiana," Garcia yelled over the wind. "When I signal, set one of your phasers for over load."

"What?!" Kletsova yelled.

"Just do it," Garcia yelled.

"Alright," Kletsova yelled. "Why are you slowing down?"

"I want them closer," Garcia yelled.

"Closer?!" Kletsova yelled.

"Set it now," Garcia yelled. "But don't throw it until I say."

"We got less than two minutes," Kletsova said.

"I know," Garcia said, having to focus due to running a red light.

The pursuit vehicles made it through the intersection without hitting anyone and accelerated. Garcia let them gain, making it look as if he had made a clumsy error. He drove down an embankment and out onto the lake. He turned to see if they had followed, and indeed, they had. He accelerated towards the middle of the lake.

"Tam?!" Kletsova said, reminding him of the danger in her hands.

"Now," Garcia said.

Kletsova tossed the weapon out of the vehicle. It clattered to the ice. The pursuit vehicle ran right by it. Then there was a flash. The ice buckled, and rippled almost all the way to the shore. A hole formed immediately under the release of the phaser's energy and it grew, sending out cracks in a multitude of directions. These cracks spread like lightening across the surface of the lake in a spider web pattern, catching up with the pursuit vehicles. Garcia's mustang bounced up the far embankment and onto land. The pursuit vehicles disappeared into the cold, dark waters of the lake. Broken ice filled the space over where they went down. Garcia brought the Mustang to a halt, spinning it to face the lake and drawing the third phaser that Kletsova hadn't used. He relaxed his hand on the phaser when he realized the threat was over. He got out of the car and went around to Niki and pulled her out. He checked her for any wounds, and found that she was fine. She had tears in her eyes from being frightened.

"I'm ready to go home now," Niki said.

Garcia nodded and hugged her to him. He looked out over the ice to see if anyone was going to surface, but no one did. Several police vehicles slid to a halt and the authorities rushed up to him. Two hours later, they were returned home. Paula, Trini, and Lenar were there to greet them.

"It's going to make a great car chase scene in an upcoming episode," Paula said.

"I'd prefer it doesn't get aired," Garcia said. "People died in that car chase."

"Yeah, the bad guys," Paula reminded him. "That was brilliant. Your car cams and the freeway cams caught everything!"

"I don't want to celebrate this or brag about it," Garcia said. "Iotia is like the old west. You kill one bad guy and then the remaining bad guys start wanting to take you on just for the bragging rights of going up against you. And for what?! To put a stupid merit badge on their uniform! What I did I did for survival. Not entertainment. Now, I want better security around this building. There have been too many Red Shirts on these streets lately and it's hard to know who they give allegiance to."

"Tam, I want to go home," Niki came to him, crying. Garcia took her in his arms and held her. "When is my mother coming for us?"

"Soon, Niki," Garcia said.

"Are you sure she is alright? Maybe something happened to her," Niki said.

"Niki," Garcia said, quietly. "Is there anything you can do about that right now?"

"No," Niki admitted.

"And your mother has always been true to her word, right?" Garcia asked.

"Yes," Niki said.



“Then you know your mother is doing what she must to be safe and worrying about it won’t change anything,” Garcia said. “I know there was a lot of excitement today, and you’re afraid, and I was afraid, but I assure you, I will protect you. Right now, we are safe.”

Niki nodded, trying to be brave. Garcia kissed her forehead and then looked to Paula.

“Paula, do not air any of this,” Garcia said. “Please.”

“If we don’t, the news will,” Paula said, obviously empathizing with Garcia’s position. “Mann wants to preempt the news and put our side out there.”

Garcia shook his head, sadly. He pulled free of Niki and went to retrieve his guitar. Niki joined him on the couch as he sat down to play.

“I’ll be in my room if anyone needs me,” Kletsova said.

Garcia began to sing the song “Why Worry,” by Dire Straights.

Baby I see this world has made you sad  
Some people can be bad  
The things they do, the things they say  
But baby I'll wipe away those bitter tears  
I'll chase away those restless fears  
That turn your blue skies into grey

Why worry, there should be laughter after pain  
There should be sunshine after rain  
These things have always been the same  
So why worry now

Baby when I get down I turn to you  
And you make sense of what I do  
I know it isn't hard to say  
But baby just when this world seems mean and cold  
Our love comes shining red and gold  
And all the rest is by the way

Why worry, there should be laughter after pain  
There should be sunshine after rain  
These things have always been the same  
So why worry now

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Paula entered Star Fleet Singers' Office and found Garcia hard at work, his fingers moving across his ergonomic keyboard as if it were a musical instrument. His typing was rhythmic and steady and he didn't look up as she entered, but he did acknowledge her with a greeting.

"I found him," Paula said.

Garcia quit typing and turned to Paula. Trini looked up from her station in the office and inquired, "Found who?"

"You sure you want to meet him?" Paula asked.

"Yes," Garcia said. "When?"

"Tonight, nine PM?" Paula said.

"Twenty One hundred hours," Garcia said.

"Yes, so it's a date?" Paula asked. "I'll pick you up at twenty fifteen."

And so she did. She pulled up to the curb just as Garcia came out of the building. The window on the passenger side powered down. "You ready?"

"Want me to drive?" he asked.

"No, silly, just get in," Paula said.

He climbed in and fastened the restraint.

"I thought you don't like the restraint," Paula said.

"I don't, but it's the law," Garcia said.

"The windows are tinted. No one will know," Paula said.

"I would know," Garcia said.

Paula smiled at him and then accelerated the car. Garcia studied her driving technique as she navigated traffic, but didn't offer her advice on how to improve her efficiency. It wasn't his place. He also studied the archaic traffic patterns and wondered at the macro social dynamics created by the communication styles for vehicles lacking computer controlled anti collision devises. He was amazed there weren't more accidents. A commercial for Tommy Guns caught his attention.

"Hey, can you play that back?" Garcia asked.

"Tam, it's a radio, it doesn't play back," Paula said.

"But the voice of the guy doing that commercial, it sounded like the guy that played Scotty," Garcia said.

"I can look into it if you like. Tommy Guns are subsidiary of Mann Enterprises," Paula said.

Before too long, Paula brought them to their destination, secured a parking place for the vehicle, and then, taking Garcia by the arm, led him into a dimly lit, quaint diner. She ordered coffee for the both of them.

"Would you like something to eat or drink?" Paula asked.

"Coffee's good, thank you," Garcia said, absorbing the information from his environment.

There was the scent of vanilla in the air, a scent distributed by the burning of scented candles. There were a few couples, but most of the patrons seemed to be college students, in groups or by themselves. One of the students noticed Garcia and Paula as he paused from his reading, did a double take, smiled, and then went back to his book. Garcia tried reading into the smile, wondering if the young man simply was happy to acknowledge that Paula and Garcia shared his space. He was rather amazed that he and Paula weren't mauled by the patrons, as they seemed to all fit into the demographic profile of viewers for their shows.

As if reading his mind, Paula addressed his concerns. "Don't worry. Most of the people that come here tend to leave the celebrities alone. I visit here every now and then."

The waitress returned, placing their drinks in front of them. "Anything else I can get you?" she asked, holding her tray against her, as if it were a shield against her sudden insecurity of serving stars.

"We're good, thank you, Sheila," Paula said.

The waitress smiled, nodded in such a way as to suggest bowing, and excused herself. Garcia returned the gesture and then took up his coffee, smelling it, and enjoying the warmth of the cup in his hands.

"So, what do you think?" Paula asked.

"About?" Garcia asked.

"The atmosphere?" Paula asked.

“Well, it’s not Casablanca, but it’s nice,” Garcia said. “New age kind of feel.”

“I guess that means you approve?” Paula asked.

“I’m comfortable,” Garcia said, reclining in his booth that put his back to the wall so he could easily survey the comings and goings of the place. “So, where is he?”

“He’ll be here,” Paula assured him.

“Okay,” Garcia said.

“Don’t you trust me?” Paula asked, playfully.

“Implicitly,” Garcia assured her. “I admit that the atmosphere has caused me to wonder if you brought me here on other pretenses.”

“And if I had, would that be so bad?” Paula asked.

Garcia smiled. “No,” he answered.

“You’re very focused on your work, and your ‘mission,’ whatever that is, and that does have me a little concerned for your health,” Paula said. “It is in my best interest to see that you take care of yourself, and taking care of yourself does mean you need to take time to relax and play. You can’t be so serious all the time. I thought you might enjoy being off camera for just a moment so you can be yourself.”

“You’re assuming that I would be different off camera,” Garcia said. “Though I am capable of acting, I am not an actor. I am what I am, to quote a popular Earth song.”

“Yes,” Paula said, reaching out to touch his hand across the table. “You’re very intense. I don’t think I have ever met someone so... I don’t even know the words to describe what I feel in your presence. It’s almost like you generate a magnetic field or static electric field, and I get this shiver down my back...”

“Paula,” Garcia said, gently, prepared to tell her the reasons why he shouldn’t be romantically involved with her, though he really wanted to go there. He flashed back to one of his holo-suite sessions where the holographic version of her taught him to dance, among other things and he really wanted to know how much of the simulation resembled reality.

“Tam, don’t say anything,” Paula said. “I know we’re friends and I am happy with whatever time fate allows us to share.”

Garcia leaned closer to her across the table with intentions of kissing her, but someone shouted, interrupting the moment. The shout came from a performer who suddenly and unrepentantly occupied the stage. His full presence and demeanor was overwhelming, almost disturbing, as he demanded the attention of his audience. He indeed demanded the attention. It wasn’t a request, or listen to me if you want. His mannerisms, wild gestures, his peculiar rhythmic style, the unnatural pausing as if he had forgotten what he was going to say, grabbed your attention and would not allow you to turn away from him in the same way that it was difficult to turn away from a train wreck. However, the next poem, which was read to the back ground of piano music, wasn’t too bad.

It Hasn’t Happened Yet, performed by William Shatner

I was crossing the snow fields  
In front of the Capital building.  
It was Christmas, and I was alone.

Strange city.  
Strangers for friends.  
And I was broke.

As the caroller sang its song  
I dreamt of success.  
I would be the best.

I would make my folks proud.  
I would be happy...

- It hasn't happened yet  
- It hasn't happened yet  
- It hasn't happened

Yes, there are nods in my direction  
Clap of hands  
The knowing smile  
But still  
I'm scared again  
Foot slipped

Pebbles fall and so did I  
 - Almost  
 (Oh my)  
 On Yosemite  
 The big grey wall  
 (Fear of falling)  
 Where to put my foot next  
 (Fear of failure)  
 I'm afraid I'm going to fall  
 (Be at one with the mountain)  
 I whispered in the air  
 (Fear of falling, fear of falling, fear of failure...Failure)  
 Fear of losing my hair  
 (Falling, falling, falling...)  
 When is the mountain scaled?  
 When do I feel I haven't failed?  
 I've got to get it together, man  
 (It hasn't happened yet)  
 - It hasn't happened yet  
 - It hasn't happened yet  
 - It hasn't happened  
 People come up and say hello  
 OK  
 I can get to the front of the line  
 But you have to ignore the looks  
 And... yet  
 I'm waiting for that feeling of contentment  
 That ease at night when you put your head down  
 And the rhythms slow to sleep  
 My head sways  
 And eyes start awake  
 I'm there not halfway between sleep and death  
 But looking into  
 Eyes wide open  
 Trying to remember  
 What I might have done  
 Should have done  
 At my age  
 I need serenity  
 I need peace  
 - It hasn't happened yet  
 - It hasn't happened yet  
 - It hasn't happened yet  
 - It hasn't happened

The audience applauded. Garcia simply set with his mouth agape. The man on the stage presented several more dialogues, including Hamlet's famous soliloquy, "To be, or not to be." He ended his performance with two songs, "Rocket Man," and "Tambourine Man," both versions of which grated on Garcia's nerves in the same manner that the songs, "They've come to take me away, ha ha," and "Mother," by Police from the 'Synchronicity' album did. There was, actually, an artistic rationale behind the way that William had performed the selections, but it grated hard on Garcia's ears to have to listen to it. Garcia barely had the presence of mind to meet the man amicably when he came to their table seemingly uninvited. His ears were still ringing with the chaotic, manic rhythms of the song. "Tambourine Man" was secret code for a drug addict getting his fix and that was what Will represented in his song. Garcia shivered.

Paula greeted the man with a kiss. "Hello, Bill. How are you doing?"

"Surviving," Bill said. He turned to Garcia. "So, this is Tammis Garcia the Great. Funny. You look just like an average man to me."

Garcia opened his mouth to say something but nothing came out. There was no doubt that Bill was endowed with talent and a genius creative energy that allowed him to mentally connect the dots that he did. There was also no arguing that the man had a passion for entertaining and expressing himself clearly, but there was just something a bit grating about his presence. Garcia blinked as he suddenly realized that he, himself, had some of these 'grating' characteristics that Bill freely and unashamedly lavished on anyone in ear shot.

Was this genius? Was this unparalleled brilliance? Is this what it would feel like to stand before Captain Kirk himself, who Bill greatly resembled in appearance and presentation?

“What’s wrong with him?” Bill asked Paula.

“I think he’s star struck,” Paula said.

“I understand. I do that to people,” Bill admitted, taking Garcia’s coffee and drinking from the mug.

Had anyone else stolen Garcia’s coffee, there would have been a verbal back lashing at the least. He didn’t even blink. “I wanted to talk to you,” Garcia fumbled for words.

“That’s why I’m here, son,” Bill said, placing the cup down. “You’re going to need some more coffee.”

Bill’s choice of the words ‘son’ shook Garcia to the core. Was Bill a clone of Kirk? Could the Iotian government had saved a strand of Kirk’s hair and cloned him in order to create someone like Bill? People did loose strands of hair every day. Garcia was biologically related to Kirk in the sense that Garcia was his grandson, but what would that mean for he and Bill? A clone would be genetically identical, so, biologically speaking, Bill would still be his grandfather. But then, as a clone, he would not be Kirk because his life experiences on Iotia made him a unique individual. The age old question of nurture or nature was at play here. Was it the genes that made the man, or the genetics? Did either really matter?

“God, I wish I had my tricorder,” Garcia rambled, wanting desperately to resolve this puzzle.

“Oh, get a life,” Bill said. “That show is dead and gone and buried. Alright? Can I go now?”

“Oh, but it isn’t dead,” Garcia countered, drawn into the debate. “This show is very much alive. Alive in syndication and in the hearts of millions of people world wide. It has greatly influenced Iotian culture and has the potential to revolutionize the way your society looks at itself and the potential other, the alien species you will meet in the future.”

“Just because Kirk had the good fortune of looking like me does not mean what you think it means,” Bill said.

“What do you think I think it means?” Garcia asked.

“You won’t find what you’re looking for here,” Bill said.

“What am I looking for?” Garcia asked.

“If you don’t know, I certainly can’t help you,” Bill said. “You have to find your own answers. Even if I knew, I wouldn’t tell you.”

“Why not?” Garcia asked.

“Prime Directive,” Bill said, quite seriously. Then he laughed and hit Garcia on the arm. “You’re much too serious for someone your age.”

“I want to put your crew back together for a Star Conqueror movie,” Garcia blurted out.

Bill laughed. “You really need to see a therapist,” Bill said. “I don’t want to play Kirk. I want to move on and to do new things. Explore the possibilities and expand my horizons.”

“The role of Kirk is just the sort of vehicle that would allow you to explore those alternative possibilities,” Garcia said.

“No,” Bill said.

“Look, Bill,” Garcia said, and then thought better of it. “I’m sorry. May I call you Bill? Mr. Shatner. You’re an international star, you’re flat broke, you’re reading bad poetry badly, and I have the means to provide you with a job and a salary that would allow you the opportunity to explore your other interests and projects. Please. I need you.”

“Don’t do that,” Bill said.

“Don’t do what?” Garcia asked.

“Imitate me,” Bill said. “You don’t do it well.”

“I’m not imitating you. I’m being me,” Garcia said. “Will you at least consider my request?”

“Even if I agreed, the others won’t agree. They won’t work with me,” Bill said.

“I’m on a mission from god. I have to bring the crew together. I need you to help save the world,” Garcia said.

Bill laughed. “You’re thinking too small. Now, if you made it ‘save the universe,’ then maybe I could help you,” he said.

“Alright then. Help me to save the Universe as we know it,” Garcia said. “With all its strange peculiarities, you can’t deny that it has been a great adventure and there are things here worth saving. I will pay you just to come in and read through the potential scripts we’ve chosen.”

“Please,” Bill said. “No one wants to see an aged, fat, balding man as Captain.”

“I think you underestimate how much love people have for you,” Garcia said. “People love you, not your diminishing hairline or growing waste line. People love you. I don’t even know you and I... I have this... unexplained need to be around you. You bring clarity to my being, you instill a sense of purpose that drives home the importance of Aristotle’s Golden Mean, and the absolute imperative to understand my humanity and help people achieve all they can be. You understand that, don’t you? You’re not only a man of passion, but a very compassionate man. My understanding is one of the reasons you’re always broke is because you keep giving to so many charities and people in your life and I can’t leave that sort of generosity unfunded and in a vacuum. You help me, I help you, and in turn, thousands of others are aided directly and millions more indirectly, but the immensity of what you give to everyone else is so close to infinity that it’s difficult for me to measure your value. Join me.”

Bill looked to Paula. “How could I ignore such an impassioned plea?” Bill asked her.

“He reminds me of you,” Paula said.

“Alright, I’m sold. I will join you and together we will rule the Universe as father and son,” Bill said, offering his hand.

Garcia stood, took Bill’s hand, and pulled him into an embrace. Garcia was filled with such emotions he wanted to cry, unable to separate the idea that Bill was indeed Kirk.

“Thank you,” Garcia said. “Thank you so much.”

“Maybe you should hold your thanks until after you see my bill” Bill jested.



Star Conquerors, The New Generation. Episode 2, Another Piece of the Action:

Admiral Arblaster listens to music, standing center of the room. He pretends to be conducting the orchestra he hears. A door chime rings. He puts the stick down and asks the music to stop

“Come,” Admiral Arblaster says.

“Sorry if I’m disturbing you, Admiral,” Captain Picard says. “You wanted to be notified when we arrived at Iotia. We’ve dropped out of warp, and are waiting your orders.”

Garcia nods, puts on his ceremonial jacket and exits his ready room. The Bridge is large and he takes his place center stage, the command chair. Ensign Worf, a Klingon, stands behind the Captain’s chair at a security station.

“Admiral,” Ensign Worf says. “The Iotians have seventy eight vessels lined up in a Beta Gamma formation. They are capable of sub-light speeds only, and have insufficient fuel for the maneuvers necessary to engage us. Lasers and Nuclear missiles are their armaments, no shields. We will cut through them like butter.”

“Thank you, Ensign,” Admiral Arblaster says.

“Shall I order the rest of our fleet to engage the enemy?” Captain Picard asked.

“I think this Galaxy Class Starship, the Flagship of the Fleet, can handle this on its own, don’t you?” Admiral Arblaster says.

“Of course, Admiral,” Captain Picard agrees.

“Hail the enemy,” Admiral Arblaster says. “Give them one chance to stand down.”

Ensign Crusher at Ops turns his chair back to face the Admiral. “Sir?”

Captain Picard steps forward, drawing a dagger. “Don’t question the Admiral.”

“Easy, Captain. He is, after all, still a boy,” the Admiral says. “I don’t want my men to fear questioning my orders. You can discipline him later on his timing.”

“Sorry, Admiral,” Crusher says, cowering. “Your message has been sent. No reply.”

“We’ll accept a no response as an indication that they are prepared to die,” Admiral Arblaster says. “Helm, take us in. Ensign Worf, photon torpedoes, at your discretion.”

Camera shot pans back from the bridge, revealing the name ISS Enterprise on the saucer section. Camera rolls for a lateral view of the Enterprise as it moves forward. Photon torpedo tubes begin to glow red

and then torpedoes are away. Camera tracks a volley of torpedoes as they home in on primitive looking space vehicles. There are flashes of light, fire, and then an expanding sphere of debris and dying embers.

"Ha!" Worf yells. "It's like shooting fish in a barrel. Hardly worth a warrior of my merit's attention."

"Cease the smack talk, Worf," Admiral Arblaster says. "It doesn't become you."

Worf appears cowed by the comment. "The battle is over, Sir."

"Helm, take us in, half impulse. I want a standard orbit, Iotia prime, outside the range of their ground defenses," Admiral Arblaster says. "Hail their leader."

"But, Admiral," Crusher begins to object.

"Boy, if you question another one of my orders today, I will personally gut you right here on the bridge, and feed your body parts to the fish in my aquarium," Arblaster says.

"Oh, please," Captain Picard says. "Let me. I know the Emperor is running out of good men, but I hate children on the Bridge."

"Please, I beg your forgiveness," Crusher pleads. "I only seek to learn from your wisdom, so that I might be as you one day. The orders from the Emperor were quite clear. Bomb their cities from orbit until you have crushed their spirits."

"You're such a whiney, kiss ass," Picard scoffs.

"Follow orders, watch, and learn," Arblaster says, waving Picard to silence.

"The boy has a point," Ensign Worf says. "We haven't even targeted any of their military compounds, or ground based weapon systems."

"Captain Picard," Admiral Arblaster says, standing. "I don't know what sort of ship you ran before I came on board, but I expect the security officer to target all enemies without being told to do so, and merely hold his fire until I am ready. Any further disruptive comments and or lack of performance from your staff shall result in you receiving severe penalties."

Captain Picard falls to one knee, bowing in submission.

"Since you all seem to be so ignorant, those compounds and weapon systems are more valuable intact than blown up. It will save us time from having to refortify this planet if we can take them intact," Admiral Arblaster says.

"Because of the Borg. You think we're going to loose against them, don't you," Picard says.

Arblaster says nothing.

"Admiral, they're not answering our hails," Crusher informs.

"Over ride their satellite communication systems and broadcast on all frequencies, television and radio, and anything else with a speaker system, even pocket tape players," Admiral Arblaster says.

"You're on," Crusher says.

"Iotian people. I am Admiral Arblaster, Fleet Commander, of the flagship ISS Enterprise. Your reluctance to join the empire is appreciated, but the time has come for you to make a decision. I have destroyed your space fleet, and because of the valor of your warriors, I have decided to be generous. I am offering you a chance to submit without me destroying any of your cities, and I do this at great risk to my career. I'll give you two hours to respond, at which point, if I have not heard from your leader, I will begin targeting cities at random, and I will not stop until every last one is destroyed.

Arblaster waves off the signal. "You have the con, Captain. I'll be in my ready room."

Arblaster walks off stage left. Break to Commercial. When we return, Captain Picard seeks an audience with the Admiral. He is buzzed in. Admiral Arblaster orders two teas from the replicator and brings one to Picard. Picard sits down after the Admiral sits. On the Admiral's Desk is a space-age, lap top computer, a few trinkets, and a bowl of precious stones.

"Captain," the Admiral says. "Give me your impression of those jewels."

"They appear to be priceless rubies, diamonds, and sapphires, my Lord," Captain Picard says.

"How much would you give me for them?" the Admiral asks.

"Oh, I couldn't afford them on my salary," Picard says, adjusting his shirt.

"You have everything you need, room, board, the best medical care that science can give you, and yet, you still covet these common stones?" the Admiral asks.

"But they're priceless," Picard says.

“Why priceless?” the Admiral asks, tossing him a diamond. “Keep it. I don’t know why you would want it. This ship of ours can replicate a ton of them an hour and rain it down on any of the cities below.”

“I don’t know,” Picard says. “I don’t guess I ever thought of it.”

“Most people haven’t, and yet, it is the standard symbol of trade, and the Iotians will be expected to pay a tribute of these trinkets, which will take more energy for us to haul up here than it would for us to simply make on our own. I could cover an area the size of Texas a meter deep in gold coins and diamonds in three days if I wanted.”

“But if you did that, it would destroy their economy,” Picard says. “And the emperor would still demand his tribute.”

“You don’t get it,” Admiral Arblaster says, tapping his head. “Currency is a thing of the mind, not an actual object of value. What you are holding has no inherent value except what you imagine. Value is artificially created. Water to a thirsty man is more valuable than it is to a man on a boat in fresh water. If we hoard all the diamonds on their planet, letting only a few on the market, then the price is high. But when I tell you that that stone is as common as granite, you look at me as if I have lost my mind.”

“It’s a symbol of their commitment to us and to the Emperor. We have to have a way of measuring their devotion,” Picard says. “It is compulsory that they pay the tribute.”

“And they will,” Admiral Arblaster agrees. “Even if children go hungry in the streets, they will pay. Why? Because an Emperor a hundreds of thousands of light years away demands it so.”

“So, why the contempt?” Picard asks. “If we have caused them to suffer, then they have learned respect.”

“Have you actually met the Emperor?” Arblaster asks.

“Yes.”

“Did you bow?”

“Yes, of course,” Picard said, uneasy look on his face.

“But you have confided in me that you hate the Emperor,” Garcia said.

Picard fidgets in his chair. “He killed women and children on my planet. It was unnecessary. We were complying. My wife and children were in that group executed.”

“So, did you learn respect?” Garcia asked

“Are you saying it would be better to win their hearts than their servitude?”

“That’s why I like you, Picard. I think there is hope for you yet,” Arblaster says. “That diamond you hold. It was given to me by my great grand mother. I think it was the only thing she ever gave me.”

Picard offers it back.

“No, I want you to keep it. Now, it has value, and this way, I’ll always know where it is,” Admiral Arblaster says,

“I don’t know what to say,” Picard says.

“Then don’t say anything. I believe you are my friend,” Arblaster says. “That’s sufficient.”

“Sometimes, I think you sound more like a philosopher than a warrior,” Picard says.

“What’s the difference?”

“I guess there isn’t any,” Picard says.

“I’ll tell you. A warrior without a philosophy is less than a foot soldier, he’s cannon fodder. A philosopher without the warrior spirit is merely a beggar on the street that no one hears,” Garcia says, standing. “Shall we go see if the Iotians have made their decision?”

Another Commercial Break. Critics are no doubt marking notes that the show is too cerebral, too much talk, too much tech talk, but they don’t know what’s in store for them. Battles. Borg. And the ratings are going to go off the charts. Come back from commercial to see an Away Team beaming in. Arblaster center front, Duana on his right and Ilona on his left, an arm’s length behind him. The extras on the landing party spread out into a defensive position just in case there is to be any treachery, phaser rifles at ready. Arblaster walks forward to greet the Iotian leader. Capone goes to his knees, bowing his head in hopes of pleasing his new master. Arblaster takes his arms and stands him up.

“You and I are equals,” Arblaster informs him. “We bow only to the Emperor.”



“As you say, my lord,” Capone agrees. “As you can see, we have gathered together this tribute. It will take us more time to get the full amount, but I assure you it will be done shortly if you will only continue to be as generous with me as you have been so far.”

Arblaster sighs. “I can show you leniency here, but I expect something in return.”

“Anything, my lord,” Capone says.

“The occupation force will be arriving soon, and we will be taking over your military compounds and ground based orbital assault stations. I expect there will be some rebellious attitudes amongst your people, and perhaps even some terrorist actions taken against the Emperor’s forces, maybe even a little vandalism. I want you to eliminate all opposition,” Arblaster says.

“That will be difficult, my lord. We are a proud people. Giving up self rule in favor of your, um, Emperor’s protection... is not an easy thing. It will take time to get use to. Some resistance is only natural,” Capone argues

“Resistance is futile. You will comply, or be destroyed. You will no doubt discover that the ones that come after me will be less merciful than I am being.

You may not appreciate that, yet. I want what’s best for my people, just as you want the best for yours.

That’s why I agreed to meet you. I don’t want any more bloodshed on either side. The rules will be easy for the people to understand. For every one of my men that die, there will be an entire city lost on your side. Capeesh?”

Capone demonstrates that he completely understands.

“Good. You will remain in office as a liaison between our two governments.” Arblaster appraises the party behind Capone. “That girl there. Is that your daughter?”

“Yes, my lord. My wife and daughter are both here to witness this historic moment,” Capone says. The daughter is played by Niki and the mother by Tatiana.

“What love they must have for you in this moment, in your darkest hour where you must force yourself to be humble at my feet,” Arblaster says. “I will be taking your daughter with me.”

Capone falls to the floor, putting his face to Arblaster’s feet. “Please, my lord, please. She is only fourteen.”

“I have disregarded the fact that you don’t have the ability to pay the full tax. I even appreciate that you will make every effort to curtail resistance from your populace, but I have no assurance that once I leave you will not scheme against those to come. And it would not look good to your people that you yourself have not shared in their suffering. For my peace of mind, I will be taking your daughter. Duana, Ilona.”

Arblaster’s personal elite guards move forward to take the girl while the leader cries, begging, pleading till spit and mucous and drool and tears run down his face. The girl was crying, too. The mom put herself between the daughter and the abductors, drawing a knife. Presidential guards draw weapons. Everyone in the away team raises their weapons, except Arblaster. Duana and Ilona glanced back for further instructions

“We can either take her alive, or dead,” Arblaster says to the thing at his feet that use to be a man, but now lay broken, contempt and hatred beginning to twist his soul into something new. “You choose.”

“Put your weapons down!” Capone shouts. “Put them down. Cooperate fully.”

The wife doesn’t put the knife down. “As long as I am living, I will not allow you to take my daughter.”

Arblaster laughs. “I always liked those sorts of ultimatums.” He draws a weapon and fires it at her. She collapses to the floor. The daughter cries over her mother. Capone starts to get up but Arblaster pushes him back down and steps on his hands.

“I merely stunned her, so relax. She is not dead. But I am so amused I am going to have to take her as well. Duana, Ilona, take both of them to the ship. Keep them comfortable in my quarters until I can tend to them,” Garcia says.

Duana touches her comm. badge and the four girls disappear. The man that was once leader looks up, not bothering to wipe his face. “I predict that you will learn something one day soon, Arblaster.”

“And what is that?” Arblaster says.

“The problem with being a bully is that in the end, there is always someone bigger and stronger and crueler than you are, and sooner or later, that dog will have his day. I only pray that he will hurt you worse than you have hurt me,” Capone says.

Arblaster kneels down, and put his forehead against the forehead of the one time leader of a nation. Capone resists but Arblaster holds his head firm against his.

“We are of one mind on this. I know you’re right, for I already foresee the day coming. The thing is, if this enemy I am thinking of wins, whether because of your prayers or not, you can be certain that there will be nothing left of your people or your culture. The Emperor sends his compliments. Have a nice day,” Garcia says, and rejoins his men.

The Away team beams up.



“That is too dark,” Gene complained. “It obviously got by the corporate leaders, and yes, I see the message you’re going for, but, this is not the future I subscribe to.”

“I know. We are going to run both episodes, to give people a choice. So they can see both realities. Did you like any of the Lost Episodes I put together for you?”

“Oh, I loved your version of Arena,” Gene said. “That’s exactly the message I’ve been trying to send. Do you suppose the Metrones are sort of like that Q character you ran by me?”

“I don’t think so,” Garcia said. “I mean, from what we know about Q, he seems to be more adversarial and uncivilized. He seems, for lack of a better analogy, more like the devil than an evolved soul.”

“Interesting. So, out of the scripts I gave you, did you have a favorite?” Gene asked.

“Well, I liked the Lost Episode of yours that I put together where Kirk is a carrier of a disease and a race of aliens hope to use him and the disease for population control. I would really like discussing with you where you came up with the idea for that,” Garcia said. “But my favorite, hands down, has to be City on the Edge of Forever. The author’s notes suggests some anger and bitterness at the Corporate changes made to his original script, but it’s still a damn good script.”

“Yes, it is. You got to City already?” Gene said.

“Yep. It’s amazing what you can do with the write equipment, w-r-i-t-e if you know what I mean. I got the stack of DVD’s right here for you,” Garcia said.

“When do you sleep?” Gene asked.

“Who needs sleep?” Garcia asked.

“I think we should run an episode where Arblaster is split into two personalities due to a transporter accident,” Gene said.

“I think that’s been done,” Garcia said.

“No, wait, hear me out. Now, Garcia is multi-speciel. Wouldn’t be interesting to see Arblaster pure Vulcan and Arblaster pure human? How would they behave? They both carry the same memories but...”

“Gene, I will be glad to discuss the theoretical aspects of this idea, but I must warn you that anytime a television series brings in the evil clone, or the long lost twin, that tends to be the jump the shark episode,” Garcia explained.

“Jump the shark?”

“You know. When Fonzie jumps the shark it’s like the lowest point a series can go and still be on the air,” Garcia said.

“Oh, yeah, well,” Gene agreed, but then hesitated. “But the transporter is a great vehicle to really explore our humanity. What if a transporter separated Kirk so there was a good kind Kirk and really evil Kirk?”

Garcia sighed. “I can give it to you,” Garcia said, surrendering. “It is, actually, a great way to explore the Golden Mean.”

“Exactly,” Gene said. “And why wouldn’t we want to just keep reproducing people with transporters. You could use it to copy people and send them down on an away team, and if you needed an army, you just keep sending energy through the same pattern buffers. But then, it really begs the question, what are we? Do we have a soul? If we have a soul, what happens to it after dematerialization? Does the soul know where to go to find its body? What if another soul should arrive at the newly formed body first? Would a new soul be

able to influence the body to act in ways other than what its memories and experience would allow for? If something bad happened to an Away Team, like rapid aging, could the transporter be used to revert the Away Team back to an earlier form? There are just so many questions that the transporter raises that might be fun to explore on film.”

“Did you see the movie ‘The Fly’?” Garcia asked. “It basically explores one of the questions you want to delve into. A man and a fly are transported simultaneously and their genetic structures combine so that you have a part man part fly.”

“That sounds interesting!” Gene said. “Let’s do a Lost Episode like that.”

“Boys, I know you two are having great fun, but it is time for us to head back home,” Majel interrupted.

“Oh, alright,” Gene said. “By the way, Tam. How’s the big project coming along?”

“I’ve found most of the actors of the original SC series,” Garcia said. “They all seem willing to come on board. I may go with what I have.”

“Let me know if I can be of any assistance,” Gene said.

“You’ve already done so much,” Garcia said.

“It’s what I’m here for,” Gene said.

“Oh, gene, did you ask him about that song?” Majel asked.

Garcia looked perplexed, but Gene explained it. “You were singing a song the other day, and I think you said it was by some cat named Stephen, called ‘oh very young.’ Do you remember?”

“I remember everything,” Garcia said. “It is ‘oh very young’ by Cat Stephens.”

“One of the lines in the song is something about a great white bird,” Gene said.

“And if you want this world to see a better day, will you carry the words of love with you, will you ride the great white bird into heaven, and though you want it to last forever, you know it never will,” Garcia said. “Yes, I know the words you’re referring to.”

“My nick name is the great white bird, and I was just wondering if this song was about me and the young is the New Generation?” Gene asked. “And though you want it to last forever but you know it never will seems to be talking about how we all wanted more original episodes but the powers that be just wouldn’t let it happen.”

“Just between you and me, I believe it is,” Garcia said.

“I have one other question, if you have time to entertain it,” Gene said.

“Anything, Gene,” Garcia said.

“You watch the news and you see how awful we are as a people to each other,” Gene said. “As Star Fleet, as you’re making your evaluations, what is it about us that’s redeemable? I mean, you’ve given me hope, personal hope that there is a better tomorrow coming, but what is it about us that gives you this hope?”

Garcia reclined in his chair and considered. He turned to his desk, sorted through a pile of news clippings and handed one to Gene. Along with the article was a picture of a dog, a German Shepard.

“An old man was walking his dog in the park and the dog ran out onto the ice and fell through. A passing stranger, jogging along the same the path, saw the dog in distress, ran out over the ice without hesitating, and managed to save the dog. The stranger who fell into the ice died,” Garcia said. “That act of compassion, or generosity, however you want to cut it up, whether it was for the dog in distress, or for the old man watching helplessly, that single act of kindness speaks volumes about you as a species. There are good people here, only lacking the light to show them the way. Your fiction has given them a light, Gene, and it’s our job to make it shine.”

Majel kissed Garcia on the forehead, and he stood to hug her. “Thank you for visiting,” he said.

“Thank you for havig us,” Majel said.

“Yes. Thank you, Tam,” Gene said, grasping Garcia’s hand in both of his own hands, warmly. “Well, I guess we should be heading out.”

“Thank you for spending time with me today, Gene,” Garcia said, and hugged him, too.

“Oh, please, it was my pleasure,” Gene said. “I really like how your computer can manipulate old images, and splice in cut footage, to make new episodes. It really is amazing how far computers have come. It’s almost like the future I envisioned is actually possible.”

“It is, my friend,” Garcia assured him. “It is.”



These Are The Days of Our Lives  
by Queen

Sometimes I get to feeling  
I was back in the old days, long ago (images of early star fleet)  
When we were kids when we were young  
Thing seemed so perfect, you know  
The days were endless we were crazy we were young  
The sun was always shining, we just lived for fun (Every time you beam down)  
Sometimes it seems like lately, I just don't know  
The rest of my life's been just a show (no joke)  
Those were the days of our lives  
The bad things in life were so few  
Those days are all gone now but one thing is true  
When I look and I find I still love you  
You can't turn back the clock you can't turn back the tide  
Ain't that a shame  
I'd like to go back one time on a roller coaster ride  
When life was just a game  
No use in sitting and thinking on what you did  
When you can lay back and enjoy it through your kids  
(is Niki my kid? The childhood I never had)  
Sometimes it seems like lately, I just don't know  
Better sit back and go with the flow.  
Because these are the days of our lives  
They've flown in the swiftness of time  
These days are all gone now but some things remain  
When I look and I find no change  
Those were the days of our lives, yeah  
The bad things in life were so few  
Those days are all gone now but one thing's still true  
When I look and I find  
I still love you  
I still love you

“These our the days of our lives,” was one of the songs on their tribute to Queen episode of Star Fleet Singers, and it was stuck in Garcia’s head as they were walking down a jetbridge to board an airplane. His brain was making lots of connections. Did Kirk ever beam down into a rain storm? The wanting for computer access to Star Fleet records and Federation knowledge was driving him crazy. He felt like his brain was smaller without the constant link-up he would have at home, and he was wondering if Niki’s rabbit analogy wasn’t right on target. The switch that gave the rabbit a pellet was in Garcia’s head, and he was missing the pellets! Missing the modern day conveniences of his normal life was revealing things about himself. The absence of instant gratification of having any question he might ask suddenly answered was weighing on him. He was an information addict!

“Are you sure this is safe?” Niki asked. She balked about getting on the airplane now that she saw it from the jet bridge.

“Safer than Tam’s driving,” KLetsova assured her, trying for humor.

“It’s completely safe,” Lenar said, not looking up from his book. “Out of all the airplanes from that era, the 737 had the safest record.”

“Technically, though, this isn’t a Boeing 737,” Garcia said. “They can call it what they want, but it’s just not the same. There are going to be minor variations in the construction process and assembly and the guts of the aircraft.”

“Good way to calm the child down,” Kletsova said.

“I’m not a child,” Niki protested, giving Kletsova a look that suggested she was tired of hearing that from her.

“Um, we’re holding up the line here,” Trini said.

George, cameraman one, went on first, walking backwards. Mike the Cameraman followed, along with the sound man, Kevin.

“Are you sure you don’t want a private a jet?” Paula asked.

“Yes, we’re sure,” Garcia said. “Public transportation is good enough for us.”

People took notice of the cameras and though some of them began to smile and wave, many of them liked the fact that Star Fleet was sitting in coach. It made them feel as if they were one of them, which was the intent. Niki was very friendly, shaking hands with people as she went down the aisle. When they got to their row, Niki claimed the window seat. Garcia sat next to her, and Paula sat next to him. Behind them, Lenar got the window, Trini the middle seat, and Kletsova the aisle. Mike and Kevin took the whole row behind Kletsova and George got the whole row in front of Garcia.

No sooner than Garcia sat down, he closed his eyes to sleep.

“Tam,” Trini said, leaning forward.

“Um?” he grunted.

“Did you read in this morning’s paper where this woman in Phoenix claim’s to have been abducted and is carrying your child?” Trini asked.

“That’s nice,” Garcia said, not really listening.

“She says that you were abducted at the same time that she was and that the two of you were forced to make love,” Trini read on.

“I don’t recall any of that,” Garcia said.

“You’ve been with so many, how could you?” Kletsova asked.

“Is an alien abduction the only way I can get you alone with me?” Paula asked, playfully.

“We wouldn’t technically be alone if we were abducted,” Garcia mumbled.

“Your loss of time coincides with her loss of time,” Trini said.

“It’s just a tabloid,” Paula said. “Nothing in it is real. Every week they have a cure for cancer, a sighting of Elvis, and last week, they even had an article about me, saying I was from some bizarre alternate Universe where I was on Earth in the 80’s. Can you believe that? Dancing with cartoon characters, no less. I don’t know why they’re allowed to print such dribble.”

“I kind of like the secret romance between you and Garcia,” Niki said.

“I haven’t discouraged that one, either,” Paula said, and turned to flirt with Garcia some more. “Any chance we might make it factual, Tam? How’s that song go? Let’s give them something to talk about?”

“Uh hu,” Garcia agreed.

“I don’t think he’s really listening today,” Paula chuckled.

“Oh, he’s listening,” Kletsova said. “Ever since he went on record as saying he believed he was abducted or had a spiritual experience, every quack out there has been sending us letters of their experiences.”

“Don’t call them quacks,” Garcia said.

“Wow,” Niki said, holding the magazine she was reading towards him. “Tam?! Did you see the rating for the Madonna episode of Star Fleet Singers? Hell, I would have kissed her if I had known we were going to get this much publicity.”

“Um,” he agreed.

Niki screamed causing Garcia to jump. “Holy Cow, Tam. Look at this still of you and Madonna kissing,” Niki said, enthusiastically. “You look like you’re really enjoying it.”

“Of course he’s enjoying it. He’s enjoying every damn minute of it,” Kletsova said. “He’s kissed more girls in one week than Captain Kirk did in his entire life.”

“Oh, that’s not right,” Trini said. “Accurate, and funny, but not right.”

“I would enjoy it a little better if you would let me sleep!” Garcia said.

“Here’s a story to give you faith in humanity,” Trini said. “A thief who robbed an ATM in New Denver recently returned all the money, plus interest, with a little note saying sorry for the inconvenience, but thank you for the loan. Now, you don’t hear stories like that on the news everyday.”

“It’s not real news,” Paula repeated.

“It could have happened,” Trini said. “There are descent people, right, Tam?”

Tam wet his lips. "I believe so, yes," Garcia said.

"Damn, look at this, Tam," Niki said, trying to show him the picture of him, with Duana and Ilona. Garcia was center, arms crossed looking up at the camera, and his two mental adversaries, Ilona and Duana, light and darkness, stood in juxtaposition poses, further reflecting Aristotle's theme of the "Golden Mean." It was a purposeful recreation of the photo of Kirk with Spock and McCoy to either side, made popular by the Iotian media.

"Niki, you really need to watch your language" Kletsova scolded. "We're on television."

Niki popped air and rocked her head to and fro, Indian style. "Hello? This is a reality television show. People use profanity in the real world."

"If you ever hit your thumb with a hammer, you have my permission to use profanity," Kletsova said. "Until then, or a similar situation that really warrants it occurs, I expect you to remain a professional member of Star Fleet. It's not just a job, it's a life style choice."

"Tam? Are you going to let her talk to me like that?" Niki asked.

"Do what your senior officer says, dear," Garcia said, sleepily.

"I love you, Tam," Niki said, sweetly.

"I love you," Garcia said, and then executed a surprise tickle attack. In a gruff voice, he said: "Now let me sleep."

Garcia settled down and Niki tried to be quiet. But her quiet didn't last long. Niki unintentionally began humming the song "Video Killed the Radio Star." Though she did it quietly, and to herself, Garcia's mind picked up on it and wouldn't let it go. Garcia reached over and touched Niki with one finger. She stopped singing. "Sorry," Niki said. She started rocking her foot which hit the seat back in front of her in a predictable rhythm. Garcia again attacked her playfully. She screamed, squirmed, and kicked the front seat trying to escape his torture. "Okay, okay, I'll be quiet. Ah! Stop," Niki said, catching her breath.

Garcia nearly fell asleep but the stewardess, or flight attendant as she corrected him, dropped by to serve drinks.

"I'd like a milk," Niki said.

"You've had enough milk," Garcia said. "She'll have water."

"Ugh, Tam! You won't let me have cokes and now you are restricting my access to milk?" Niki complained.

"I'd rather you drink soda," Garcia said.

"One coke," Niki said.

"No coke!" the entire Commune said.

"Then let me have my milk," Niki said. "You know it does the body good and contributes to good bone health."

"You haven't paid close enough attention to the ads. It says 'may help to prevent osteoporosis,' not 'actually.' In fact, there is more scientific evidence that it may be doing more harm than good," Garcia said.

"Now, Tam," Kletsova argued. "If you're about to go off on one of your conspiracy theory, soap-box trips, I'm going to have to side with Niki on this one. Out of all the things to drink on this little planet, milk must be the least harmful."

"It had some nutritional value before they pasteurized and homogenized it. Why do you think they fortify it with vitamins and minerals after they cook it? It's because the processing destroys all the good, original contents. Same with all the juices on this planet. The processing part of mass producing it forces the companies to re-fortify it with all the stuff that made it beneficial to drink in the first place. Sorry, Niki, but you've met your daily allowance of crap for today," Garcia said.

"I can't believe this," Niki complained. "Who died and made you the nutrition cop?"

"Not only am I your superior officer, but until we're off this planet, I'm your family physician and nutritional adviser," Garcia said. "If you have any complaints, you can file an official report with your mom when we return to Federation space."

"Geeze," Niki said.

"Let her have a milk," Paula said. "You don't want the dairy industry suing us, like the cow industry sued Oprah."

“Do you think we can be on the Oprah show?” Niki asked.

“No milk,” Garcia persisted.

“I could come back,” the flight attendant said.

“She’ll have a milk,” Paula said.

“I’m not letting her have the milk,” Garcia argued, sitting forward, eyes opened to better emphasize that he was serious. “I wouldn’t give that crap to my cat. Especially cows milk. Think about it, Paula. Scientifically speaking, what is the purpose of cow’s milk? It’s to provide the nutritional requirements to a new born calf so that it can quickly gain enough weight that it can sustain itself without its mother’s milk. Now, it may be circumstantial evidence on my part, but you have a food industry pushing milk as a healthy choice and you have an epidemic of obesity. Well, hello, people are drinking cows milk, is it any wonder they are turning into cows? You are what you eat. And that doesn’t even begin to address the issues with all the hormones your country is putting in the milk. Physically speaking, Niki is developing into an adult fast enough, so there is no need to add hormone saturated milk to speed the process up.”

“I think the obesity issues come from a lack of exercise,” Kletsova said.

“It’s a combination of factors,” Garcia said, reclining back again. “Lack of exercise and poor nutrition. I have never seen such an affluent society that is so underdeveloped nutritionally.”

“I think I will come back,” the flight attendant said.

“Just look at all the carbs on her dolly,” Garcia pointed out. “More proteins, less carbs, and more leafy green vegetables. You want more calcium in your diet, eat freshly grown spinaches. And if you want to prevent osteoporosis, get the proper amount of sun exposure. Your body makes vitamin D when expose to natural sun light. In fact, your body makes every thing it needs from proteins and vegetables and daily walks in the sun. You were meant for walking and eating healthy choices. There are no bread trees or sandwich trees and spaghetti trees in the wild. We didn’t evolve to eat processed sugars and processed wheat, which both have had all their nutritional values eliminated through the bleaching process, and who ever it is in your government pushing the corn products, putting corn syrup in everything, he needs to be taken out and shot...”

“Garcia!” Kletsova snapped. “That’s enough.”

“What? Before you didn’t want me to sleep and now you want me to shut up?” Garcia asked.

“Yes, please,” Kletsova, Trini, and Lenar all said together not one of them looking up from their personal activities.

Garcia crossed his arms and reclined back in his chair, obviously angry. “Fine,” Garcia snapped back. “I’ll just take my soap box and go home.”

“I love you, Tam,” Niki said again.

“Grrrr,” Garcia growled.

Garcia finally managed to sleep, but only after some time had passed, and his mind had stopped presenting arguments to win his case, and after he had become accustomed to all the sounds in his environment: the engine frequencies, the shifting of people in their seats, the slight vibration of raw engine power through the fuselage plus the drag of wind on the plane, and the bell summoning the flight attendants that nearly caused him to come completely out of his seat the first time it rang. Three hours later, Lenar was waking Garcia up. “Garcia, come to the back with me for a moment.”

Garcia yawned, unfastened his seat belt, stretched, and stood, taking a quick survey of his surroundings. Kletsova was reading. Trini, Niki, and Paula were asleep. He managed to slip past Paula without waking her and headed to the back with Lenar. A lady smiled at him and the man behind him wanted to shake his hand. George followed, catching everything on camera.

“Do you mind?” Lenar asked George.

He shrugged, but didn’t leave. He was just doing his job, after all.

“What’s up,” Garcia asked.

“I studied the route we were supposed to take before leaving, right?” Lenar said. “And we were supposed to have only flown over water for like thirty minutes. We’ve been over water now for an hour, from the time I noticed that we had been over water longer than we should have been,” Lenar said.

Garcia turned immediately and started for the front, stopping only to lean into Kletsova. “After we pass the seventh row up there, get up and follow, slowly,” Garcia said.

Kletsova nodded, not asking questions.

By the time Garcia got to first class, he noticed the worry on the lead flight attendant's face.

"You really should go back to your seat, sir," she began.

"May I talk to you in the galley?" he asked.

A man in the fourth row stood, drawing a weapon. "Air marshal, return to your se..."

Kletsova clobbered the man over the back of the neck, dropping him to the floor.

"Any one else want to play?" Garcia asked.

No one volunteered anything as Kletsova collected the air marshal's weapon and gave her own menacing look towards the passengers, searching for another threat. Garcia took the flight attendant by the arm and led her forward.

"What's going on?" Garcia asked her.

"We're unable to communicate with the pilots," the flight attendant said.

"Are you concerned?" Garcia asked.

She nodded. Garcia appraised the flight deck door.

"Do you have a key?" he asked.

She shook her head no.

"Lenar," Garcia said.

"On it," he said, grabbing a knife from the galley.

"Tatiana, go wake Trini and tell her to sit next to Niki. Only wake Niki if you have to," Garcia said.

Kletsova nodded, appraising every person as she return to her seat. When she came back, she saw the flight deck door had been completely removed from its hinges and Garcia was appraising the situation. To the casual observer, the pilots appeared to be sleeping.

"Phaser, stun setting?" Kletsova asked.

"Judging by the way their heads and shoulders are both slumping towards the right, I would say the phaser is somewhere to the left," Garcia said, knowing that the muscles furthest from the stun strike would contract before the whole body succumbed.

"Want me to sweep it?" Kletsova asked.

"No, I want you to help me fly," Garcia said. "Lenar, I need you to do the sweep."

Lenar wasn't pleased, but he understood. He appraised the flight deck before entering, trying to imagine where a phaser could be concealed and still take out both pilots. His first choice was the small hatch where the pilot's emergency escape rope lay coiled, which had a small hole for the pilot to pull it open quickly should he want to abandon the plane from his window. He was right on the first guess. The phaser was set for wide dispersal, which could have easily taken out both pilots. It also had a radio remote activation switch. He handed it to Garcia.

"Tatiana, check the air marshal for a trigger," Garcia said. "And even if you don't find one, tie him up, just in case he wakes early. Lenar, keep looking. I want the whole cockpit swept before we attempt to fly this thing."

"On it," Lenar said. After he was satisfied that the flight deck was secure, he turned his attention to the pilots. "Garcia, they're dead. I imagine the cause of death was multiple shots with the phaser on stun setting. After awhile, you know it'll stop their hearts."

"I know," Garcia said. "Let's get them out."

Kletsova returned with a nice little trigger as Lenar and Garcia dragged the pilots out of the cockpit. They laid them in the galley.

"This what you wanted? The passenger sitting next to him saw him playing with it," Kletsova asked.

"I hope he was the only plant," Garcia said, taking the Captain's seat. "Take the copilot's seat. Air maps should be beside you on the right. Also look for the check lists. They should be laminated and bound together."

"Got the maps," Kletsova said.

Garcia pointed to the GPS readings, and noted the frequencies tuned into the navigational equipment to assist her in determining their location. He began a gradual turn to the left to head back the way they had come.



“What’s our fuel?” Kletsova asked.

He told her.

“Tam, we’re not going to make it,” Kletsova said.



Mirror, Mirror, The Lost Episodes

“By now, you’ve figured out that you are not in your Universe,” Spock says.

“What do you intend to do with us? You don’t seem the murdering type and you can’t keep us locked up forever,” Evil McCoy says.

“I believe my captain will be trying to return his landing party to this Universe,” Spock says. “And when he does, I must send you back to yours.”

“What makes you think we can get back, you green blooded...” Evil McCoy rips into him Spock.

“You must go back, so that we can have our Doctor back,” Spock explains patiently. “Also, there is a slight chance that if I don’t send you back, and they are successful in returning, that the imbalance could destroy both Universes.”

“And how do you know they aren’t about to beam back now?” Evil McCoy demands.

“I don’t,” Spock admits. “All I can do is prepare to send you back. The window of opportunity for this exchange, if it is to happen at all, is growing smaller by the moment.”

“But you can’t just beam us over there. What if they are already dead? Or what if they are in a holding cell?” Evil McCoy asks.

“Ideally this exchange should happen simultaneously, as it did in the original transaction, however, when I detect a spike in the gamma particle emissions, we will initiate the transport. If I don’t see that, I will continue with the transport at the last possible moment before the window between our two Universes closes completely.”

“You could kill us all!” Evil McCoy snaps.

“Am I not, by your own admission, giving you a better chance for life than you would give me in your Universe?” Spock asked.

Evil McCoy concedes the point. “Damn your logic, Spock. We have to try to make this right.” Evil McCoy sighs. “You must really like him. I doubt my Spock would do as much for me.”

“I can not speak for the Spock in your Universe, but I suspect, you may be surprised at what you might find, if you scrutinized him more carefully. I can, however, speak about you and your alternative. You are both passionate men, with a respect for life and dignity that I admire. Though I personally find your bent towards emotionalism taxing, it might just be what your Universe needs. Let your passions move you to speak out against corruption. Push for that kinder, gentler humanity that you now know is possible.”

“One man can’t do it, Spock,” Evil McCoy says.

“There are lots of examples of individuals changing the world, Doctor. Did you have a Ghandi?” Spock asks.

“Yeah, he was run over by a Nazzi bulldozer,” Evil McCoy said.

“Can you think of no one from your history that made a difference?” Spock asks.

Evil McCoy nods. “Yeah, one person. Her name was Edith Keeler, and it was the 1930’s. She made a call for peace that kept the United States from entering the war till it was too late,” he says. “Perhaps had she not been so successful the United States would have entered the war and Germany wouldn’t have taken over the world. And, consequently, maybe Ghandi would have had an impact.”

“As much as your passion drives you, you must find a way to reach your Spock with reason. Insist on logic. Push it as far you can, and then push it some more. He will see it!” Spock says. “And you do have power over Kirk. I believe he listens to you. One of his strengths has been to listen to the counsel of those he trusts before acting.”

“Gene, are you crying?” Majel asked.

“Garcia understands,” Gene said. “He understands.”



“George, I want to speak to the number one flight attendant,” Garcia said to his camera man.

The Number One heard and ducked under the camera and into the flight deck.

"I slept through your speech. Does this aircraft carry life rafts?" Garcia asked.

"No," she said. "Federal regulations only require rafts if we are routed over water for more than thirty minutes..."

"Okay, I understand. What's your name?" Garcia asked.

"Donna," she said.

"Stick with me, Donna. I'm going to need you. Here's the situation. We don't appear to have enough fuel to make it back to land. We may have to ditch. I'm going to do what I can to avoid that, but meanwhile, you need to get people prepared for a water landing. Alright?" he asked.

"Alright," she said.

"Alright," Garcia said. And before she left, he added. "And I need one more thing."

Donna stopped to listen.

Garcia had her complete attention and he was dead serious when he said: "Find me a stick of gum. Any flavor."

Her eyes widened in concern and then a little mirth broke through, and she nodded that she understood as he was nodding to get her to agree. She touched his shoulder and departed the flight deck.

"Tam, don't be ridiculous," Kletsova said.

"What, you want a stick, too?" Garcia asked.

Lenar ducked into the cockpit. "What can I do?"

"I want Niki sitting between you and Trini. No matter what happens, your jobs are to keep Niki alive," Garcia said. "Copy?"

"Copy," Lenar said, and patted Kletsova on the shoulder. "Good luck."

Garcia put the headset on. "Look for an alternative to ditching," Garcia instructed Kletsova. "An island. A sand bar. Anything. ATC, this is Quality Air flight 453, declaring an emergency."

"Flight 453, we have been trying to contact you. Turn your transponder code to zero seven seven three and ident. Please, state the nature of your emergency," ATC answered.

"The pilots are dead," Garcia said, tuning in the numbers on the transponder and then pushing the ident button. Pushing in on the IDENT button caused their icon on the ATC's screen to brighten. "It appears we have insufficient fuel to make it back to land. Can you confirm and advise?"

"Stand by," ATC said. "Confirm, you said the pilots are dead?"

"Affirmative, pilots are dead," Garcia said.

"Then who's piloting the plane?" ATC said.

"Are we dealing with a moron?" Kletsova asked.

"Maybe he's reading off a check list," Garcia said. "This is Tammias Garcia, from Star Fleet. Are there any secret landing strips near us, perhaps an uncharted military air strip, or an island?"

"If this is a joke, I will have your license revoked," ATC said.

"Get your god-damn superior on the line. This is Quality Air 453, and I have a hundred and seventeen souls on board. I am declaring an emergency. Please advise," Garcia snapped.

Silence.

"You really should stay professional, Tam. He's doing his job, and if you piss him off, he's not going to talk to us," Kletsova said.

"That's the way these people talk, haven't you been listening to them?" Garcia asked.

"He's been professional. Stupid, but professional," Kletsova said.

"ATC, this is Quality Air flight 453, please advise on the nearest available landing sites," Garcia said.

"Yes, Quality Air, this is ATC. We have two military F16 en route to intercept," ATC returned. "How much fuel do you have?"

"Twelve thousand pounds of fuel," Garcia told them. He imagined people running about screaming, 'they're all going to die,' but then he remembered, that was just a movie. This was real life. He also was wondering what good a military escort was going to do. Did they have the ability to refuel him in flight?

"Be advised, you are going to have to execute a water landing," ATC said.

Garcia pulled back on the throttles and began to reduce the flap settings. He also pulled back on the yoke to change the angle of attack to maintain attitude as he lost airspeed.

“What are you doing?” Kletsova said.

“If I can maintain this altitude at these setting, we can pinch on fuel and maybe get a little closer to land before we have to ditch.

“Quality Air 453, please maintain your previous airspeed,” ATC said.

Garcia explained to controller what he was doing.

“We do not concur with your choice. We think it is better for you to run yourself out of fuel before you ditch,” ATC said.

“Is there anyone else I can talk to?” Garcia asked.

Two F16’s pulled up along side, close enough that Garcia could wave at the pilots. “ATC, we have spotted your intercept.”

“They will follow you and report back your crash site,” ATC said.

“They sure got here fast,” Kletsova said.

“They did,” Garcia agreed, pushing in on the yoke to put them in a slight dive. “Look for it.”

“What?” Kletsova asked. “Those oil rigs?”

“No. It’ll be bigger... There it is” Garcia said, pointing towards an aircraft carrier. “Turn on the fasten seatbelt sign.”

“Where?” she asked, lost in all the buttons and lights on the console in front of her.

Garcia reached above her head and flipped the switch. Garcia then lost some altitude by kicking the rudder hard to the left and the ailerons to the right, putting them into a side slip to loose altitude quickly.

“ATC, can you give me the radio frequency for the aircraft carrier?” Garcia asked.

“Um, negative,” ATC said. “Please return to your previous altitude and heading.”

“Donna?!” Garcia yelled.

Donna popped into the cockpit.

“Yes?” she asked, obviously scared, perhaps from the airplane’s sudden, rapid descent.

“I want Paula Abdul up here immediately,” Garcia said.

“Tam, what’s going on?” Kletsova asked.

“I’m thinking we may be more screwed than you and I originally thought,” Garcia said, turning back to the camera. “George, start transmitting your camera signal.”

“But no one will receive it up here,” George said.

“Do it! Now, or we’re all dead,” Garcia said.

“The fighters are falling back,” Kletsova said.

Paula ducked into the flight deck and ducked down so as not to block the camera. “What?”

“Get Mann on the phone, now,” Garcia said.

“My cell phone won’t work up here,” Paula said.

“Yes it will. Please, make it fast,” Garcia assured her.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Garcia connected via his neural implant via the airplane's inboard satellite cell service system to his supercomputer back at his office. The feed from George's and Mike's cameras were now being fed live and ready to go through the network to every local house and everyone connected via satellite, cable and internet. At the same time, he connected to Brittney and dialed up the President's personal cell phone. The President was on the phone with someone else, but Garcia was able to disconnect that line in favor of his call.

"Hello?" the President answered.

"Remember me, Mr. President? Star Fleet?" Brittany asked him.

"It's the Enterprise," Kletsova said, as they grew closer to the aircraft carrier.

"Attention Quality Air, do not attempt to approach closer to the aircraft carrier, or we will be forced to shoot you down," came a voice.

"I want to speak to the Captain of the Enterprise," Garcia said.

"This is Captain Eggers," the Captain responded. "State your intentions."

"I am declaring an emergency and request permission to land on your aircraft carrier," Garcia said.

Kletsova braced herself. "Are you out of your ever loving mind!?"

"That is a physical impossibility. You will not be allowed to land on my carrier with that aircraft,"

Captain Eggers said. "Do not force me to shoot you down."

"I got Mann," Paula said.

"Tell him to turn on his secret feeds and tell him to go live, now," Garcia said, knowing full well that everything happening to them was going to be broadcast over the network using the emergency broadcast system. Only instead of going just locally, it would now be all over the world. "Start narrating what's going on. I'm turning the radio up so you can hear both sides."

Garcia throttled up so that he could circle the aircraft carrier. He was also constantly changing his flight line hoping to prevent the fighters from getting a good lock, shaking the passengers up in the process. Of course, it was probably all for naught. The fighters were more than likely carrying heat seeking missiles, which would be difficult to avoid unless his aircraft was equipped with automatic, anti terrorist missile deflection systems.

"Yes, I remember you," the President said, answering Brittney. "How did you get this number?"

"Turn on your Television set, quickly. We don't have much time," Brittney instructed. "Do you see what's playing out? Get on the phone to Captain Eggers of the USS Enterprise and instruct him to allow Tammis Garcia to land the 737 on the carrier."

"You can't land a 737 on a carrier!" the president argued.

"Mr. President, everyone in the world is now watching this, live," Brittany said.

"Captain Eggers," Garcia said. "I assure you, I can land this safely on your ship. This is an emergency situation. We have elderly and children who may not survive a water landing. Please, allow me to land. George, have Mike sweep the cabin with his camera."

"I will shoot you down if you come any closer to my ship," Eggers said.

"Tam? Are you sure about this?" Kletsova asked.

"Sure," Garcia said. "I've done it before."

"When have you done this before!?" Kletsova yelled.

"On the holodeck," Garcia said.

"Oh my god," Kletsova said, closing her eyes tightly.

Donna leaned in. "Mr. Garcia? I found some gum. It's sugar free, is that okay?"

"Oh! Thank you," Garcia said. "Would you un-wrap a stick for me and place it in my mouth. My hands are kind of busy. Thank you. I owe you one."

Donna made a small, hysterical laugh and backed out of the way. Paula continued to tell everyone what was going on as she saw it. What she didn't know was that on another channel, the conversation with the President and Eggers was going out live with the same footage. At least, the President's end of the conversation was as Brittany was forwarding what she heard back to Garcia's super computer.

"I know it's impossible to land a 737 on an aircraft carrier. No, I'm not giving you permission to shoot him down. Do you know who's flying that plane? That would definitely be the end of our careers. How the

hell did that plane get in that situation to begin with? Well find out! Who was the ATC in charge? Why weren't you notified of his situation sooner? Why didn't you investigate why a stray commercial airliner was passing over your ship earlier, way outside of normal commercial traffic lanes? There are a lot of unanswered questions here, and by god, if any one of those passengers die it's not going to be my head that rolls. Really? You want my advice? Let him try and land the goddamn airplane. If he crashes it, it's on him."

"Quality Air 453, this is Captain Eggers of the USS Enterprise," the captain returned. "On the orders of the President of the New United States, I am hereby authorizing you to attempt a landing on my ship."

"Thank you," Garcia said. "Now, I can only do this once, so listen up. Engage normal landing protocols and head straight into the wind. Let me know when you have achieved your top speed."

"What if your wrong, Tam?" Kletsova asked.

"Worst case scenario?" Garcia asked, popping his gum. "We over shoot the flight deck, slide off the end, and don't have time to recover, hit the water, and the Enterprise runs over us, killing everyone on board."

Kletsova went pale as a ghost. Paula's mouth fell agape.

"But that's not going to happen," Garcia told them. "I am going to land this plane on that carrier, and we're going to walk out of here alive and well, without even a scratch."

"If you pull this off, I'm going to sleep with you," Paula said.

"If he pulls this off, I'm going to sleep with him" George said.

Garcia, Kletsova, and Paula looked to George. He smiled. "A little humor to lighten the situation?"

"You two want to go buckle in?" Garcia asked.

"Does it really matter where I crash if you miss?" George asked.

"Not really," Garcia said.

"I'll just stay here, then, if it's okay with you, boss," George said. "I might just get an Emmy for this footage. I'll be dead, but I'll have an Emmy."

Garcia nodded, blew a bubble, and Kletsova grabbed the arms of her seat, commenting that he was turning too steep.

"Relax, honey," Garcia said. "Donna?!"

Donna stuck her head in. "Yes, Captain?"

"We're going to be landing shortly. Do your routine and take your seats."

"Aye, Captain," Donna said. "Ladies and Gentleman, please make sure your seat belts are fastened, securely. And, in the case that we do land in the water, please remember that your seat bottom can be used as a flotation device. Good luck. Flight attendants, take your seats."

"Tam, this is not a Cessna!" Kletsova snapped.

"Um, yes it is," Garcia said, throttling back. "Ladies and gentlemen, please remain in your seat with your seatbelts fastened until notified. For real this time."

"And stop popping your gum," Kletsova said.

"Would you prefer I sing?"

"Maybe," Kletsova said.

"Swing low, sweet chariot," Garcia began.

"Pop your gum, smart ass," Kletsova said.

Garcia now had the aircraft going as slow as physically possible given the current conditions: full flaps, gear down, and headed directly into the wind. He allowed the aircraft to drop below the deck line of the ship, literally skimming the water. The tips of waves wet the bottom of the main gears. As the aircraft carrier rose and rolled with the waves, Garcia planned his final approach.

"We're too low!" Kletsova snapped.

"I know," Garcia said. "Be ready to step on the toe breaks when I say now."

"Oh my god," Kletsova said, clutching the arms rest so tight her knuckles were white.

The Enterprise rocked and rolled with the seas and Garcia blew a bubble, getting a feel for the rhythm of it all. A song began to play in his head. At the last possible moment, before imminent collision with the ship, Garcia yanked back on the wheel, causing the aircraft to rise suddenly. It stalled. The two main gear hit the side of the deck, just below the center line of the wheels, with enough force to deflate each tire, but still roll onto the landing deck. Garcia popped his gum, which startled Kletsova more than the sound of the tires

hitting and the jarring sensation and the scream of the passengers, and then he pushed the nose down hard. They were on top of the deck, and when Garcia said “now!” he and Kletsova stood on the toe breaks. The right wing tip just missed scratching the tower by three centimeters, and the left main gear was just six centimeters from going off the side of the ship. Garcia slipped the throttles into thrust reverser mode, causing the engines to whine as if they were participating in the desperate efforts to keep the plane from going off the other end. The 737 came to a complete stop with the nose gear touching the end of the deck. And then it started to back up. The far left tire slipped off the side of the carrier, just as he brought the engines back to idle. The aircraft came to a halt once more and finally. Garcia began the engine shut down procedure, smacking his gum, calm as if everything was business as usual. Kletsova sat there, gripping the arm rest, staring forwards out the window. She suppressed the thought that she was about to get seasick, the sun beaming through the cockpit window causing her to feel warm.

Outside, Navy men jumped and danced. Some actually ran and tied cables to the 737 landing gear to help prevent it from sliding any further off the deck as the ship moved with the turbulent sea.

“Ladies and gentleman,” Garcia said, only a little more animated than his usual demeanor. “This is your Captain speaking. I’d like to thank you for flying Quality Air. Pay close attention to the flight attendants instructions as we will be debarking from the right side of the plane. And, welcome aboard the USS Enterprise.”

“I take back every mean thing I ever said about you,” Kletsova said, staring at him blankly.

“No worries, Tatiana,” Garcia said. “Would you help greet the passengers? I’m going to step into the restroom real quick.”

Kletsova nodded and stepped out to where the flight attendants were helping the passengers down. She had to scoot forward for Garcia to access to lavatory and then fell back to get out of the way of passengers lined up and moving steadily for the exit. She thought she heard Garcia being sick, but she gave him his privacy. A little old lady reached out for Kletsova’s arm.

“Where did that nice young man go?” she asked, her hands shaking with age tremors, as opposed to being scared. “I wanted to thank him for doing such a good job.”

“I am sure he would be willing to say hi to you later,” Kletsova said.

“Oh, good. He is such a nice young man. Have you ever met him before? He is so handsome and so talented,” she said.

“Yes,” Kletsova agreed, only a little peeved that the old woman didn’t recognize her, too. The drummers were never remembered, she thought. “He is that, isn’t he? Now watch your step, Ma’am. Right this way.”

Nikita hugged Kletsova. “Oh my god! You two out did yourselves,” she said. “Where is he?”

Kletsova nodded towards the bathroom. “Weren’t you three supposed to exit the back?”

“Yeah, but I wanted to wait for Tam,” Niki said.

“No, you need to go down after Lenar, and now,” Kletsova said, looking at Trini and Lenar crossly for not getting her off the aircraft immediately. “Trini will follow. C’mon, let’s go. Chop, chop.”

The flight attendants did their job in record time. The only ones left were Garcia, Kletsova and the Flight attendants.

“You should go own down, Ma’am,” Donna said.

“I’d rather wait,” Kletsova said.

Donna nodded and instructed the other Flight Attendants to debark while she and Kletsova waited for Garcia. Kletsova knocked on the door. “Tam? Are you okay?”

“Do you need assistance?” Donna asked.

Kletsova knocked again and the door opened. Garcia’s face was wet and he was drying it with a paper towel.

“I’m alright,” Garcia said. “Let’s go.”

“Not yet,” Donna said, forcefully embracing Garcia and kissing him hard on the mouth.

Kletsova flinched, knowing full well Garcia had been throwing up. It didn’t seem to bother Donna any. “Everywhere we go,” she thought, observing how into it Donna seemed to be and observant of how Garcia’s participation was growing in enthusiasm. Nothing like a life or death scenario to get the adrenalin

flowing and the libido up. She suppressed her own feelings for Garcia, telling herself to come to terms with the fact that her expectations would never be. Garcia was who Garcia was, and nothing would ever change that, but knowing that he was probably sick due to the stress of the situation made him seem a little more vulnerable and human, and she could no longer deny that she loved him. She went down the slide, leaving Garcia and the Flight Attendant visible in the door way. Garcia had Donna go down next, leaving him the last one off the plane. He then disappeared from the door as he investigated the airplane to make certain there was no one left on board before he, too, debarked. Garcia was definitely a Captain, Kletsova thought.

Once on the deck, Garcia shook hands with Captain Eggers. "I don't suppose you can fly this thing off my ship?"

"Are you kidding?" Garcia asked. "That's impossible."



Captain Eggers had a private conversation with Garcia in his quarters, offering him a cup of coffee and a cigar. Garcia smelled the cigar and then stuck it in his pocket. The quarters were dimly lit, and most of the light came from a lamp on the Captain's desk. It had a translucent, plastic, green cover, directing most of the light to the desk top, but emitting enough of a green glow to softly illuminate the cabin.

Captain Eggers leaned forward, his arms on his desk, tapping a pencil. "Are you really Star Fleet?"

"Why do you ask?" Garcia asked.

"I watched your approach, and you did better than just fly a plane, you became one with it and my ship. It couldn't have been better timed. You hit the deck just at the right angle as the aft rose with the water. You are either the best pilot this planet has ever produced, or you are not from this planet," Captain Eggers said.

"Is this conversation between you and me?" Garcia asked.

"Completely off the record," Captain Eggers said.

"I am from Star Fleet," Garcia said. "I originally came here to evaluate your planet's progress and determine what help you need to get to the next level, if any. That mission is still in affect, but some of the parameters have changed. Your government, or a branch there of, decided to board our starship, and the damage they inflicted was so great, I had to destroy it. Members of my crew were captured, and my new mission is to ensure their safety, rescuing them if I can. It would be nice to know that I have a friend on this planet. Someone I could call on for assistance if the need arises."

"Will you answer a few questions for me before I commit to a working relationship with you?" Captain Eggers asked.

"That is very reasonable," Garcia said.

"Why is Star Fleet abducting our people?" Captain Eggers said.

"Star Fleet is not abducting your people. That is not how we operate," Garcia said. "Sadly, mostly due to procedures and politics, Star Fleet hasn't visited your planet since Kirk. Nearly a month ago we sent our first ship since Kirk. It went missing, presumably for similar reasons that my ship is now missing."

"Will there be negative consequences for attacking your ships and holding your people hostages?" Captain Eggers asked.

"If by negative you mean will we blow up your planet? No. If by negative do you mean we might be more apt to simply leave you alone. That's possible. Our intentions were never to influence your social evolution. Unfortunately, when the Horizon came, they didn't have the rules we cling to so dearly today. Some of the rules we have are actually in place because of what happens when ships like the Horizon leave technology and bits of culture without a contextual understanding of the materials and events," Garcia said.

"Okay, so, if you aren't abducting our people, who is?" Captain Eggers asked.

"I don't know," Garcia said. "Because I have been unable to gather anything but circumstantial evidence, I am leaning towards that there is nothing more to this phenomena than mass hysteria."

"I have lost 14 fighter pilots chasing UFO's," Captain Eggers said, not hiding his hostility. "And out of sixty two sighting and chases, I have only managed to knock one of these things out of the sky."

"Can you describe the craft?" Garcia asked. "Can I examine any of the wreckage?"

"The Craft completely disintegrated after twenty minutes," Captain Eggers said. "It evaporated like water and dissipated like so much smoke on a windy day. The only thing left, other than a crater in the

ground, was a tiny sphere ball about this size. It appeared to be marble, but the thing is, no one could cut it or break it. A scientist took it and I don't know where it is today."

"Any occupants?" Garcia asked.

"Two small gray creatures, about yey high," Eggers said. "They were taken to a secret facility to be autopsied."

Garcia involuntarily shivered at the mentioning of grays. "Is it possible for you to get me reports of these encounters without getting you in trouble with your superiors?" Garcia asked.

"I could probably arrange it," Captain Eggers said. "What will I get in return?"

"At the moment, I am not in the position to promise anything," Garcia said. "To be honest, I am just barely managing to stay sane. Now it appears someone has decided I should die, or my whole team should die, so, I have to take some new precautions. My number one priority is to make sure my immediate team survives to get rescued."

"I can appreciate your position," Captain Eggers said. "Look, all I want is information. I want to know what these things are, why they are taking my people, and how to stop it. Can you give me at least that much?"

"Yes," Garcia said. "If there is an alien intelligence adversely influencing the evolution of this planet, or otherwise affecting your people, I will give you every bit of information about that intelligence that I have available, and will help establish some form of defense against that alien. You have my word on that."

"And you have that friend you were looking for," Captain Eggers said, putting out his hand.

Garcia took Captain Eggers hand.



Giovanni entered his office and flipped on the light, talking to his lead henchman that he had in tow. He noticed two things almost simultaneously. One, Tammás Garcia was sitting in his chair with his feet up on his desk. The second thing was that there was the muzzle of a gun in his back. His lead henchman was about to pull his weapon but was advised not to do so. Tim came around and took the weapons from them and pointed Giovanni to the chair in front of the desk. The lead henchman was stunned and pulled aside so that the door could close. Mike was the man with the gun in Giovanni's back, and Roxanne closed the door.

"The last time we met, Mr. Giovanni, I was tied to a chair," Garcia said. "Do you remember that?"

"May I smoke?" Giovanni asked, trying to play it cool.

"Don't you know smoking kills?" Garcia asked.

"Are you going to kill me?" Giovanni asked.

"I haven't decided, yet," Garcia said.

"Then may I smoke?" Giovanni asked.

Garcia nodded. Giovanni reached for the cigar box on his desk, but Roxanne slammed it shut and pushed him back to the chair with her foot. She lifted the box, inspected it, opened it, and took out a cigar. She leaned back on the desk. She delicately unwrapped the cigar, ran it slowly under her nose, appreciating the smell, cut the end off, licked it, sucked on it, and then finally lit it. She blew a smoke ring skywards, and then handed Giovanni the cigar.

"Remind me to take you to dinner tonight," Garcia said.

"Sugar, you don't have to buy me dinner. We can just go back to my place," Roxanne said, smiling sweetly.

"But I'm hungry," Garcia said. "You can pick the place."

"Just tell me what you want, Sugar," Roxanne said.

Garcia turned his attention back to Giovanni and tossed the trigger at him. "You recognize that?"

"Some kind of radio controlled device," Giovanni said.

"Does it belong to you?" Garcia asked.

"Never seen it before," Giovanni said.

"Come on!" Garcia put his feet down and leaned on the man's desk. "You don't feel the slightest bit angry that I took out three of your men?"

"You didn't kill them," Giovanni said. "I appreciated that. It gave me some joy killing them myself for them not finishing their assignment and then lying about it, covering up the fact that you escaped."



That news sickened Garcia, but he didn't show it. "I've also seen a few more Red Shirts on my side of town. You didn't have anything to do with the assassination attempt while I was teaching Niki to drive? Are you saying you haven't been contemplating putting a hit on me?"

"Sure, I contemplated it," Giovanni said. "No law against that."

"Was that fake air marshal one of your men?" Garcia asked.

"Never saw the man in my life," Giovanni said.

"Boss, I say we just kill him," Mike said. "Slowly."

"Let me, boss," Roxanne said. "It's been a while since I killed a man."

"Look, I was told to pull my men back, so I did," Giovanni said.

"Who told you to pull your men back?" Garcia asked.

"I aint telling you nothin'," Giovanni said.

Garcia nodded, got up, went around the desk, and took the cigar away from Giovanni. For a moment he acted as if he might burn the man with the cigar, but then he put it in the ash tray. Garcia grabbed Giovanni up and stared him straight in the eye. The man didn't even flinch.

"You aren't going to make a mess again, are you boss?" Tim asked.

Garcia smiled, man handled Giovanni over to the open window, and threw him out. Unbeknownst to Giovanni, Tim had attached a bungee cord to the man's leg at the same moment Garcia had grabbed him up from the chair. This bungee cord saved Giovanni from hitting the ground, but he did hit the building a couple times, as he bounced. The man was still screaming when they pulled him back into the room.

"Who gave the order to pull your men back?" Garcia asked again.

"Some new kid in town," Giovanni said. "I've never met him."

"What's his name?" Garcia asked.

"I don't know," Giovanni said.

"Put a little more slack in his line," Garcia said, and after Tim complied he threw Giovanni out the window again. When they pulled the screaming Giovanni back inside, Garcia said, "I bet his head just touches the ground next time, what do you say?"

"I'll put a hundred on that," Mike said.

"Count me in," Roxanne said.

Tim agreed and let a little more slack out, making sure Giovanni was watching just how much slack he was giving him.

"Honest, I haven't met this man," Giovanni said. "I think his name is Brick or Brack."

"Brock?" Garcia asked, completely taken by surprise.

"Yes, that's it. I don't know anything about him, really. He only allows a few elite people to meet with him and they distribute his orders. I hear he's a real bad ass, and has lots of ladies hanging on him, blowing in his ear or something, you know, but really, I don't know anything," Giovanni said, sobbing. "Honest."

Garcia patted the man's cheek. "Are you and I going to have any more problems here?"

"Oh, no. We're square. I don't have any beef with you," Giovanni said.

"So, you're telling me, I could maybe call you up and have you do a favor for me one day?" Garcia asked. "You know, to kind of make up for the way you treated me the first time we met?"

"Sure, absolutely," Giovanni said. "It would be a pleasure and honor to do you a favor. My wife and kids think you're the best thing since sliced bread. Anything you want. You just name it."

"I believe you," Garcia said. "And you work for me now, capeesh? So, here's rule number one. Don't you or any of your Red shirts kill any more people unless I give the word. Got it?"

"Rule number one. No killing without your orders," Giovanni said. "Got it."

"Rule number two, be nice to your wife and kids," Garcia said.

"Rule two. I'll be the best husband and dad ever. No more cheating. I promise," Giovanni said.

"Rule three you'll get later. When I call you for that favor," Garcia said.

"Right," Giovanni agreed. "You call me. I'll be waiting for your call. You and I are the best of buds from this point on."

"And you and I are okay. You're sure about this. Because, you understand, I could kill you at any time, just take over the business and run it without you, and I don't even have to kill you myself," Garcia said.

"You and I are best friends. You can count on me," Giovanni said.

"I am glad to hear it. I want you to think about our arrangement for awhile. And think real hard. Here's your reminder and motivation," Garcia said, and tossed him once more out the window.

They all looked out the window. "His hair touched, does that count?" Mike asked.

"Yeah, that counts," Garcia said, fishing some money out of his pocket. "Thank you guys for the help."

"Oh, it's been our pleasure, boss," Mike said. "Haven't had fun like this in years."

"Hey, we're still on for dinner, aren't we?" Roxanne said.

"You bet," Garcia said, putting his arm around her.



"Are you crazy?" Brock said. "I advised you not to kill him. Tell me you didn't sign the order."

"I didn't sign the order," the General said.

Brock did a double take. "I understand. But it was still stupid. You just made Garcia a national hero. And maybe set back my plans several months on getting him under control."

"We have a little surprise for you," the General said.

"Really?" Brock said, his mood changing.

Jay escorted two Ferengi into the room. Tolro and Riko. Brock's face fell and his chest sunk.

"I think I'll leave the three of you alone," the General said.

"So, you've been living it up here in the lap of luxury while we sat in a holding cell for the last several days," Tolro said.

"I had no idea," Brock said. "Must have been some quarantine procedure. They didn't tell me. Well, this is great. Now that you're here, we can call home and get the wheels of progress turning."

Tolro stepped forward. "You know, I have had a really bad couple of days. Tell me some good news. Did you get the contract with Garcia?"

"Yes, I got him right where we want him," Brock said. "We might have to wait till his celebrity status wanes a little before we put the squeeze on him, but we got him."

"Right. And what's the situation here?" Tolro asked. "How much are we making in this little set up?"

"Now, wait just a minute," Brock said. "Technically, I set this up without you or your ship so..."

"Technically, I am still your Captain and I get a fair percentage of any deals you broker while under my command. We have a contract. That is, unless you're saying you would like to sell your shares in my ship and take a penalty for leaving me without a qualified First Officer," Tolro said.

Brock sighed. "I'll cut you in for your percentage."

"That's what I wanted to hear," Tolro said, offering his hand. "Put it there."

"Now, we need to move fast on this," Brock said. "We should have a team of investors, accountants, and lawyers here within a week, in order to beat the Federation to the bargaining tables. You know how they can ruin a good deal."

"Yes, I am aware of that," Tolro said, leafing through a book on the Iotian GDP. "You've done good work here. It's hard to imagine these simians actually share a common ancestor."

"It's more than that. This is like reliving Earth's electronic information age all over again, only this time, we can make sure it develops appropriately," Brock said. "So, when can we get back to the ship and make that call?"

"Well, that could be a little bit of a problem, at the moment," Tolro said. "The communication array on our ship is currently out. Phlim and Phlam are working on that about now, I imagine."

"What happened? Did you run into some trouble?" Brock said.

"Yeah, something like that," Tolro said. "I don't suppose your friends have any space worthy shuttles, do you?"

"Um, no, and I wouldn't recommend their transporters, either" Brock said.

"Well, I guess we'll just have to sit here and wait for a rescue," Tolro said.

"What happened?" Brock asked. "Did the Iotians board our ship?"

“Oh, no, nothing like that. It’s a long story, actually. I would love to fill you in, but I would prefer to wait till we’re safely off this planet,” Brock said. “You know, they have ears and all.”

“Ears? Oh, you mean are they monitoring us? Don’t worry about that,” Brock said. “I got everything down here under control.”



“Osaka?” Simmons asked, waking the first officer with a gentle tap on the arm.

Osaka sat up. They had been held in captivity for who knows how many weeks now and suddenly the guards were being nice. At least to some of them. They had brought in a viewer of some sort, allowing for a bit of entertainment. The guards simply pushed it in the room and departed without explanation. It proved to be a very simple device to operate, once they figured out to plug it in and attached the cable. It wasn’t twenty four hours later that they discovered a show called “Star Fleet Singers,” starring none other than Tammias Garcia.

“I’m going to kill him,” Osaka said. “He’s out there living it up in the lap of luxury and we’re in prison.”

“You have to admit,” Simmons said. “Sometimes it’s nice to be a celebrity.”

Owens yelled across the hall to Osaka. “Hey, Osaka, turn to channel 62. I think it’s a UHF channel.”

“TV. Channel 62,” Osaka said. He frowned and got up for the remote. On turning the channel, he froze, holding the remote aimed at the TV. He simply could not believe his eyes.

“Admiral!” yelled a man who looked very much like Captain Picard, who was jumping to take over the helm when a young Ensign fell from his chair due to an explosion somewhere overhead. “There are two more Borg ships approaching from 034 mark 268.”

“Steady as she goes, Picard. One target at a time. Medic to the Bridge,” Garcia said, hitting his com. “Worf, where are those damn torpedoes?”

“I got them, Admiral. I had to cut life support to the officer’s quarters, but I got them,” Worf said. “Target locked.”

“Open fire on the lead Borg ship,” the Admiral said, standing. “We will not loose another planet to these bastards.”

“It’s just Iotia!” Ensign Riker said. “Let it fall. We can regroup somewhere else.”

“Every planet that falls makes our enemy that much stronger,” Garcia said. “And these people deserve a fighting chance. Now open fire!”

Doctor Crusher entered and went right to the injured. She turned to the Admiral, “My son is dead.”

“We’ll throw a party later. Get his body off my Bridge,” the Admiral said stepping over the boy to punch a button on the Ops panel. “Engineering, what the devil are you doing down there. Get those shields back up.”

“Intruders!” Worf yelled, jumping over his station to save the Admiral.

“This is complete garbage!” Osaka gagged.

“Hey!” a passing guard over heard. “You diss the Admiral again, and we’ll take your TV away from you.”

“Go ahead,” Osaka said. “I can’t believe this. Has the world gone completely insane? Am I still alive? Is this hell?”

“I am sure there is a reasonable answer to all of this,” Simmons said.

“Would ya’ll quiet down? I’m trying to watch this.”

Osaka and Simmons both executed a double take off of the cadet leaning forward on his cot. Osaka was about to say something, but the cell door opened again. The one they called “the suit” was there, with several of his goons.

“Lt. Osaka,” Jay said. “Come with us.”

Everyone in the room stood as if they were ready to fight, but Osaka waved them into submission. Everytime they had resisted, they were all stunned and the Iotians did as they pleased anyway. By minimally cooperating, Osaka at least hoped to learn something useful. He was taken down the hall to the interrogation room. He had already seen it several times and so wasn’t surprised or frightened by the tools of the trade openly displayed around the room.

“Have a seat,” Jay instructed.

Osaka chose to sit down.

“Would you like something to drink? Maybe some food?” Jay asked, revealing a cart loaded with some of the most appetizing foods they could put together.

“Are you sharing this with all my people?” Osaka asked.

“No, just you,” Jay said.

“I’ll pass,” Osaka said.

“You know, if you were to cooperate with us, we could come to a better living arrangement for you and your crew,” Jay said. “Garcia seems to have really taken to the life we’ve made for him. You could be a star. You could have riches beyond your wildest dreams. Anything you want.”

Osaka didn’t even rise to the bait. He simply sat there, listening, and watching what the other guards were doing.

“The Ferengi has also cut a deal with us, like Garcia,” Jay said. “So we’re going to get what we want eventually, but we would rather it be from you. Your kind appeals to us more than the Ferengi. Our public is more likely to accept you than the bug eared monsters.”

“It is exactly that sort of prejudice that demonstrates that you and your society are not prepared to handle the knowledge and technologies that the Federation has to offer,” Osaka said. “If you think the Ferengi are ugly, then you simply are not prepared for space travel. There are creatures that are so ugly, so asymmetrical, that a mere glance can make a human mentally unstable. Psychologically, sociologically, even morally, you are not ready to handle what I can give you.”

“You think you’re superior to us?” Jay said more than asked. “It took your people two thousand years to get to our current level of technology.”

“The reason you did it in two hundred years is because you had help. Had you evolved through normal levels of progressions, without skipping necessary lessons along the way, you would be much more prepared to face the challenges that await you as a people,” Osaka said. “Surely Garcia has told you that much. Technologies don’t always make life better. They can complicate things, even distance you from your fellow man. Your entertainment and communication technologies has done more to isolate your average citizen than to bring them together. People don’t socialize as much, and so, sure, you rebuilt New York City, and everyone goes to work and then goes home and watches TV, but they go home to an empty life. A life without social interaction is empty.”

“How dare you?” Jay demanded.

“Tell me it’s not true,” Osaka said. “Is the general public happier? Are they healthier? Has crime gone down? Has depression gone up? Sure, you can get on the internet, or call New London on the phone, but are you closer as a people because of this?”

“Tell us about warp technology,” Jay said.

“Why? So you can make the rest of the Universe equally miserable in your loneliness?” Osaka asked.

Jay nodded and two of his henchman strapped Osaka into the chair.

“You won’t find your answers torturing me,” Osaka said. “You won’t find your answers in space, out there. If you want to understand the world you live in, you have to look inside yourself.”

Jay nodded and his henchmen started the session.



“Oh my god, I am so excited,” Niki rambled. “We’re actually going to meet Oprah. The woman who changed television.”

“It’s not Oprah,” Garcia said. They were sitting in the green room waiting to be called out, watching Oprah on a monitor as she started her show. Oprah told the audience that she had several surprises for them today. The first surprise was that Star Fleet Singers were her guests, which got an immediate standing ovation. The second surprise was, there were going to be no commercial interruptions for the hour, as the Star Fleet Singers had agreed to pay for all the spots, which Oprah turned around and gave to charities. As agreed, they allowed Nikita to go on stage first. Niki knew Oprah was about to call her and was pacing from excitement. When Oprah called, she ran. The rest of Star Fleet Singers watched from their monitor in the green room while several hostesses saw to their comfort.

Nikita walked out on stage and when Oprah opened her arms, her knees bent, she screamed, and she clapped her hands, and then ran into Oprah's embrace. Oprah, gracious as always, led Nikita back to the couch, allowing the audience to settle.

"So, how does it feel to be the most popular teenager on the planet?" Oprah asked.

"Oh, I don't know if I have the words," Nikita said. And then she smiled. "May I jump up and down on your couch?"

Oprah gave one of her "speechless" faces to the camera, and shook her head, and waited for the laughter and clapping to die down. "Oh, go ahead."

Niki got up, leaving her sandals on the floor, and jumped up and down on the couch. "Come up here with me Oprah!" The clapping grew louder and Oprah climbed up on the couch and jumped, saying, "I can't believe I'm jumping on my couch with Nikita from Star Fleet!"

When Oprah climbed down, holding her hands up to assist Nikita back down, she fanned herself off and motioned for water to be brought out. "Whew" she said. "That was fun. Makes me feel young and old at the same time."

"It's a good thing, sometimes," Nikita said. "To be both. Garcia once told me the best definition of happiness is some sad, some happy, and a hell of a lot of neutral."

In the back, Garcia put his hand to his forehead, knowing good and well the camera was on him, but also the eyes of his Commune.

"Well, I am sure everyone asks you, but I want to know, too," Oprah said. "What's it like working with Garcia?"

"Oh my god, he is like, so nice," Nikita raved.

"And you're not saying that just because you're in love with him?" Oprah said.

Nikita blushed. "Yes, I admit, I am biased, but how can you not love him? Unfortunately, he has really healthy boundaries, and he looks out for my well being," Niki said, and then she hoped what she said sounded as funny to the audience as she was trying to make it. "And we joke about it and play off of it. Like, you saw the other day where he started singing, 'young girl, get out of my mind, my love for you is way out of line, better run, girl' and I just busted out laughing and about nearly peed in my pants."

Oprah covered her mouth with her hand to keep from laughing out loud and shook her head. She surrendered to her fit of laughter, and put her other hand on her belly, and sat forwards, looking away from the guest to the audience back over her right shoulder. She may have recovered her composure earlier, but the audience simply wasn't helping her any.

"Your favorite episode?" Oprah said, finally, breathless.

"Of your show?" Nikita said. "That's the one where you give prizes. Oh. My show? Well, that's easy. The one where Olivia Newton John visited us. I just love that song she did with Garcia, 'Suddenly.' Now, that is probably, out of ten, the number one kiss I have seen in my life. Oh, my," she said, fanning herself comically.

"You are just a riot, girlfriend," Oprah said. "When you were on the airplane, weren't you just a tiny bit scared?"

"No," Niki said. "I knew as long as Tammias was in charge, nothing bad could happen to me."

"That doesn't sound healthy. You almost sound as if you believe Tammias is from outer space, and that he can do anything," Oprah said. "He immerses you in a world of fiction, twenty four hours a day. He acts like he is from outer space. Are you buying into that? Do you think he's serious about that, or just acting?"

"I really think that that's a question best left to him," Nikita said.

"Well, why wait any longer, Tam? Come on out here," Oprah yelled.

On the screen behind Oprah, they saw Tam shaking his head but getting up to come on out. He acted genuinely surprised by the screams and standing ovation, and graciously stopped to touch the hands of people as he passed them. One even asked for a hug. He came around the rail to hug her before taking his place on the couch between Oprah and Nikita.

"Do you want to jump on the couch, too?" Niki asked.

Garcia scratched his face a little, either enjoying the laughter as he appeared to be musing about couch jumping or actually considering the antics. "Nah," he said, finally.

“Do you really believe that you’re from outer space?” Oprah asked.

“Do you really believe that you’re not?” Garcia asked.

It got some laughter, and Oprah leaned over and punched Garcia’s knee playfully, but she also understood. “Can you be more specific,” Oprah said, quoting Garcia’s most often said line on his show. “No, really. What do you mean by that? Are you saying you believe that I am also from outer space? Are speaking philosophically, metaphorically, spiritually, or literally?”

“Why do we have to compartmentalize it?” Garcia asked. “Maybe it’s all of them at the same time. The atoms comprising our bodies come from stars. We come from stars. That’s literally and amazing and thought provoking. We’re all the same stuff, which invalidates systems where people are differentiated by their age, or their sex, or their color, or their species. It shouldn’t matter in the least if I’m from Iotia or Earth or the Andromeda Galaxy. We are the same.”

“When I hear you say it, I believe it,” Oprah said.

“But it I can prove it. The only way to create heavy metals, and elements like zinc, which our bodies can’t exist without, requires the collapse of stars, the elements spewed out when the star goes super nova. All of the elements that exist today are present because of the death of billions and billions of stars, over billions of years,” Garcia said. “Even your scientists have confirmed that. Without super novas, there would be no bling. Take water, comprised of atoms of hydrogen and oxygen. Hydrogen has been around since the emergence of the Universe and is the basic building block on which all atoms are based. The same water that you drink today a million years ago, a dinosaur waddled through it.”

“But you know as well as I do that there are a lot of people who don’t believe that,” Oprah said. “Lots of people will fight you to the death about the evolution of Universe and the evolution of life.”

“Can you be more specific? Define a lot,” Garcia said, seriously. “It is too easy to be vague and playing that game can be crippling, emotionally, logically. Whenever you get something obscure such as ‘a lot of people,’ put a number on it. If you ever hear, ‘well, they say that...,’ pin them down. Who said that? When did they say that? Where is it written? And even if it is written down and it’s been passed down for centuries, don’t be afraid to reevaluate and determine if it is still applicable in your life. Example: ‘there are bad people in the world.’ If you agree, yeah, there are bad people in the world, you’ve already fallen into a trap. People who use that statement are trapping you into agreeing with them, and once you agree with that statement, you’re already biased in favor of their next statement. Let’s examine it: There are bad people in the world. How many? Well, how many people are there in the world, best estimate. Iotia seems to be supporting approximately 16 billion people. Some say that’s a lot of people. That another topic in itself, which I don’t buy. Given the appropriate sharing in resources, I think you could quadruple that number and still have a functional society. I’ve read about planets so populated that you couldn’t even sit down without getting trampled, so you’re not really cramped for elbow room, yet, but let’s go with 16 billion. Now, this country has the highest number of incarcerated people on the planet, at 2 million. World wide there is less than ten million people incarcerated. And most of these are people that need protection from themselves, as well as controlling their interaction with society at large. Let’s say though, just for the sake of argument, there is five million more people that need to be in jail that aren’t. So, we’ll be generous. There’s twenty million bad people on the planet. Subtract that from 16 billion people and you still have 15 plus billion people who are caring, law biding citizens. I’d say that’s cause to celebrate. A cause for hope. Because when you wipe out poverty and give everyone equal access to education, look out, prosperity is going to sky rocket.”

“You really believe that’s going to happen?” Oprah asked. “On a planetary scale?”

“Oh, Oprah,” Garcia said. “This planet hasn’t even begun to daydream about the possibilities that lay ahead. Take your transporters for instance. Right now you can take an object over here and move it over there by turning it into energy and then converting it back to matter. Basic formula is energy times matter equals the velocity of light squared. No matter how you break this down, energy and matter are interchangeable. So, say you want an object over there, but you don’t have an existing object to move. What you do is create a new object by changing the energy you already have into that object.”

“But we’re running out of energy,” someone yelled.

“It does seem that way, but you are bright people. Star Fleet has faith in your ability to overcome these temporary problems,” Garcia said.

“Why doesn’t Star Fleet just give us the technology?” another person in the audience yelled.

Oprah seemed apologetic for the outburst, but then she turned the question over to Garcia anyway. “He does have a point.”

“When you want to teach someone how to do math, you don’t give them the answers on the test, you show them what’s possible, and then you let them do it,” Garcia said. “It has been our experience that people on the whole excel and grow much quicker when they do it for themselves, as opposed to when it is just handed to them. How many reality-TV shows are there now about the spoiled little rich kids from famous people that had everything handed to them all their lives, so much so that they don’t seem to be able to function on their own in the real world? How many of them turned to drugs? I’m not saying that there aren’t people in the world that would appreciate and benefit from a free education, or that there aren’t just as many rich, good kids as there are bad ones, but the people who pursue prosperity and happiness own their initiative, doing what it takes to get the job done, and tend to be the more successful. You can also see this in the wild. If you feed the bears in the national park, they become dependant upon human interaction and give up foraging and being bears and the bears get sick because they’re not eating bear food. But this is just one reason and one example. We could be here all day discussing the philosophy behind the Prime Directive’s policy on non-interference.”

“And you think we can get to this next stage before we kill our planet off?” Oprah asked.

“Ultimately, that’s completely up to the people of this planet to decide,” Garcia said. “But yes, I am hopeful, and, should you fail, you’ll have to remember that life is more tenacious than you think. All life on Earth was nearly wiped out by an asteroid, and it came back. Here’s the deal. You are on the verge of harnessing tremendous powers. And when you do, you’re also going to gain substantial rewards. Like on our show, we go to a replicator, which is basically just a transporter, and we ask for ice cream and then we instantly have ice cream. Once you have this technology, everybody will have access to material wealth, and two things are going to happen over night. The first thing that will happen, your current economic system will collapse. You will have to decide as a people what is the best, fairest way to share resources. It is generally best if everyone has equal access, as opposed to only a few having special privileges. There are going to be growing pains. It will be hard for most to give up their work ethic. You are going to think your children are crazy and spoiled and don’t know the meaning or value of work or possessions. And, from a certain point of view, that will be true. They will have a new value system. Not a better or worse one, just different. Because they will no longer be dependant on things that were once necessary for survival and for marking social position, they are free to explore a new way of being. You’re going to have to find new games to play, such as improving yourselves through education. Or finding a way to go to the stars. Pursuing favorite hobbies. There are so many possibilities. Everyone could theoretically go to medical school.”

“I find some of the things you’re saying to be contradictory,” Opra said. “On one hand, you tell us that material wealth and comfort is not important and you shouldn’t pursue it. And you just said that our work ethics will change, suggesting people will get lazy. How can this be good?” Oprah asked.

“Your work ethic will change. You won’t have to give your time to a corporation. It becomes your time. You can invest it in any thing you want. Studying, playing games, growing gardens,” Garcia said. “Being freed from the current game of competition and holding a meaningless job of repetitious and or monotonous activities to earn just enough money to compete with the Joneses, who you don’t even like, being one check away from bankruptcy or unemployment, is a good thing because you can now invest that time in pursuing your own health and happiness.”

“That sounds rather selfish,” Oprah said.

“It’s just the opposite. By securing your own health and happiness, you guarantee that the health and happiness of those around you will improve,” Garcia said.

“I’m sorry, but that just sounds counter intuitive,” Oprah said. “You’re going to have to explain that one.”

“Okay, think of it this way. You’re on a plane at thirty thousand feet. The plane depressurizes. If you listened to the flight attendants’ instructions you will know that you are to put your oxygen mask on first. Not your kids, not your husbands. Yours. If you try to help anyone else, you risk passing out and killing yourself, and killing those you intended to help,” Garcia said. “This same principle applies to health and happiness. If

you run yourself ragged taking care of everyone else without replenishing your own reserves, then you are doing everyone a disservice and you will put yourself in an early grave. How does dying before your time serve anyone? What are you teaching your children if the only example you provide them is to ignore your own needs in favor of the groups needs.”

“The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the one,” Oprah pointed out.

“That is one way to read the platitude,” Garcia said. “The interesting thing about that particular saying, which stems from a Vulcan philosophy, is that it is equally true in reverse.”

“Okay, let’s say you’re right, and we all pursue our own interests. We can’t all be Doctors,” Oprah said.

“Why not?” Garcia asked. “That won’t happen in any society, especially after you take the money factor out of the equation. Once the issue of money is removed, you get only doctors that won’t be doctors as opposed to someone who really doesn’t care about you or your health, but is simply there for the pay and prestige the position offers. But let’s say, everyone wants to be a Doctor. What’s wrong with that? Your current minimum expectation for education is high school. Why not have your minimum level of education expectation at the Doctorate level? I am the first to agree, college is not for everyone. But I refuse to sanction any philosophy that suggests that people can’t continue to grow and learn their entire lives, and I’m not just talking about academics.”

“Are you really Star Fleet?” Oprah asked.

“Yes,” Garcia said, without batting an eye.

“What’s it like out there?” Oprah asked.

“The same as everywhere. We live, we die, we fight, we love, we struggle, we gain, we lose, we cry, we laugh, we make mistakes, we carry on,” Tam said, and he took Niki’s hand in his. “But you know, I’m not alone in this. It’s not just me. I am nothing without my crew. My band makes me, inspires me, gives me meaning to get up and keep carrying on. I have not forgotten my crew. Tamm’s Commune? Come on out here.”

Oprah greeted each of the others with hugs. The conversation became more fun again, less serious, and there was lots more laughter. Lenar and Tatiana somehow thought it would be fun to tell the story of how Garcia went naked to class at the academy due to a practical joke, which Garcia complained was an unnecessary story to share. Trini talked about how she started ballet classes at the age of three, because she wanted to wear a tutu. She also told them that Garcia coached her on the sign language, her contribution to their band.

“Garcia, do you believe in God?” Oprah asked.

“No. There are no gods in heaven or devils in hell maliciously pushing buttons to make our lives miserable,” Garcia said. “There are some things in this Universe that we don’t understand, there are some creatures out there that seem godlike, but, no, I’m not convinced in a personal God.”

“Isn’t that kind of scary and lonely?” Oprah asked. “How do you know what’s real?”

Garcia took Oprah’s hand. “This is real. This moment. And as I hold your hand, my loneliness goes, and fear dwindles, because I am never alone,” Garcia said. “I have my friends, and yes, I suppose an argument can be made that the Universe is inherently lonely, when you consider the vast amounts of space and how limited our understanding of the Universe is even today, especially when factored into the perspective of a godless paradigm. But right now, at this moment, I know peace and joy, on the Oprah show.”

“You are just too kind,” Oprah said, not wanting to let go of his hand. “And so intense. I almost want to believe you just because of your power of persuasion.”

“You should not let me persuade you out of your beliefs,” Garcia corrected her. “I’m not saying there isn’t a god. That, to me at least, is just as illogical as saying there is a god when I have no proof. I’m a scientist.”

“But, even as a scientist, you occasionally have to take a leap of faith, right?” Oprah asked.

“Yes,” Garcia admitted.

“So, you’re in a plane about to crash, and the thoughts of god and fear of death didn’t pop into your head?” Oprah asked.



"I didn't have time for that sort of philosophical tangent. I had a job to do," Garcia said. "People were dependant on me successfully landing that plane. I had no time for self doubt or fear. I merely relied on my training to do what was necessary and allowed everyone else to pray for me."

"Not even for a split second?" Oprah pressed.

"The question of whether or not a personal god is out there looking over me and the rest of the Universe is really irrelevant. God doesn't pay the bills. He doesn't hand feed the sparrows. The early bird gets the worm. We get up, we navigate through our lives doing the best we can, and each day, if we're doing well, we evaluate our performance and try to do better."

"But that evaluation requires you to have a goal and a model, and god is that model," Oprah said. "Our laws and morals require there to be a god."

"Your laws and morals require you to have a second sentient being present," Garcia said. "You don't need laws or morals if you live by yourself on a mountain or a deserted island. You only need laws and morals when you share space and resources with another sentient being."

"Are you open to answering questions from the floor?" Oprah asked.

"Sure," Garcia said.

Oprah chose a young man towards the middle, who asked for a hug from Trini in sign language. Trini happily complied, kissing him on the forehead. All of this, giving interviews with the Aliens, was technically a violation of the Prime Directive, but Garcia could see in the audience that his mission was having an impact. The Iotians were, and still are, ultimately a kind species and part of their territorial qualities, enhanced by "the Book" came from wanting to protect and preserve themselves. If they could learn to better direct that energy so that it didn't always end in violence, or the Gangster Way, they would make it as a species, Garcia believed.

"You make it cool to be an Indian," Oprah said to Trini. "You realize you probably started a new trend in dancing by the mixing of traditional Indian dance with western styles."

The next question was directed at Garcia, but he was still musing over all the unique gifts each of the members of his band had brought to help create their unique look and sound, and though he had heard the question, he delayed processing it. He had tried to only give the Iotians music from Earth's past, but there was no way to eliminate their individual influences on the art. They were subtly introducing 24<sup>th</sup> century Federation to the Iotians, and there was really no way around it. Who they were was having an impact.

"Tam?" Oprah asked.

Garcia checked himself. "I'm sorry," he said, and revisited in his mind the question the girl in the middle had asked. She had two questions, the first being that she wanted to know the name of the song they had performed on the episode where they attended Sea Park, and whether Garcia had actually done his own stunts.

"Cool Change, by the Little River Band," Niki answered, pretending to punch Garcia's arm as if to wake him up. "And he did all of his own stunts. He and the killer whales invented never before seen stunts on the spot."

"Really?" Oprah said amazed. "You fly planes and you swim with killer whales. Is there anything you can't do?"

"I don't know. I've been rather successful and fortunate in pretty much every endeavor I've ever engaged in," Garcia said. "You just got to get out there and do it and pick yourself up when you fall. And believe me, I've fallen a lot. I've literally broken every bone in my body, at one time or another, at least once."

"So, why did all the dolphins refused to perform until you met with them?" Oprah asked, referring to what she had assumed to be part of the plot for the show. "I just thought that was part of the act."

"I am capable of communicating, to a limited degree, with dolphins. I do better with computer assists, like a universal translator, which this world hasn't developed yet," Garcia said. "Anyway, they recognized that I could communicate with them and they demanded a dialogue and no performances until that happened."

"That was one reason he didn't want to go to Sea Park in the first place," Kletsova added. "He knew the moment he walked near a dolphin, something would happen."

"It was so funny," Niki said. "Where ever we sat, the dolphins would just hover in the pool closest to us and chatter. If Tam hadn't gone over to talk to the trainers and explain what was going on, there would

have been some very disappointed guest that day. And as you saw, the trainers balked at letting Tam get in the water until the owner of Sea Park himself authorized it.”

“Well, what did they want?” Oprah asked. “More fish?”

Garcia didn’t wait for the laughter to completely fade. “I’m not at liberty to discuss the details of my conversation with the dolphins at this time,” Garcia said. “However, the ones at these parks consider themselves ambassadors. They are working with you to establish mutual respect and hopefully one day, a form of communication will open up new possibilities for the two of you.”

“You mean, they’re intelligent? What’s the word you used on the show? Sentient?” Oprah asked.

“You know for a fact that there is sentient life in outer space, why is it so hard to believe that you might actually be sharing the planet with other forms of sentient life?” Garcia asked.

“So, this begs the question... Are you a vegetarian?” Oprah asked.

“I’m an omnivore. See my teeth?” Garcia asked, showing off his teeth.

“But no one ever sees you eat meat on the show,” Oprah said.

“My personal philosophy will not allow me to consume meat that I did not personally kill. Now, I can eat synthetic proteins, but since this planet doesn’t offer that as of yet, I must eat what’s available,” Garcia said.

“Synthetic?” Oprah asked. “Sounds awful.”

“Why? If you think about it, a cow is just a self contained chemical factory that turns grass into meat. So, if you could do this in a lab setting, or a Petri dish, or an extra gadget built right into your lawn mower that takes the cut grass and then turns it directly into hamburger for you, the end result is the same as if you killed the fatted calf. I am capable of killing the calf, but I have no need to, nor any desire to. There are too many alternatives for me.”

“Interesting, but I seem to recall hearing that you refused to contribute to the Animal Liberation Front?” Oprah asked.

“I have a deep respect for all life,” Garcia said. “And your ALF is much too militant, and their agenda gets people and animals hurt. I can not sanction their beliefs when violence is the only response they have to not getting their way. This planet has enough violence as it is, and people of conflicting beliefs need to start a dialogue for how to humanely treat animals and other people, whether you consider them sentient or not. You will eventually develop a Universal translator which will allow you to communicate with species such as the dolphins, and even chimpanzees and gorillas to some extent. You won’t get Shakespear from the apes, but you will clearly recognize that there is a rudimentary intelligence in these species. I mean, just look at the complex sentences Koko the gorilla has strung together in an effort to speak with her handlers. Of course, you’ve got bigger issues than simply discovering that there is other intelligent species sharing this planet with you. You got to find a way to stop fighting, you got to stop polluting the oceans and the land, stop cutting down the rain forests, stop over fishing and over cultivating land and start to clean up the damage you’ve already caused. If you learn to live in harmony with your biosphere, I think the mutual respect for all animals, sentient or not, will come. But if you don’t, you may wake up one day and find all the dolphins in the world gone.”

“You mean dead?” Oprah asked.

“Star Fleet’s Prime Directive does not apply to species that are unable to build technologies due to biological or physiological factors,” Garcia said. “So, let’s say the dolphins at Sea Park petitioned me to assist them in their mission to find a peaceful solution to their predicament. Star Fleet would be compelled to act on their behalf. That might mean interfering in a direct way on this planet, or, more probably, relocating the dolphins. Simply beam them up, so long, and thanks for all the fish, kind of story.”

“You would save the whales but not us?” Oprah asked. “Or are you saying you would fight us to save the whales?”

“Your house is on fire, Oprah. You have an infant in a cradle and an adult in the house. Star Fleet has the ability to save the child or the adult, but they can only do one. The adult can walk out on their own two feet. If you listen, Star Fleet has been pointing you towards the door, all you have to do is run, walk, or crawl there. When you get to the other side, Star Fleet and the infant will be waiting for you,” Garcia said.

"I think I understand. Kind of like that movie you made where Kirk went back in time to bring two whales into the future in order to save Earth," Oprah said. "That was an interesting message in that one. But then, I think there is a message in everything you put out, isn't there?"

"I want to give you some hope, and show you some of the great things you can do, if you will all just come together," Garcia said.

"Speaking of Kirk, when is he coming back?" Oprah asked.

"Kirk isn't coming back," Garcia said.

There were gasps from the audience as if Garcia had said something blasphemous. Someone even shouted "Kirk said he was coming back. He's coming back to get his piece of the action."

"Kirk isn't coming back," Garcia repeated. "And this mindset, this belief that someone is coming back to save you, is preventing you from doing what you need to do. Look, the environment needs to be cleaned up now. The problem is getting worse because you're not taking the steps necessary to even start cleaning the environment. Some of the challenges you face are so overwhelming to you that your reliance on this myth of this superman, this legend that Kirk will come back to save you from the mess you yourselves have created, is preventing you from doing what you know you have to do. This belief that Kirk is coming back has a macro affect on your individual psychology," Garcia said. Changing his voice to sound like someone else, in an attempt at irony, he said, "Well, there's nothing I can do that would make the world a more peaceful place. I can't clean it up. But Kirk is coming back and he'll fix everything. So, I'll just wait here and drink another beer and see what's on the boob tube."

"So, nothing gets done," Garcia concluded. "It's time to stop pointing fingers, passing the blame and responsibility onto others, and collectively agree that it has to get done."

The audience was stunned by his irreverent tone.

"Yes, the task seems overwhelming, but you have to try. One person can make a difference. Don't you know the starfish story? Guy walking along the beach after a storm is tossing starfishes back into the sea. Someone came up to him and said, hey, you're wasting your time. You'll never save all these starfishes. There must be a million of them scattered here. You won't make a difference. To that, the man picks up another starfish and tosses it back into the sea and says, I made a difference to that one," Garcia explained, but he was no longer sure the audience was getting it.

"How can you say Kirk isn't coming back," someone asked.

"Kirk died when a ship he was on encountered a phenomenon called the Nexus," Garcia said.

"Yeah, but he could still come back, right? Relativity and all provides a chance for him to come back?" the man persisted.

"Alright, true, as a scientist, I can not rule out the possibility of Kirk returning from the dead and showing up to save your planet, but the odds are so against it, that I feel pretty safe in saying, you need to get a life and fix your own problems," Garcia said. "Hell, for all I know, Shatner may be Kirk. But if Kirk taught you anything, it has to be take care of your own problems. If you mess something up, you have to fix it. Even if that means you have to go back in time, watch the girl you love die, even though you could have prevented it, which pretty much means you killed her, and then return home face the consequences, a life facing your own solitude. That is courage. Owning your world and doing what you have to do. Doing what you think is right against all odds, even if you fail."

"Were you going to sing something for us before you leave?" Oprah asked, changing the subject.

"Turn, Turn, Turn, by the Byrds," Nikita said.

Garcia leaned over and whispered into Niki's ear.

"Oh, that would be better," Nikita agreed.

"Your not changing the song again, are you?" Kletsova asked.

Niki smiled and said, "Yep. Counting Blue Cars, by Dishwalla."

"Oh my god," Trini said.

"Exactly," Niki said.

And Star Fleet went to their instruments which had been set aside and sang:

Must have been mid afternoon  
I could tell by how far the child's shadow stretched out and  
He walked with a purpose  
In his sneakers, down the street  
He had many questions  
Like Children often do  
He said  
Tell me all your thoughts on god  
Tell me am I very far?  
Must have been late afternoon  
On our way the sun broke free of the clods  
We count only blue cars  
Skip the cracks in the street  
And ask many questions  
Like children often do  
We said  
Tell me all your thoughts on god  
Cause I would really like to meet her  
And ask her why we're who we are.  
Tell me all your thoughts on god  
Cause I'm on my way to meet her.  
So tell me am I very far  
Am I very far now?  
Its getting cold, picked up the pace  
How our shoes make hard noises in this place  
Our clothes are stained  
We pass many, cross eyed people  
And ask many questions  
Like children often do  
Tell me all your thoughts on god  
Cause I would really like to meet her.  
Tell me all your thoughts on god  
Cause I'm on my way to see her.  
So tell me am I very far now?  
Am I very far now  
Am I very far now  
Am I very far now?

Then they sang, Joy to the World, by Three Dog Night. And for an encore, they sang **Imagine**, by *John Lennon*.

Imagine there's no heaven  
It's easy if you try  
No hell below us  
Above us only sky  
Imagine all the people  
Living for today  
Imagine there's no country  
It isn't hard to do  
Nothing to kill or die for  
And no religion too  
Imagine all the people  
Living life in peace  
You may say I'm a dreamer  
But I'm not the only one  
I hope someday you join us  
And the world will be as one

Imagine no possessions  
I wonder if you can  
No greed or hunger  
A brotherhood of man  
Imagine all the people  
Sharing all the world  
You may say I'm a dreamer

But I'm not the only one  
I hope someday you'll join us  
And the world will live as one.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

A critic was speaking about Oprah's interview with Star Fleet on the television. He made some comments like, Garcia was too preachy and should keep his philosophies and politics to himself. Entertainers should be entertainers and leave the real world problems to the experts.

Niki shouted at the television. "You stupid, moron. I'll take you out," she said, bobbing her head in a modern gangster style as she talked smack. "I'll put a hit on your ass..."

Garcia interrupted her. "Niki, that's enough. We agreed, we would not imitate the gangster mannerism and perpetuate the image on our program."

"But he just..."

"He's not the only one," Garcia said. "Let them speak their opinions."

"Well, then I should be able to speak my opinion," Niki said. "And my opinion is we give him some cement galoshes and let him talk to the fishes, you know what I mean?"

"That's enough," Garcia said.

"Whatever happened to, 'when in Rome, do as the Romans do' kind of thing?" Niki asked. "Everyone here speaks like this."

"First off, you're not everyone. You're Star Fleet. Second, we're not in Rome. And if you keep this up, I'll be assigning you some extra history lessons to better remind you as to just what happened to the Roman Empire," Garcia said.

Niki backed down, but not without turning the channel, using the remote like a phaser to zap the talking head. Garcia turned back to his research. It was spread out over the dining room table in what appeared to be chaos. Lenar was assisting with the research. Trini was in the kitchen preparing an Indian meal, the old fashioned way, and complaining the whole time. "I don't know how my grand mother did it. She'd cook for all of us, and there was always a meal, but god, this is taking forever. You could at least help me, Tatiana!" Kletsova said she would, but only after she finished exercising. She was on the living room floor between Garcia's work and Niki on the couch surfing the channels.

"Tam, I want something to do," Niki said.

"Go help Trini cook dinner," Garcia said.

"That's not what meant," Niki said. "I want to do something to help Iotia, too. You have your research."

"You mean his fantasy," Kletsova said.

"Oh, stop it. I believe in Garcia," Niki said. "He is on to something. But he also has his volunteer work at the Sea Park. I don't have anything. I am just a follower. I do my bit part and I watch TV. And Tam, you said TV watching should be minimized. So, let me do something useful."

"You do something useful every time you sing a song," Garcia assured her.

"I want to do more," Niki said.

Garcia put down his book and stared at her across the table. "What do you have in mind?"

"I want to be on the Xuxa show. I want to be one of the Paquita girls, her assistants, and help entertain the children. I like her mission, helping the children. I want to be a part of that," Niki said.

Garcia thought about it. "No," he said, and went back to work.

Trini came into the room, wiping the flower off her hands onto a smock. "Tam, I think it's a good idea."

He put his book down. "Excuse me?" Garcia said.

"Uh, Tam," Kletsova said, standing up. "You're letting this you're in charge thing go to your head. I think you should consider her request."

"No, what you're wanting is for me to reconsider her request. I already considered it and made a ruling," Garcia said.

"This just isn't fair," Niki said, and stormed off to her room.

Garcia looked to his companions for support, but found none. He stood up. "Bloody hell!" he said, and began to pace. "Apparently none of you seem to appreciate the lengths I am going through to keep us all safe, and letting her run off on her own is hardly compatible with that goal."

"She would be in the studio across the street," Trini said. "And I could accompany her, and stand off back stage, as well as hire some body guards."

"Do you guys not recall that earlier this week someone tried to off us?" Garcia snapped. "And before that the car chase and shoot out?"

"No," Kletsova said. "We have not forgotten. Sure, you stole the show like you do everywhere else we go, but you can't be everywhere, and you can't protect us a hundred percent of the time. Life is inherently unsafe. We measure the risks and we do the best we can."

"Not on my watch," Garcia said. "I can not justify..."

"What, letting her out of your sight?" Kletsova said. "You're not her mother."

"And that is why I have to work twice as hard to ensure her safety," Garcia said. He resumed pacing. "Make me out to look like the bad guy. Indeed! Do you think all of this is easy? Do you think this is fun and games? We are not here on vacation. I said no, and that's final. You got that? Trini, I think you're burning something."

"My roti," Trini said and ran back to the kitchen.

Garcia paced for a little more, went back to his chair, set down, started to read, and then slammed the book shut. He stared at the table. "I'm not the bad guy here," he mumbled.

"I didn't say anything," Lenar said.

Niki returned to the living room, approaching Garcia, head down. "Tam, I am sorry. I was out of line. You have treated me more like an adult than anyone in my life, and given me much more responsibilities than I have ever been challenged with before. I owe you better. I won't bring it up again. Forgive me?"

Garcia hugged her. "There's nothing to forgive," he said.

Niki went back to the couch and turned the television channel. Kletsova returned to her exercise.

Garcia returned to his work, a research focused on the UFO phenomena on Ioita. Newspapers and magazine articles related to UFO sightings and or abductions, reports that Captain Eggers had somehow managed to get to him, as well as fan letters who also claimed to have been abducted or seen a UFO, littered the table in several stacks. Lenar tore out a page from his magazine and handed it to Garcia. The page contained a photo of a crop circle, which Garcia cut out, labeled the date and location, and then tacked it to the wall behind him. He stepped back to study the arrangement. A collage of clippings of crop circles covered a good portion of the wall.

"I really think your obsessive compulsive disorder is getting worse," Kletsova said, taking a break from her sit ups. She rested her elbows on her knees.

"There's a pattern here," Garcia said, unconsciously squeezing a stress ball. "And I'm going to find it."

"Like there is a pattern with the celebrities," Kletsova said.

"There's a pattern there, too," Garcia said. "And I'll find it."

"Why don't you just mind meld with one and see what that turns up," Kletsova said.

"I've thought about it, but for now, I'll just keep doing interviews," Garcia said, turning the image of the crop circle over.

"You know, I'm okay with you reading the papers and such, and your interviews with the stars, but you shouldn't have asked people to send stuff to you," Kletsova said. "The amount of material the kooks are sending us is becoming obscene. It was bad enough when people were just sending us their songs and poems for you to review and girls sending you pictures of themselves and marriage proposals. It's just too much, Tam. We had to turn the floor downstairs into a post office."

"People love us," Lenar said. "It's only natural that they should want to contact us. Most of these people don't have much else in their lives. Little hope of improving their condition in this sort of market environment, other than selling themselves to corporations, which is little better than being in a sweat shop."

"That's my point," Kletsova said. "Tam, when you talk about this hypothesis of yours on national television, you put ideas in people's heads, and they invent these stories because they want to belong to something bigger than themselves."

"First of all, there's no way I could keep my interest a secret, seeing how everything we do or say ends up on television," Garcia said, waving his hands at several of the cameras to make his point. "Second of all,

no one wants to be a victim of a UFO encounter, and not just because it's not fun being probed and violated, but because the amount of ridicule and stigma associated with coming forward as a witness to something unusual. You yourself, Tatiana, are guilty of perpetuating a stereotype in regards to this segment of population by calling them kooks, or suggesting their need for something larger is generating their fantasy. And third, if good people who have these experiences are brave enough to attempt contacting me and using me as a conduit to explore the meaning behind what's happening here, then I see no harm being done. They get some comfort sharing their story and I might find an answer."

"Tam, there's nothing here to find," Kletsova said.

"The more I go over it, the more I think I was abducted," Garcia said, bouncing the stress ball off the wall and catching it. "I have an experience of missing time, and this person's photo of a UFO sighting outside of Denver area coincides with my experience. I find that interesting."

"Was it a pink UFO like the one Xuxa comes out of on her show de Xuxa?" Trini asked, spying on him from the kitchen.

"No, it was not a pink Xuxa UFO," Garcia grumbled, bouncing the ball off the wall again.

"Have you considered checking the neural transmitter levels in your brain chemistry," Kletsova said. "You were not abducted. You may have hit your head on something, or your oxygen supply was reduced due to the extended duration of time spent in your Life Belt, or you may have even had a black out from all the stress..." Kletsova caught herself before she revealed something she shouldn't have, because ever since the car incident Niki had been forced to wear one of their Life Belts every time they went into public to protect her against bullets. She continued without much of a pause: "We've been under. I just find it highly unlikely that you were abducted. It just doesn't make sense. Why would aliens abduct you? And even if you were abducted, what are the odds of an alien picking you up, assuming random abductions, in a population you just joined? And why would they put you back after going through all that trouble to capturing you in the first place?"

"Well, that one might be easy to explain," Lenar said. "Have you ever tried working with him?"

"True that," Kletsova laughed. "But it also doesn't make sense that the national press would not cover a story of a UFO sighting."

"Really?" Garcia said. "Earth, March 13<sup>th</sup>, 1997, Phoenix, Arizona. Twenty thousand plus people observed a UFO. The event lasted 106 minutes and was captured with video and still photos by both professional photographers and amateurs. It appeared to be a mile long, hovered approximately six thousand feet off the ground, and even interrupted approaching flights to Phoenix International Airport. Approaching aircraft saw it, radioed the tower, and asked for a heads up. The tower responded that though they had a visual on the object, it did not show up on radar. That's fact. That's interesting. But guess what. It did not get national new coverage until June 18, 1997, nearly three months after the event, and it got a total of one minute air time, and one article in the USA Today, a national news paper for the U.S. Phoenix local government refused to investigate the sighting because they believed it fell under the military's jurisdiction. The military refused to investigate it because they said it fell under the local government's jurisdiction. Consequently, nothing got done. The people that tried to make reports were dismissed, or flat out ignored, and to this day it still reeks of a government conspiracy to hide the truth."

"Nice story, Tam, but it has no relevance in this day and age, and on this planet," Kletsova said. "And our show is not about project Blue Book. It's about music, and our time might be better spent if we were to prepare for our next guest."

"I think it's kind of cool," Niki said. "It gives us something to do, other than sit around waiting for my mom to show up. Tam, can we go and talk to some of these people?"

"Maybe," Garcia said. "Definitely if any of these people reside in a town where we're scheduled to give a concert."

"Wouldn't it be like so cool if we could solve a mystery or something?" Niki went on. "Maybe we can go ghost hunting, too. And then we could do a song to accompany a video of us all running from monsters in a long hallway going through doors and returning to the hall from doors on the opposite side in some kind of weird bending of the space time continuum..."



“We don’t have a dog,” Kletsova said. “See what you’ve started, Tam. And don’t start talking Valley, Niki, or you’ll start a new fad on this planet.”

“Tam,” Lenar said. “Let’s assume you’re right. Aliens are here and are influencing this culture. That means the people inserted into this culture are either complicit in the alien activities or they are somehow controlled. Either way, there would have to be some sort of communication going on between aliens and the human agents, more sophisticated than crop circles. It would have to be telepathic in nature.”

“Or subliminal, perhaps,” Garcia said, his eyes glancing to the television. “A subliminal trigger that causes someone to remember something or act. Can you create a program to sift through the television and radio signals on this planet looking for a signal or subliminal message?”

“You know how much processing power I am going to need for that?” Lenar asked. “We’re talking processor time here, trillions of hours of processing time. Each of our lap tops are capable of 6,500 million instructions per second. Even if we devoted all them, coupled with your super computer, suspending your movie making madness, it could take years to find an embedded or hidden message.”

“We’ll buy more computers,” Garcia said.

“Because that’s practical,” Kletsova said.

Trini made herself visible. “We don’t have to buy more computer chips,” Trini said. “We can use what’s available to us now.”

“What are you talking about,” Lenar said.

“There’s chips in everything,” Trini said. “There’s a computer chip in the microwave,, the washer and dryer, the dishwasher, the stove, the toaster, the blender, the coffee maker, and the refrigerator. Practically everything in this building that runs on electricity has a chip, even the vacuume cleaner. Those chips have more processing power than are being used and if we could tap into them we could more than quadruple our processing ability. The modern house probably has 50,000 MIPS available, if you connected all the chips in tande,”

“But that’s the trick, Trini. How do you connect them all together?” Kletsova asked. “They don’t have wireless abilities.”

“All the equipment is plugged in,” Garcia said, scratching his Go-T. “If we could send a signal via the electrical outlets, we could access everything that is plugged in and reprogram the chips to process information. We could theoretically access and take over the functions of every chip on this floor, or the whole building, or, hell, even a city block!”

“There might be a simpler way,” Niki said. “Design a fancy screen saver and distribute it for free on the internet and ask people to join us in the search for an alien signal in their spare time. They did that on Earth, didn’t they?”

“There you go!” Garcia said. “Good thinking, Niki. There are two options for you, Lenar. Let’s do both. You and Trini can make that your top priority. Maybe there’s a connection between crop circles, celebrities, and abductees. How many abductees had children that went on to become celebrities? Run that through the program we’re creating while you’re looking for a connection to something in the real world, or in the Iotian language database we’re compiling. There’s got to be something.”

“There doesn’t have to be something,” Lenar said. “But, I’m on it.”

“Hey! The Bangles are on TV!” Niki said, turning up the volume and climbing up on the couch. “Oh my god! That’s us! We’re in a Bangles video!” Niki said, jumping on the couch. “They’re using cut scenes from our TV show. This is so cool!”

Everyone gathered around the television. The Bangles were singing, ‘If She Knew What She Wants.’ The video had the Bangles playing on a dimly lit stage, dark blue lights shining on strips of white canvas, and behind them was a screen displaying images of the Tammias Commune. The way the Bangles were spinning their song suggested that there was a want-to-be love interest between Kletsova and Garcia. Niki pointed out the obvious while continuing to jump up and down on the couch, screaming, as the camera zoomed into the screen, panning by her image as it showed Kletsova making one of her normal faces at Garcia’s antics.

“Why can’t I be the love interest?” Trini asked, playfully.

“You want to be the love interest?” Garcia asked and grabbed at her hips, tickling her.

Trini tried to get away, laughing, screaming for help. Niki joined in the attack, forcing Garcia to tickle her.

“This isn’t right,” Kletsova said, sulking. “I know what I want. You just can’t give it to me.”

“Ahhh!” Niki screamed. “Wait, wait, I give up.”

Trini suddenly found herself the center of attention again as Garcia turned back to her, grabbing her up close. “Kiss me,” he said.

“No,” Trini said, turning her head away in the classic Indian fashion, movie style of avoidance.

“Did you have anything to do with this?” Kletsova asked, pointing to the screen.

“No, they did it on their own,” Garcia said.

“I like it,” Lenar said, returning to his work. “Trini! Your rice is boiling over!”

Trini broke free of Tam’s hug, “slapping out” as if she had been in a Karate hold, and ran to the kitchen. Niki continued going on how awesome it was and telling Garcia he should give Hoffs a call and invite the Bangles over. “Maybe they could open for us on our next tour,” Niki went on. Garcia said he didn’t have to ask them, for if they were watching the show, as it appears they were, they would now have the invitation. He returned to the table and his work. Kletsova fell into some vigorous push ups, venting off some steam. The phone began to ring.

“Would someone get that?” Trini yelled. But no one did. “Fine, I’ll get it. Yes. FBI? Oh, about the plane incident? Sure, come on up. We’re going to have company. The FBI wants to talk to us about our flight from hell.”

No one seemed to be listening to her.

“I think you should call her anyway,” Niki said to Tam. “She really likes you, you know.”

“I know,” Garcia said, handing Lenar a photo. “What do you make of this, Lenar?”

“A bunch of lines, just like the others, Tam,” Lenar said.

Garcia pinned another crop circle pic to the wall.

“Tam? Have you heard this one? Mouth, by Merrill Bainbridge? I think she’s talking about you,” Niki asked.

“You think everyone’s talking about him,” Kletsova complained. And then reminded her of the last time she had brought this up by singing: “You’re so vain, you probably think this song is about you...”

“Please,” Niki rolled her eyes. “It’s either about James Bond or Tammias Garcia, and it’s so obvious to me it’s about Tammias Garcia.”

There was a knock at the door.

“Well, to hear you say it, all songs are about Tammias Garcia,” Kletsova said, and then she sang a bit of another song Niki had suggested was about Garcia: “Your eyes are the most awesome blues eyes I’ve ever seen.”

“Well, they are,” Niki said.

“But his eyes are hazel,” Kletsova argued.

“Don’t you think this song is about you, Tam?” Niki asked.

“Yeah, it’s a nice a song,” Garcia said, casually, not really giving her his full attention.

“Is someone going to get that?” Trini yelled.

Again someone knocked on the door.

“So, when are you going to call Susanna Hoffs, Tam?” Niki asked.

“I said, I’ll call her. Trini, you want to get that?” Garcia asked.

“No!” she snapped. “I’m in the middle of cooking roti!”

There was a louder knock on the door.

“Is someone going to get that?” Lenar asked, not looking up from his magazine.

“I’ll get it,” Nikita finally volunteered.

“No,” Garcia said, pushing away from the table. But she was already at the door, looking through the peep hole.

“Oh my god!” Niki yelled, not realizing that her sudden pitch change and the excitement in her voice caused Lenar to pull out a hand phaser. “It’s David Duchovny!”

"It's not David Duchovny," Garcia said, logging onto the security network via his implant. There were two people in the hall, male and female and the male did indeed look like David Duchovny. He could also hear the audio: "Are you sure you want to go through with this, Mulder. We're going to be on national television the moment we go in there, and you know what kind of ridicule we're going to get from the guys at the Bureau when that happens." "It will be okay, Scully. Trust me," he said, ringing the door bell a third time and knocking again. "That coming from a guy whose passcode is trust no one," she mumbled. Garcia frowned, wondering if they were acting, or there was something seriously wrong with this Universe he was in. He hoped they were acting, looking for a little push for their TV series, because other wise, he would have to revise some of his hypotheses about the 20<sup>th</sup> century Earth icons on Iotia.

"Lenar, add two names to my alien list. David Duchovny and Gillian Anderson," Garcia said, and then told Niki to back up so he could open the door.

Kletsova stood up. Niki screamed and jumped up and down. "I told you its David Duchovny! I know my twentieth century Entertainment history. David Duchovny, David Duchovny."

David smiled and flashed his FBI badge. Gillian flashed hers, but she was not smiling.

"Hello," David said. "I'm special agent, Fox Mulder, and this is special agent, Dana Scully. We'd like to talk to you."

"He would like to talk to you," Gillian corrected, emphasizing "He would."

"Of course. Come in," Garcia said. "May I offer you something to drink?"

"It's David Duchovny," Niki said, hugging Garcia around the waste, and spying on David from her safe vantage point.

"I see," Garcia told her, patting her head. "Why don't you go get them some tea?"

Niki nodded, backing away slowly, keeping David in her line of sight.

"Sorry," Garcia said. "She gets a little excited around guest stars."

"I see," Gillian said. "Who's David?"

Fox wandered over to the wall to examine the crop circle formations. There were forty five pictures in all, aligned in a grid formation. Fox then turned and gave a cursory examination of the articles on the table. "It looks like you're running a little investigation here," Mulder said. To Lenar he said, "Nice spots. Got to hand it to the tattoo artist."

"Thank you. It could have been ridges, but this host was available," Lenar said.

Mulder didn't know how to respond to that so he turned back to Garcia. "Have you found anything interesting?" Mulder asked, placing one of the letters back on the table.

"Yes," Garcia said.

"No," Kletsova said, simultaneously, and then added. "You're not here about the plane, are you?"

"Please, be seated," Garcia said, pointing to the couch. He rolled his exercise ball over and sat on the opposite side of the coffee table, across from the guests. "I would be happy to share my findings with you."

"What do you want to bet Garcia kisses Scully in this episode," Lenar whispered to Kletsova as Mulder said he would indeed appreciate seeing anything Garcia had. Kletsova responded by hitting Lenar in the arm.

"I wish I was Tam," he whispered, rubbing his arm. Trini hit him in the other arm.

"We're going to be having lunch soon," Trini offered. "Roti and spinach, rice and beans, and shark bake. Would you be interested?"

"No, thank you," David said, acknowledging Niki with a smile as she placed the tea on the coffee table. She bit her lip and withdrew behind Garcia.

"So, I hear you were abducted," Mulder asked.

"I believe so, yes," Garcia said.

"And what evidence do you have to support this belief?" Scully asked.

"Nothing tangible," Garcia said.

"Mulder, we're wasting our time here," Scully insisted.

"Dana, I want to hear what he has to say," Mulder said. "Have you seen an alien?"

"We are aliens," Niki said.

“Mulder. They’re in a band called Star Fleet. Do you really expect him to say he hasn’t?” Scully asked, high on the sarcasm.

“Look,” Garcia said. “I know you think I’ve watched too many Star Conqueror episodes, but I know some things. I believe that a race of aliens is experimenting with the social order on this planet.”

“You believe this?” Scully asked.

Garcia briefed them on a little Preserver history. Scully heard it as trivia.

“You’re talking old episodes of Star Conquerors,” Scully pointed out. “The ones recently found in the archives that the studios have released. The Lost Episodes?”

“I know it’s hard to believe, but sometimes fiction is based on actual historical and scientific events,” Garcia said. “Lenar, would you bring me that list of aliens.”

Dana rubbed her forehead.

“Headache?” Garcia asked.

Scully nodded. Garcia instantly got up, pressed a pressure point on her shoulder, and then massaged the point for fifteen second, watching as she visibly relaxed. “How’s that? Better?”

“Yes, actually,” Scully admitted, her hand going to her shoulder.

Garcia nodded, took the list from Lenar and handed it to Mulder. “This is a list of alien personalities that have been inserted into this culture.”

Scully looked at the list Mulder was holding. “It’s a list of celebrities,” Scully said.

“It makes sense,” Mulder said. “I always thought Barbara Streisand was from another planet.”

“The last two names on the list are yours,” Garcia said.

“Ours?” Mulder asked, looking at the list.

“Your real names are David Duchovny and Gillian Anderson. You come from Earth, 20<sup>th</sup> century,” Garcia explained.

“I can assure you,” Scully said. “That though Mulder is out there, neither he, nor I, are aliens. And these are the only names we have ever had.”

“I know it sounds ludicrous, but everyone on that list, including the two of you, have counter parts that were living on Earth during the twentieth century. You are not really FBI agents. You only played FBI agents on a successful TV show, called the X-Files, where you investigated the paranormal,” Garcia said. “The only mistakes you made were the movies.”

“So, because the movies were bad we had to be brought back to life in this incarnation as punishment?” Mulder asked. “Or as an encore?”

“Mulder, don’t humor him,” Scully said.

“He’s telling you the truth,” Niki said.

“What, Vulcans can’t lie?” Scully asked.

“He’s only a quarter Vulcan,” Kletsova pointed out.

“So, it’s only a quarter of the truth,” Scully offered.

“I don’t think you can handle the truth,” Lenar mumbled.

“I’ve studied entertainment from the twentieth century, and I’ve watched you two on your show,” Niki said. “My favorite was the roach episode.”

Mulder shivered. “How do you know about the roach incident?” he asked.

“We know a great deal,” Garcia said. “Did you know that your government is making secret deals with a member of the Ferengi Alliance, who wants nothing more than to enslave you through economic means?”

“Well, one can interpret the Kirk encounter as the Federation’s taking over the planet,” Mulder said. “Perhaps the Ferengi will offer a better deal than the whole new world order conspiracy gig.”

“He was only trying to restore order to a system that became chaotic due to an earlier encounter with aliens,” Kletsova argued.

“You’d be better off making a deal with the devil, or a bad interest credit card company,” Lenar said. He handed him a sketch of a Ferengi. “His name is Brock.”

“And how did you come by this information?” Scully asked.

“We have our sources,” Garcia said.

“Right. And do you have a spaceship?” Scully asked. “I might find that convincing.”

"No," Garcia said.

"So, that doesn't leave us much to go on, does it," Scully said.

"We did have a ship," Niki said.

Garcia gave her a warning look.

"Well, we did until Garcia the great, here, blew it up," Kletsova said.

"Why would you blow up your own ship?" Mulder asked.

"I couldn't allow Star Fleet technology to fall into the wrong hands," Garcia said. "The Iotian Government, and to some extent, the population at large, may not be ready to handle the kind of technology Star Fleet has to offer."

"Convenient out. It's a plot contrivance if you ask me," Scully said.

"So, tell me," Mulder asked. "Why would anyone want to infiltrate our world with personalities from old Earth?"

"I don't know," Garcia said. "I'm still working on that one. It could just be experiments of some bizarre kind, but if I were to hazard a guess, they seem to want to see what combinations of cultures produce the most successful human populations. This planet had already had a dose of Earth's gangster past, which probably would have self destructed a hundred years ago except Kirk intervened. Now the powers that be seem to be attempting to offset some of the violence that comes with the gangster mentality by offering you some of the better parts of Earth, such as Entertainment. Music, stories, and art."

"All very nice, but you still have no proof," Scully said.

"Surely the two of you have seen some strange things and have no proof," Niki offered. "And it's not like you aren't aware of the existence of aliens, since you openly admit that you have been visited at least twice, once by the Horizon, and then once by the Enterprise. So, since we agree that there are aliens, then all we have to do is decide which aliens are here and determine what they are doing."

Garcia patted Niki's shoulder, applauding her analysis.

"I will give you aliens," Scully agreed. "But I don't believe in government conspiracies and cover-ups. And I don't believe Garcia is any more alien than I am."

Garcia brought his hands together, index fingers touching, as he considered a leap of faith equation. "I am prepared to give you absolute proof, Dana," Garcia said. "It will be of a personal nature, not something you can scrutinize with a microscope, but, you, at least, will know beyond a shadow of a doubt."

Kletsova stepped forward to be more prominent in his line of sight, giving him a look that seemed to say: "What are you about to do?"

"Anything is better than nothing," Scully said.

"Tam," Kletsova said. "What sort of evidence?"

"I'm going to mind meld with Scully," Garcia said.

"Oh, no. Hell no," Kletsova said. "It's too risky for you and Scully, and I can't allow you to jeopardize our situation here."

"It was your idea," Garcia argued.

"I was joking!" Kletsova said.

"Tatiana, I need some more information. I need to know if somewhere in Scully's mind is a memory of her being brought here from Earth, or if she was somehow programmed to be who she is. She's a perfect candidate because we know her as a celebrity, but she believes she's just a regular citizen. This would answer so many questions for me, and, at the same time, would give her the answers she's wanting. This way I can be certain that she is not an alien that looks like Scully, programmed with the persona of a character, with some secret agenda to hurt the Iotian people."

"I assure you, I am not an alien, and I would I never allow my home world to come to harm," Scully said. "That's why I took this job."

"Then you will agree to a mind meld with me?" Garcia asked.

"I'm game," Scully agreed.

"Dana, let me mind meld with him," Mulder volunteered.

"No," Scully said. "I want to see this proof. You're too easily swayed by all this crap, where I won't be so easily hypnotized or mislead."

Garcia got up from his ball and scooted the coffee table away. He then rolled his ball closer to the couch and sat back down, inching his way closer so that his knees touched the couch, and Scully's knees were touching the outside of his knees. She could feel heat radiating from where his leg touched hers, even through the fabric of his pants.

"When I'm ready, I'll need to touch your face," Garcia said.

The Tammam commune had gathered in the living area to witness the event. "Niki, come over here, please," Trini said, wanting some distance between Niki and Garcia.

"Oh!" Niki complained. "I want to watch."

"You can either watch from over there with Trini, or you'll be going to your room to watch it on a rerun," Kletsova said.

Niki unhappily complied.

"Do I need to do anything?" Scully asked, putting her hands on her knees, adjusting her skirt down a little. She could discern the increasing intensity in Garcia's attention and it was a bit unnerving. Part of it was no doubt because he was a superstar, and there was, or will be, millions of people watching this. Consequently, she was feeling a bit nervous, but it was because of that fear that she wasn't going to back down.

"Relax," Garcia instructed her. "This doesn't hurt. All I really need now is your permission to proceed."

"Permission?" Scully asked.

"This is a mind meld," Garcia explained. "Our minds will merge and you and I will for a certain time think and act as one. You will learn things about me that only I am privy to, and I will know you equally as well. This is transcendental intimacy, and it will be a life changing event. It can not be undone, and there is some inherent risk whenever two minds collide, so, if you have any doubts or concerns, or anything in your life that you would not want me to know, even though I will never divulge your secrets, then now is the time to speak up."

"You're just trying to scare me," Scully said. And he was pretty convincing, too. "To get higher ratings."

"It's working," Mulder said. "He's got me hooked."

"I'm very serious," Garcia said. "You need to make this decision as if I were telling you the truth."

Scully nodded. "Alright. Let's do it," she committed.

"Tam," Trini said. "Are you sure about this?"

Garcia had already made up his mind. He nodded. "I believe it will help answer some question," Garcia said. And, he was secretly hoping that these two Federal agents might be able to help him with his mission. He could use some inside help.

"Dana," Mulder asked. "Same question."

"Oh, please, let's just get this over with," Scully said.

Garcia lifted his left hand and touched the right side of Scully's face, touching her gently. He blushed as he suppressed an inappropriate thought, but pushed forward with the meld. His fingers sought out positions that would link him to her through her Temporal, Zygomatic, Buccal, Mandibular, and Cervical nerves that lined the face. Once he found them, his fingers gently pressed deeper into her skin and Dana took a sudden, sharp breath in. Mulder reached out to her but Kletsova grabbed his hand back.

"Don't," Kletsova warned. "With this particular trance, he might not be able to handle both of you simultaneously."

Scully and Garcia's breathing and heart rates began to synchronize. Their eyes locked. "Our minds are one mind," Garcia said. "Our thoughts are one thought. One body, one mind, one Katra," he went on, and her voice joined in the chorus. "Your thoughts, my thoughts, our thoughts."

Scully reached up with her left hand and touched Garcia's face, her fingers mirroring his finger position. Together they stood up and Kletsova rolled the ball away so that Garcia wouldn't accidentally step back and trip over it. Scully and Garcia stepped in closer to each other, their bodies touching, his right hand moving to the small of her back, and her right hand going to his shoulder. It looked as if they were about to start slow dancing. Tears began to roll down Scully's face.

“Music,” Scully said, Garcia’s mouth moved but no words came out. Apparently, her mind had been the dominant one in this merger. “Mystery. Beauty. Love.”

The two of them couldn’t get any closer, but they tried. Scully pressed her lips against Garcia’s lips, and they both surrendered to the passion, still of one mind, one thought. Garcia was the one that finally broke off the kiss. Scully tried to pursue, but he turned his face and she kissed his cheek. His right hand came up, tracing her spine, to finally rest on her shoulder. He forced some space between them. His free hand followed the arm up to her hand, and he gently pried it away from his face.

“No,” Scully said. “Please...”

Removing his left hand took more effort, but he did so. “No,” Scully cried. “Don’t leave me here alone in the light. Please. They might come back. They might come back.”

Garcia staggered. Kletsova stepped in front of Garcia and shook him by the shoulders. “Let go!” she yelled in his face. “Break contact.”

“No,” Scully said. Garcia echoed it.

Kletsova slapped Garcia hard across the face. Scully’s head turned suddenly as if she were hit.

“Tanya!” Niki screamed, moving as if to protect Garcia from Kletsova. Trini held her back.

Kletsova hit Garcia again and then a third time. She was about to hit him a fourth time, but he suddenly blocked, grabbing her wrist and bringing his other fist in to punch her, stopping himself a centimeter from her nose. His eyes focused on hers and he nodded. He was now free. Scully collapsed into Mulder’s arms and he sat her down on the couch. Garcia let Kletsova go and went to Scully’s side.

“I think you enjoyed that a little too much,” Lenar told Kletsova, but she ignored him.

“Are you okay?” Garcia asked Scully, taking a napkin and wiping the perspiration from her brow.

Scully nodded, sipping from the ice tea Mulder was holding for her. She pushed it away and turned to Garcia, taking his hand. “I believe,” Scully said.

Garcia was embarrassed at some of the things they had exchanged and looked down, was instantly reminded of why he shouldn’t have looked down, and turned his head. Scully gently turned his face back towards her. “It’s okay,” she said, softly. “I understand.” She kissed him lightly on the lips, a friendly kiss, less passionate than what they had earlier shared.

“Understand what?” Mulder and Kletsova asked simultaneously. They did a double take off each other.

“Anything Mulder and I can do to assist you, we will,” Scully said.

“We will?” Mulder asked.

“Thank you,” Garcia said. “Perhaps we could arrange for me to speak with you in private, and meet the Lone Gunmen,” he said, the words out before Scully could stop him, putting her finger to his lip. They were growing more out of sync with each passing moment, and they both wanted to return to that union.

“How do you know...” Mulder started to ask, but then remembered where he was; a television show.

Scully picked up the remote and turned up the sound on the television. “How long has your neural implant been malfunctioning?” Scully asked, whispering in his ear.

“Since the UFO encounter,” Garcia said. There was now no doubt in his mind that she knew what he knew, and he had the benefit of knowing that her medical knowledge helped her to assess his situation.

“Can it be reset?” Scully asked.

“Not with the technology we have available,” Garcia said.

Scully touched his face, brushing his hair out of his eyes, concerned. “What if we took the power supply out and then put it back in.”

“Right. And who would I get to do the surgery?” Garcia asked.

“I will,” Scully said.

Garcia squeezed her hand and imposed a thought on her. “We’d have to do it off camera. The studio thinks this is all a gimmick. Too much evidence might blow our cover and the safety of my friends is paramount.”

“We can work this out,” Scully said, triggering a Beatles’ song in Garcia’s head. She actually heard the chorus going off.

“No,” Garcia said, aloud, shaking his head, and patting her hand. He imposed another thought on her. “I just can’t risk it at this time. I can’t risk losing contact with Brittney.”

Scully nodded. "Can you still hear me?" she asked, trying to push her thoughts through her hand and into his, not knowing if the mental imagery helped any.

"A little," Garcia said. "Like a whisper."

"I'm yelling," Scully said, smiling.

"I know. It's a loud whisper," Garcia assured her.

"If your condition gets worse, let me know," Scully said.

"Mind melding with you gave me an infusion of strength," Garcia said, standing up. "It'll keep me stable a little longer."

Scully stood up as well, not letting go of his hand. "I want to be alone with you," she said.

Garcia nodded, kissed her one more time. "Let some time pass," Garcia said. "The feelings will fade."

"I don't want them to," Scully said.

"Hello?" Kletsova said. "We're on TV? You have to talk and say stuff for the audience."

"Like, get a room?" Mulder asked.

"I've got to go and rest," Garcia said. "Will you please excuse me?"

Scully reluctantly let go of Garcia's hands, then thought better of it, hugged him, and then headed for the door. "Come on, Mulder. We got work to do."

"We do?" Mulder asked, starting to follow, and then paused to shake Garcia's hand, reconsidered, and brought his hand back. "I think we'll be seeing you again."

"Most definitely," Garcia said.

Garcia turned and went right to his room, the closing of the door synchronized with Scully closing the front door. She leaned back against the door, indifferent to the fact that Mulder was appraising her.

"What was all that?" Mulder asked her. "Are you alright?"

"I'm so alright," Scully said, unconsciously smiling as she considered her new insights into Garcia. And then she thought about it again and how she was now alone, her smile fading. "And so not."

Inside the Tamm Commune, Niki shook her head in amazement. "This is going to be our best episode ever!"

"What makes you say that?" Lenar asked. "Nothing new. Tam sees girl. Tam kisses girl. Seen one episode, you've seen them all. The only thing that didn't happen was Garcia losing his shirt."

"But that was a really hot kiss," Niki said. "And it was Gillian Anderson! No one back home is going to believe this. Wait, do you think when my mom comes we can get all our programs downloaded onto the computer so I can have proof?"

"We'll see," Trini said.

"Oh, and I know the song for this episode," Niki said. "We have to sing Bree Sharp's David Duchovny song."

Kletsova looked to the others, who all in turned shrugged. "As usual, you have us at a loss."

"I'll sing it for you," Niki said, grabbing Garcia's guitar. "It goes great with acoustic guitar, but we can add drums and stuff later."

The episode was later edited, ending there with a cut to Niki singing, supported by the band, and for the background there was some additional footage added of adventures with Mulder and Scully, who were called back by the studios just to get some support scenes. Garcia commented that he really liked the still photo of Scully holding her weapon at ready as she leaned against a wall, ready to come around the corner, and the photo of him and Mulder in dimly lit warehouse, their weapons drawn, looking official. There was also a scene with the three of them in a car, Mulder telling a story, and Scully rolling her eyes, as the three of them drove to interview abductees, and then again as they spoke to a person who claimed to have been abducted, standing in the sun as the alleged abductee was watering the tree in his front lawn, telling his story.

Bree Sharp's, 'David Duchovny', sung by Niki: "It's Sunday night; I am curled up in my room. The T.V. light fills my heart like a balloon. I hold it in as best I can. I know I'm just another fan. But I can't help feeling I could love this secret agent man. And I can't wait any more for him to discover me. I got it bad for David Duchovny. David Duchovny, why won't you love me? My friends all tell me, 'Girl, you know it's just a show,' But deep within his eyes I see me wrapped up like a bow. Watching the sky for a sign. The FBI is on



my mind. I'm waiting for the day when my lucky stars align. In the form of... David Duchovny floating above me in the alien light of the spaceship of love. I need David Duchovny hovering above me American Heathcliff, brooding and comely. David Duchovny, why won't you love me? So smooth and so smart. He's abducted my heart. And I'm falling apart from the looks I receive from those eyes I can't leave. And you may say I'm naive but he told me to believe... Ooooooooooooo.... My bags are packed. I am ready for my flight. Want to put an end to my daydream days and sleepless nights. Sitting like a mindless clone, wishing he would tap my phone. Just to hear the breath of the man, the myth, the monotone, And I would say... David Duchovny, why won't you love me? David Duchovny, I want you to love me, kiss and to hug me, debrief and debug me. David Duchovny I want you to love me, I'm sweet and I'm cuddly, I'm gonna kill Scully. David Duchovny, I want you to love me. I'll be waiting. In Nevada.



After hearing that Niki wanted to be on the Xuxa show, Xuxa made a personal visit to drop by the set and make an impassioned plea on her behalf. And Garcia changed his mind about allowing Niki to go be on the show de Xuxa. Trini agreed to escort her to rehearsal, and that left Kletsova, Lenar, and Garcia with an unusual evening to themselves. "I think it's a good thing that you let her do this," Kletsova said.

"Me, too," Lenar agreed. "And now, I think it's time you allowed us to go out and get some stress relief of our own."

"What are you talking about?" Garcia asked.

"We're going out for drinks," Kletsova said.

"Um, no, we're not," Garcia said.

"Um, yes, we are, and you're going with us," Kletsova said. "You need to get out and do non work related stuff."

"But..."

And the next thing Garcia knew was that the three of them were walking into a bar. It sounded like the beginnings of a good joke, but it wasn't going to turn out so funny. It was a famous Irish pub down the street from their building that offered dancing, billiards, live entertainment, and had the reputation for holding some of the best bar fights this side of New NewYork. The waitress brought a beer for Kletsova and Lenar, and Garcia had a regular, no cocaine, coke.

"See," Kletsova said. "This is nice. The people here appreciate that stars just want to come and have a drink and be normal for a while."

Two men that had been playing pool approached Garcia.

"You're that Admiral guy on the New Generation, aren't you?" the first asked.

"Um, yes," Garcia said.

"I got twenty bucks here that says me and my friend here can take you," the second said.

"Umm," Garcia said. "You should sell that twenty bucks on ebay and see if you get anything for talking money."

"You playing us stupid or something?" the first said.

"No, I would never do that," Garcia said.

"Stand up," the second said.

"I think I will just sit here and drink my drink," Garcia said.

"Look guys," Kletsova began...

"We're not talking to you, wench. We're talking to the man. He likes to fight, we like to fight," said the first.

"You really don't want to do this," Lenar said, putting an arm on Kletsova's shoulder to keep her seated and calm.

"Not talking to you, either, Spot," said the other. "So, what's it going to be? You gonna stand up and take it like a man, or are you gonna sit there like a girl?"

"I'm going to sit here like a girl," Garcia said.

"No, you're not," the second said.

He and his friend both moved in on Garcia at the same time, and Garcia's tactical advantage of having remained seated was soon revealed. The act of getting up would have made him vulnerable to the first attack.

By the two of them coming to him, he could hit first, and, because of the fact that he was seated, he was in prime position to target their groins. He put a boot in each of their groins, shoved his chair over backwards, rolled away and came up standing, assuming a fighting stance.

The two men remained incapacitated on the floor, but as anticipated, the two men who had wanted to fight had friends. These friends now wanted a piece of Garcia.

Kletsova looked to Lenar. "What do you think? Should we assist?"

"Nah," Lenar said. "I think he can manage. Nother beer?"

"Yep," Kletsova agreed. She flagged the waitress and pointed to her beer.

When the waitress showed with the new drinks, she made a comment of admiration for Garcia. "Wow, it's just like in his movies. He really can fight."

"Better make my next one a double," Kletsova said, wanting to be sick by the way the waitress was admiring Garcia

"Check," waitress said, and headed towards the bar, doing her best to stay out of the way of the fighting patrons, and at the same time not wanting to loose sight of Garcia as he took on the growing mob.

Kletsova and Lenar lifted their drinks off the table just in time to allow Garcia to roll across it. He got up, staggered to the table. "You want help?" Kletsova asked.

"No," Garcia said, and pushed himself back into the fight.

Kletsova shrugged. "He has to hog every moment of fun," she said.

"It's just his way," Lenar said, again lifting his drink to avoid it getting spilled as Garcia landed on the table. This time the table collapsed to the floor. Garcia got up and went back to the fight.

"They don't make tables like they use to," Kletsova said.

"I wonder if that accounts for the saw dust on the floor?" Lenar asked.

Because of their television status, and the fact that they were on internet television twenty six seven, word got out quick that there was a bar fight with Garcia going down. After the fiftieth person entered the bar to join in on the fun, the Pub had to lock the doors so that no one else could come in until an equal number departed. It was standard operating procedures during such an event.

"Oh, that's going to smart," Lenar said.

"Yep," Kletsova said. "Glad we came."

"Me, too," Lenar agreed.



Trini was left dressing Garcia's wound, scolding him the whole while. "I leave you three alone for one night, and you go and get into a bar fight?"

"It wasn't exactly my idea," Garcia said.

Trini looked to Kletsova and Lenar for explanation. "Well, don't look at us. We didn't start the fight," Kletsova said.

Niki touched a bruise on Garcia's face, asking, "Does that hurt?"

"Yes," Garcia said, putting her finger in a joint lock. "Does that?"



While passing Niki in the hall, Garcia brushed her arm with his hand and imposed a quick thought on her. Later that day, Niki came out of her room and screamed. Everyone looked at her as if she had lost her mind, with the exception of Garcia who didn't even look up. She was right on time and played her role well. "I want out of this apartment. I want to go somewhere," Niki said. "I don't care where. I just need out. Please! I want to go to the park, or a ball game, or a bar fight, I don't care which, but take me out."

"And screaming is going to help you get your way?" Kletsova asked.

"Get dressed," Garcia said. "I'll take you to the mall."

"Really?" she asked, a complete and sudden make over in her expression and attitude.

"Yep. Chop, chop. Get dressed. Before I change my mind," Garcia said.

"Yes!" Niki yelled triumphantly, and rushed to her room to change.

"Tam?" Kletsova said. "You're not going to give in to a tantrum, are you?"

"She's right. We need to get out. All of us," Garcia said. "Five minutes?"

"And this coming from a guy we had to drag to the bar?" Lenar asked.

“And having made all that fuss about not letting Niki out,” Kletsova added.

“What can I say?” Garcia asked. “I’m a reformed man.”

And so Star Fleet had their first “impromptu” outing, without Paula and their normal assortment of guards. Tatiana and Trini walked beside Niki, Lenar behind them, and Garcia in front of them. The only non Star Fleet were the normal entourage of cameramen and it wasn’t lost on them that Garcia’s group moved as if they were a military unit in a war zone. When they past a toy store, they all stopped to examine the Star Fleet Singer action figures, and bought one of each for Niki to keep as souvenirs.

“It doesn’t look anything like me,” Trini said, evaluating the collector’s item.

“Tam?” Niki asked. “Do you always alter your stride in order to avoid stepping on the cracks and patterns in the tiles and side walks?”

Garcia frowned. He had not been aware that he was doing such a thing, but he could clearly see that that was what he was doing, and now that someone had pointed it out he was aware but unable to resist stopping. They were on the second floor and he could partially see down to the first level as he watched his feet, but not straight down, for he wasn’t at the rail that prevented people from falling. Consequently, what he couldn’t see was the toy kiosk right below, and the man winding up one of his flying toys. The man was selling toy birds and planes, and to show off his merchandise he let one fly. The toy rose above the second level and Garcia reacted instantly, turning towards it, drawing a phaser, hitting it dead on. His weapon was set for stun, but it melted the delicate wings and sent the whole thing crashing to the ground.

Kletsova was suddenly on him, trying to take the weapon out of his hand. “You just killed a toy!” Kletsova said.

“It startled me,” Garcia said. “I thought it was an alien... Never mind.”

“Give me the phaser,” Kletsova said, holding out her hand.

“It’s legal,” Garcia said. “And it was set for stun.”

“Yes, it was a stunning example of your marksmanship,” Kletsova said. “Now, hand it over.”

Tatiana increased the intensity of her stare, holding her hand out, and he finally acquiesced. He really wasn’t feeling himself, lately. Stress, no doubt, and all the work he was doing to prepare to rescue his crewmates. “Lenar. Go down and pay the man for the toy,” Kletsova said. “Really, Tam. We can’t take you anywhere.”

Lenar saluted and went to take care of it, trying hard not to laugh. A mall security guard approached the group. “Sir, you need to come with me.”

“It was just a misunderstanding,” Kletsova said. “We’re going to buy the toy.”

“None the less, I need you to come with me, Sir,” the guard said.

“You’re just a mall cop,” Garcia said. “I’m not going with you.”

The security guard snapped the safety off his holster to free his weapon. “There are two ways we can do this,” the guard said. “You can walk with me on your own two feet, or I can drag you. I recommend you come with me now. Turn that camera off me.”

Garcia sighed. “You guys continue shopping. If need be, we’ll rendezvous back at the van,” Garcia said.

Garcia followed the security guard back to the mall business offices and into a room. Mulder and Scully were waiting for him inside. Scully was instantly in his arms, kissing him. “Are you doing okay?” she asked.

“Yes,” Garcia said.

“I told you it would work,” the security cop said, taking off the hat. “Of course, shooting the toy was a good call.”

“It really was an accident,” Garcia said.

“Yeah, right,” the guard said. “I’m Melvin Frohike. It’s nice to meet you, Garcia. I think you already know my friends John Fitzgerald Byers, and Richard Ringo Langly.”

“And I’m Yves Adele Harlow,” Yves said, though Garcia knew her as Zuleikha Robinson. Whoever was behind this illusion of Earth stars on Iotia, they had gone all out for support characters. He wandered if Cancer man, or more politically correct, cigarette smoking man, was also here somewhere, perhaps making deals with the Ferengi. Yves eagerly shook his hand, bringing his attention back to her. She moved in closer

to kiss his cheek, knowing full well that Scully didn't approve, which made it even more fun for her. "I wanted in on this piece of action."

"You're really going to go through with this?" Mulder asked.

"I've got to rescue my friends," Garcia said. "They killed another member of my crew."

"I'm sorry," Scully said.

"I've got a gang of gold shirts ready to move on the base when you give the word," Ringo said, brushing his long, blond hair back out of his eyes, and then pushing his glasses back in place. "A base, I might add, that the Government completely denies exists."

"Which means, technically, we can't get in trouble for harassing the guards?" Yves asked. "Or blowing up the base?"

"I can add a compliment of red shirts to your gang of gold. Are you sure they understand their roles?" Garcia asked. "I don't want anyone killed."

"I told them they will be going in, phasers on stun," Melvin said. "But there is no guarantee they'll comply. The military is also supposed to shoot stun at civilians, but they're expecting a war. You just have to remember, everyone in this game volunteered to play. Now, you promised us some codes."

Garcia supplied them with some computer hack information and passwords to some top secret government sites. Melvin looked to John, who after a moment, nodded. "I'm in."

"Damn, how did you get this?" Ringo asked, watching over John's shoulder.

"Trade secret," Garcia said. "Now, I'm going to beam in outside the base and sneak in, and I have a plan to escape, but I'll need a way to beam out in the case of an emergency."

"We're going to tag you with a chip so that we'll be able to follow you and beam you out," Melvin said.

Scully showed him the chip, sealed in a sterile bag. It was huge.

"What am I supposed to do with that? Swallow it?" Garcia asked.

Scully shook her head. "I'll need to make an incision and place it just below your rib cage. I'm prepared to do that now."

Garcia took his shirt off. Scully nodded to Yves, and she brought the medical stuff over to the desk. Scully started with a syringe. "This will numb the pain," Scully said. "Unless you would prefer not to..."

"Are you kidding?" Garcia asked. "Numb away. Ouch! How about something to numb the numbing agent?"

Scully kissed him. "How's that?" she asked.

"By the way, tell Niki that that was a great song," Mulder said.

"Except for the whole kill me part," Scully said, putting on gloves. She began to wipe on a sterilizing agent, covering a much larger area of Garcia's skin than needed, but then, she was just trying to be thorough.

It only took a moment for Scully to insert the device, activate it, and close the wound back up. It took four stitches. "You're all set. We'll be in touch."

"Alright," Melvin said, while Garcia was putting on his shirt. "You better get back to your cameras and your friends before people get too suspicious. We'll be waiting. Oh, and here's your ticket. Sign here. This is my copy. What? I collect autographs. Anyway, just give it to your producer. She'll take care of it."

"Thanks," Garcia said, and then to Scully, "Thank you."

Scully took his hand. "Be safe."

"Bye," Yves said, flirting with him.

"Perhaps you two girls would like to be alone with him?" Mulder ask.

"You'd like that," Yves said.

"Of course. Especially if you got it on film," Mulder said.

Scully hit him.

"It's okay. I know about his collection," Garcia said, winking, and then departed.

"Who told you about my collection?" Mulder asked, but Garcia was gone. "Scully?"



The Garcia and Seven clones made it to the Portal, but not without trouble. The number of Borg inside the artifact had increased, almost exponentially, and some were following them. Seven laid down a suppressing fire while Garcia played with the controls to the portal.

"Tell me you know how to operate that," Seven said.

"I watched the Princess do it," Garcia said.

Seven was not happy about the answer, but there was little she could do. She had no information on this technology, so Garcia was their only hope to getting out alive.

The inner dial on the arch rotated, clicked into position, and the portal came to life. Looking through the portal was a serene setting, grassy plains and blue skies.

"That did it," Seven said.

"No, that's not San Francisco," Garcia said. "Give me a minute."

"We don't have a minute," Seven said, grabbing him by the arm and shoving him towards the portal.

"Wait!" Garcia said.

Seven followed him through the portal just as the first rumblings of destruction began to echo beneath her feet. On the other side, it was pure country with no visible clues to where the portal was and no evidence of a civilization. Acting instinctively, she forced Garcia to the ground and covered him with her body. A sudden, short burst of debris and a plume of super heated plasma jetted through the portal, passing just over their heads, before the portal died on the other side, preventing any further destruction from following them through. When she was sure they were safe, she inspected Garcia's face for damage.

"Do you know what you've done?" Garcia asked.

"I saved us," Seven said.

"We don't have a clue where we are!"

"We're alive," Seven said. "We can work with that."

Deanna appeared and stared down at Garcia. "I was unsuccessful."

"Great," Garcia said.

"Is that intended as sarcasm? I saved our lives," Seven said, unaware of Garcia's multiple personality issues.

"So, are you going to tell her about us?" Ilona asked, stepping up along side of Deanna. Duana approached from somewhere behind Seven, pointed to the drone and gave Garcia a conspiratory thumbs up and a wink. Lal knelt down to examine a flower. "Or are we just going to sit here and watch the two of you bicker?"



Once the Ferengi life pod was inside the Horizon's shuttle bay, Sharlow closed the shuttle bay doors, pressurized the bay, and entered. She was very relieved to see Carter and Thomas alive. Carter began instantly rambling about their situation and the Borg and that Garcia had returned to destroy the artifact.

"Whoa, hold it. Tammis Garcia?" Sharlow asked.

"Is there any other?" Carter said.

"But Garcia is on Iotia. I've seen the videos," Sharlow said.

"In order to preserve the best specimens, the Omegans like to make copies of their victims," Gary said.

"And who are you?" Sharlow asked.

Thomas started to come around, his groaning bringing everyone to his aid. "I want you to arrest Garcia," Thomas said, sitting up.

"Which one?" Sharlow asked.

"The one that used the Vulcan nerve pinch on me," Thomas said, standing, and rubbing his forehead. "What do you mean which one?"

"We really don't have time for this," Gary said. "We need to destroy the Ferengi vessel to prevent the Borg from going to Iotia."

"Again with the Borg? What Borg?" Sharlow asked.

"Burke to Sharlow. You're needed on the Bridge, ASAP," Burke called over the intercom.

"I'll head to Engineering and see if I can't get you any power to the phasers," Carter said. "After I make a quick pit stop to the restroom. And I'm starving. Is there anything to eat on board?"

“Yeah, go, go,” Sharlow said. “Thomas. Get into a space suit, and take this Ferengi life pod and see if you can’t recover the Darwin. I think we’re going to need it.”

“Aye,” Thomas said.

Isis mewed and Gary patted her as he followed Sharlow out of the shuttle bay. Sharlow seemed a little disconcerted about the fact that he was talking to his cat.

“I am sure they are doing everything they can,” Gary tried to soothe Isis.

Isis mewed again.

“I’ll ask,” Gary said. “Excuse me, Lt. Do you have communications available? I have a fellow agent on Iotia that may be able to assist us. She was expecting me to contact her some time ago.”

“I don’t know who you are or what your intentions are,” Sharlow said. “And I don’t have time to baby sit. Will you please, just stay out of the way? And don’t touch anything. This vessel is two hundred plus years old and it’s falling apart around us. Now, if you’ll excuse me.”

Isis complained.

“I’m sure she is under a lot of stress,” Gary said. “Let’s see if we can find a communicator, or the parts to build one.”



Sharlow stepped onto the Bridge. “What?”

“I have established a ship to ship communication laser,” Burke said. “It’ll be in range in seven seconds.”

“What will be in range?” Sharlow asked, and turned to the screen where Burke was pointing.

The Ferengi vessel was approaching. It was doing so very slowly, but it was definitely coming for them.

“Open a hailing frequency,” Sharlow said. “Ferengi Vessel. This is Commander Sharlow. I would like to speak with DaiMon Tolro.”

A response signal arrived and the image of a Borg appeared. A very specific and well known Borg. “I am Locutus of Borg. Your attempts to sabotage this vehicle have been futile. Your ship and crew will now be assimilated to facilitate repairs. Resistance is futile. You will become one with the Borg,” Locutus said.

“Oh my god,” Sharlow said, going for an intercom button. “Bridge to Carter. I need those phasers. Something. Anything! And now!”

“Would you like me to go out and throw a rock?” Burke asked.

“Do you have a rock?” Sharlow snapped.

“Carter here,” Carter said, sounding as if she was chewing on something as she spoke. “I’m on my way to engineering now. Will be there momentarily.”

Burke stepped closer to Sharlow and whispered a solution. “We have enough anti matter that we could blow both of our ships up, if they actually get within boarding range.”

Sharlow nodded. “That will be a last option. No matter what, we can’t let one of those things get to Iotia.”

“Commander? I’m getting a strange energy reading from the comet,” Ensign Su said.

“What kind of reading?” Sharlow asked.

As if cued to her question, there was a massive explosion. The screen brightened leaving a silhouette of the Ferengi vessel before it went blank and erupted into sparks. Power systems all over the ship failed. Artificial gravity went off for three seconds, came back on, but at a higher setting due to a surge through its systems. By the time artificial gravity returned to normal, the damage had been done. Many of the crew had sustained new injuries, including broken legs and arms. They had been trained should artificial gravity ever give out and come back on, they should avoid landing on their feet, favoring a martial arts tumble. Most of the injuries were actually the most senior of officers, and the ones with the lightest of injuries were the cadets, who had practiced artificial gravity outages more recently.

Sharlow got up slowly, weary of the gravity. “Ensign?”

“I’m okay,” he said.

“I’m going to need a medic,” Burke said.

“Try not to move,” Sharlow said and turned to Ensign Su. “Can you tell me what happened?”

“The last bit of information I got before the sensors went off line was that the artifact blew up, disintegrating the comet,” the Ensign said.

“What about the Ferengi Vessel?” Sharlow asked.

“It’s reasonable to assume that they took on damage,” the Ensign surmised. “They were closer than we were. Then again, they are in a newer ship, less likely to be affected by EMP’s and random feed back and energy surges.”

Sharlow tried the comm. system, but it was off line. She performed a cursory medical evaluation of Burke and determined he had a broken leg, which fortunately was not a compound fracture. He would live.

“Ensign, go to medical and fetch a team up here to retrieve Burke. Assist them where needed, for there are probably more injuries. His are light so use your best judgment,” Sharlow said.

“Light? I’m in pain here!” Burke protested.

“I know, but stiff upper lip,” Sharlow said to Burke. She turned to an Ensign that was coming on the Bridge. “I’m going forward to the observation blister to see if I can ascertain what happened to the Ferengi ship, if anything. We may have to defend against a boarding. Pass the word, I want everyone carrying arms. Go.”

Sharlow knew for sure that the weapons available on the Horizon were going to be no match for the Borg if they were boarded, but it would give them a little courage to face what was to come. The only guarantee they would have of actually stopping the Borg would be releasing the antimatter and blowing up their ship. It was the very thing she was determined to do herself if she looked out the observation blister and saw the Ferengi ship still coming for them.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

The local news showed a group of people demonstrating in front of the building where Garcia's Commune lived. They were mostly protesting about his comments that Kirk was not coming back, but a few of them were protesting his sponsoring of dolphin friendly tuna nets, which would drive some of the local fishermen out of business because they couldn't compete with the larger fishing vessels. Kletsova drank some tea and stared out the window. She could see the crowds gathered on the opposite side of the street and the police force keeping the peace, but they were too far away to identify anyone specific. She discerned how cold it was by the fact that almost everyone was bundled up in winter clothing, steam rising from street vents.

"You know, Tam," Kletsova said, as she returned to her seat at her desk. "I think it was unwise to disclose your belief that Kirk isn't coming back."

"Oh, not you, too," Garcia said.

"You're messing with the fundamental belief system of this planet," Kletsova pointed out. "We're in a precarious enough situation as it is without you starting a civil war here. First and foremost, your comments were a violation of the Prime Directive. Second, stating your opinion could adversely affect our living arrangements on this planet. You don't know who in power you might tick off. Third, it could have an adverse affect on our immediate health, especially if they start throwing rocks."

"It can't be against the Prime Directive to correct a misperception brought about by someone who was operating under the Prime Directive," Garcia said.

"You're not Kirk, Tam," Kletsova pointed out. "And you don't have the authority to do what you did, nor the rank necessary to make that decision in the absence of said authority."

"How dare you!" Garcia snapped, pivoting his chair about. "I'm here to help these people."

"So am I," Kletsova returned with equal intensity. "And even though I am just a cadet, I would be remiss in my duties not to inform you that you've over stepped your boundaries. Our job here is to blend in, make observations, and wait for rescue, not to go poking holes in the social fabric of this community. A fabric, I would like to remind you, which has the consistency of wet toilet paper and is just tenuously holding together, perhaps out of sheer luck. Your words, not mine. They're grasping at straws, here, Tam. If deifying Kirk provides them with the hope to get through the day, or the peace of mind to just to function, minimally or not, who are you to rob them of this psychological security blanket?"

Garcia stood up and walked over to her desk, his anger in check but visible. He pointed a finger at her, thought about his words, and said, "You're right. My opinion on the matter of Kirk's return is irrelevant and I was wrong to share that opinion in a public forum. Further, I should no doubt apologize for coming on so strong and perhaps for sounding condescending about the said belief system. I can't retract the statement, because I can't condone believing in myths and ghosts and the likes, but I do understand that there is a time and a place, and that wasn't the time or the place."

Trini entered the office. "Tam, there are a couple of Police Officers on their way up. They want to speak with you."

Garcia followed Trini back into the main living area to find Lenar answering the door and allowing the Officer's entrance. Kletsova stood in the hallway, visible, and when Niki tried to pass her, she put her arm out and blocked her egress. "Stay behind me." Lenar allowed the two officers in.

"Mr. Garcia," the Officer said. He looked like a man who had spent too many years behind a desk, with one too many donuts and cups of coffee. "I'm Lt. James Ford, truancy Officer for the state of New York, and this is Janet Helms, from child protective services."

Garcia didn't shake the Officer's hand. "How may I help you?"

Lt. Ford left his proffered hand shake out there. "There's no need to be adversarial."

"Are you here on official state business?" Garcia asked.

"Yes," Ford answered.

"Then there is also no need to be cordial," Garcia said. "Please state the nature of your visit."

Lt. Ford withdrew his hand. Janet Helms stepped forwards. She had the appearance about her of the stereotypical Russian orphanage care taker. A bit pear shape, no muscle tone, dark circles under her eyes, the hint of cigarette smoke on her clothes, and her hair pulled back tightly into a bun, so tightly that the wrinkles in her forehead were pulled smooth. "It has come to our attention that Niki is not in school."



“She is home schooled,” Garcia said.

“That may be, but you have failed to file the proper paperwork designating her as a home schooled person, and she has not taken any tests or provided any information to the state for us to ascertain whether or not she is in conformity with the state’s minimum standards.”

“I assure you, she exceeds all of your standards,” Garcia said.

“Until I see the proof on my desk, she is delinquent, and you sir, are subject to fines and penalties, including jail time, if you do not correct this error,” Helms said.

“You can’t do that,” Niki said. Kletsova motioned her to be quiet.

“If you will provide me with the necessary paper work to correct this error, I will make sure that it is completed and returned to you as soon as possible,” Garcia said.

“That won’t be good enough,” Helms said. “Now that this matter has come to my desk, I am obligated to assess her situation, and quite frankly, my concerns go beyond the fact that she isn’t in school. I am also concerned about how much you work her. She is a child, and you appear to be in violation of our state’s child labor laws.”

Niki started to say something but Kletsova merely glanced at her and she kept her peace.

“I appreciate your concerns, but it is my obligation to see to Niki’s well being, not the states. Given the fact that you can see us through out our entire day via the net, I doubt you can prove that I am remiss in my duties in regards to either her mental or physical health. We work, yes, but we play, and we exercise, and we eat healthy. And, given the state of your appearance, I doubt either of you are disciplined enough to advise us on how to live a healthy life.”

Lt. Ford put a hand on Helms shoulder to hold her back and he spoke over her. “Mr. Garcia, I appreciate the fact that you’re a big time celebrity...”

“No you don’t,” Garcia said. “The only reason you’re here is because you know you’re currently on TV and you want to throw your weight around, which you have a lot of. Well, I know the law and unless you have a court ordered injunction against me to allow you to interrogate me or my child, then you need to just turn around and march yourselves right out.”

“I was hoping we could avoid some of the legal issues and just get you caught up to speed with your civil requirements,” Ford began.

“We will comply with all the state statutes. Give me the paper work and I’ll take care of it,” Garcia said.

“I told you, that is not good enough. I want an interview with Niki, in private,” Helms said.

“That’s not going to happen. You can bring in the entire state militia if you choose, but you will not have that, and I will fight you,” Garcia said. “If you want to sit down and chat, right now, we’ll all do that, but I will not allow you to take Niki out of my sight or care.” Garcia stepped forwards at this point. “And trust me, your public image will be severely tarnished if you try to take her against her will or mine on national television. Now, if that’s all, I’ll see you to the door.”

“You don’t know who you’re messing with,” Helms said.

The door opened and several armed men stepped in. Garcia nodded and they escorted the two public officials out. Garcia turned to Trini, “Get Paula on the phone, now. And I want to speak with Mann and the Mayor and the Governor.”

Several phone calls later, Garcia sat in the recliner he had nonverbally claimed as “his” chair, fuming silently. It wasn’t like he had enough issues to deal with! Having to explain the way he was raising his child, which really wasn’t his child but no one on this planet would ever discover that fact, if he had his way about it, was just a little more than he wanted on his plate. After all, anyone who had ever watched his show could see that Niki was happy and talented and that she was where she needed to be, with people who loved her and protected her.

Niki imagined she knew what Garcia was brooding over, so she approached him. “Tam, if it’s compulsory for me to attend school while we’re here, I’ll do it to keep you out of trouble with the law.”

Garcia reached up, took Niki’s hand, and drew her to him. She sat on his lap and leaned her head against his. He kissed her forehead. “Niki, you do not have to prove your bravery to me. I know that you would gladly take one for the team. You’re not going to have to attend school. I am confident you can pass

whatever competency exams they choose to provide us. Paula is going to get the state requirements and we'll do some practice exams. Everything will be okay. It's just bad timing, is all."

"As long as it's not biology, I think I'll do okay," Niki said.

"There will be some biology and some local history, state history and country history. You know some of the basics, the Horizon and the Enterprise," Garcia said.

"No, you don't get it. I'm a musician, not a biologist," Niki said. "I don't do well in this subject, and believe me, I have tried, because I have wanted to emulate you in every way. It just doesn't stick."

"You can do it," Garcia assured her. "If you can memorize notes and chords and musical phrases, you can do biology. It's mostly memorization, naming structures and systems. Hell, nine tenths of any science is simply memorizing the nomenclature."

"It doesn't stick," Niki insisted.

"Go fetch me my banjo and pull up a chair," Garcia instructed.

Niki gladly went to retrieve the banjo. She handed it to Garcia and then for a chair she rolled Garcia's exercise ball over and sat down in front of him. He was already plucking on the strings, as he always did before beginning to play, as if he were checking to see if the instrument had gone out of tune since he last held it.

"Okay," Garcia said. "You know music, we agree on that. And you've demonstrated you can learn songs. So, just like the episode of Happy Days, you take your best subject and blend it with the worst subject, to give it roots. You make everything a song. Here's an example:"

Pump, pump, pumps your blood.  
By Anson Williams  
The right atrium's where the process begins,  
where the CO<sub>2</sub> blood enters the heart.  
Through the tricuspid valve, to the right ventricle, the pulmonary artery, and lungs.  
Once inside the lungs, it dumps its carbon dioxide and picks up its oxygen supply.  
Then it's back to the heart through the pulmonary vein, through the atrium and left ventricle.  
Pump, pump, pumps your blood.  
Pump, pump, pumps your blood.  
The aortic valve's, where the blood leaves the heart,  
then it's channeled to the rest of the bod.  
The arteries, arterioles, and capillaries too  
bring the oxygenated blood to the cells.  
The tissues and the cells trade off waste and CO<sub>2</sub>,  
which is carried through the venules and the veins.  
Through the larger vena cava to the atrium and lungs,  
and we're back to where we started in the heart.  
Pump, pump, pumps your blood.

Niki laughed and clapped her hands. "I can do that," she agreed.

"Of course you can," Garcia affirmed. "You can do anything if you attach to something you know and you know music, which is a vehicle for doing just about anything. Let's do a history lesson. One of the greatest Earth documents ever written is the Consitution. So, here's the preamble, as sung by a group known as School House Rock."

Music & Lyrics: Lynn Ahrens  
Sung by: Lynn Ahrens  
Hey, do you know about the U.S.A.?  
Do you know about the government?  
Can you tell me 'bout the Constitution?  
Hey, learn about the U.S.A.  
In 1787, I'm told,  
Our founding fathers did agree,  
To write a list of principles  
For keepin' people free.  
The U.S.A. was just starting out,  
A bold, brand new country.  
And so our people spelled it out:  
The things that we should be.

{And they put those principles down on paper, and called it the Constitution. And it's been helping us run our country ever since then. The first part of the Constitution is called the Preamble, and tells what those founding fathers set out to do.}

We the people,  
In order to form a more perfect union,  
Establish justice,  
Ensure domestic tranquility,  
Provide for the common defense,  
Promote the general welfare and  
Secure the blessings of liberty  
To ourselves and our posterity,  
Do ordain and establish this Constitution,  
For the United States of America.

In 1787, I'm told ,  
Our founding fathers all sat down  
And wrote a list of principles  
That's known the world around.  
The U.S.A. was just starting out,  
A bold, brand new country.  
And so our people spelled it out,  
They wanted a land of liberty.  
{And the Preamble goes like this:}

We the people,  
In order to form a more perfect union,  
Establish justice,  
Ensure domestic tranquility,  
Provide for the common defense,  
Promote the general welfare and  
Secure the blessings of liberty  
To ourselves and our posterity,  
Do ordain and establish this Constitution,  
For the United States of America.

“That is so awesome,” Niki said. “Oh my god, why didn’t you ever direct me to school house rock before?”

“Some things are more fun when you discover them on your own. You did your homework on the twentieth century entertainment, so this should have gotten some hits for popularity as well as functionality,” Garcia said. “Conjunction Junction was simply brilliant. So was the ‘I’m just a Bill’ song. But I guess my other favorite was Elbow Room.”

“Elbow Room?” Niki asked. “Will you sing it for me?”

Elbow Room, sung by Sung by: Lynn Ahrens  
One thing you will discover  
When you get next to one another  
Is everybody needs some elbow room, elbow room .  
It's nice when you're kinda cozy, but  
Not when you're tangled nose  
to nosey, oh,  
Everybody needs some elbow, needs  
a little elbow room.  
That's how it was in the early days  
of the U.S.A.,  
The people kept coming to settle though  
The east was the only place there  
was to go.  
The President was Thomas Jefferson  
He made a deal with Napoleon.  
How'd you like to sell a mile or two, (or three, or a hundred or a thousand?)  
And so, in 1803 the Louisiana Territory was sold to us  
Without a fuss  
And gave us lots of elbow room,  
Oh, elbow room, elbow room,  
Got to, got to get us some elbow room.  
It's the West or bust,

In God we trust.  
 There's a new land out there...  
 Lewis and Clark volunteered to go,  
 Good-bye, good luck, wear your overcoat!  
 They prepared for good times and for bad (and for bad),  
 They hired a Sacagawean to be their guide.  
 She led them all across the countryside.  
 Reached the coast  
 And found the most  
 Elbow room we've ever had.  
 The way was opened up for folks with bravery.  
 There were plenty of fights  
 To win land rights,  
 But the West was meant to be;  
 It was our Manifest Destiny!  
 The trappers, traders, and the peddlers,  
 The politicians and the settlers,  
 They got there by any way they could (any way they could).  
 The Gold Rush trampled down the wilderness,  
 The railroads spread across from East to West,  
 And soon the rest was opened up for - opened up for good.  
 And now we jet from East to West.  
 Good-bye New York, hello L.A.,  
 But it took those early folks to open up the way.  
 Now we've got a lot of room to be  
 Growing from sea to shining sea.  
 Guess that we have got our elbow room (elbow room)  
 But if there should ever come a time  
 When we're crowded up together, I'm  
 Sure we'll find some elbow room...up on the moon!  
 Oh, elbow room, elbow room.  
 Got to, got to get us some elbow room.  
 It's the moon or bust,  
 In God we trust.  
 There's a new land up there!

"I love you, Tam," Niki said.

"I love you," Garcia echoed.

"Will you answer a question for me and be honest?" Niki asked.

"May I hear the question first?" Garcia asked.

Niki giggled. "Are you saying you wouldn't be honest on all questions?" Niki asked.

"I will endeavor to be direct, but there are some things I can't or won't be able to answer, for a number of different reasons," Garcia said.

Niki nodded. "I appreciate you telling me that part. I understand, I think," she said.

"What's on your mind, Niki?" Garcia asked.

"It's just that it's been so long and I would have thought we would have heard from my mom by now," Niki said.

Garcia set the banjo on the floor to pull Niki to him again, taking her in his arms to comfort her. "I don't know," Garcia said. He initiated a light mind meld as she cried into his neck. It was the same kind of general boost that Deana Troi had offered him so long ago. These words went direct to her head: "Shh, baby, it's okay. I imagine your mom is fine. There's no telling what condition she found the Horizon in. It may be broken beyond repair. The crew that escaped in the life pods no doubt rendezvoused with her and they are just waiting for Star Fleet to send help."

"What if she's not alright?" Niki cried.

"Is there anything you can do about it at this moment?" Garcia asked out loud.

"No," Niki admitted, wiping her nose on her sleeve. She had received this speech before.

"Then this has to be one of those moments where you let go and let god," Garcia recommended.

"But you don't believe in god," Niki said.

“No, but there is still an important lesson there,” Garcia said. “There are times when we as human beings are unable to know or act and those are the times we have to let go and trust that things will work out the way they will. The Serenity Prayer is probably the wisest thing a human could put to memory and when we experience doubt or fear or concern, we draw on it for strength. I asked you if this is something you can change. No. It’s beyond our abilities and resources at this particular moment. But we do know some things. Your mom is highly competent in her field and she will do what is necessary to fulfill her obligations. Further, she is your mother and she loves you and she will not fail in her obligations to you. She will not forget you.”

“Do you really love me?” Niki asked.

“Oh, Niki,” Garcia said. “I love you very much.”

“And you think we’re going to get out of here alive?” Niki asked.

“As long as there is breath in my body, no harm will come to you,” Garcia said. “Now, go clean up. It’s your turn to help Trini prepare a meal.”

Niki kissed him on the cheek and went to clean up. He waited till she had left the room to get up and discovered Trini had been listening in, for how long he could only guess. She approached.

“Are you crying?” Trini asked.

“No,” Garcia said, too defensively. “Maybe. Sympathetic reaction to overwhelming emotions due to close proximity of the person emoting.”

Trini put a hand on his shoulder. “I love you, Tam. Everything is going to be just fine.”

“At this particular moment, I don’t feel as confident about that,” Garcia admitted. “If you’ll excuse me, I should go meditate and exercise this... This stuff off.”

Trini hugged him without warning him. “Maybe you could let me be the strong one tonight and you just relax a little,” Trini said.

He was about to nod and agreed to relinquish command to her when Kletsova appeared. He separated himself from Trini and went to his room.

“I’m sorry,” Kletsova said. “Did I interrupt something?”

“No,” Trini shrugged.



As they drove home from another concert and reception party, Garcia started a fight with Kletsova. Niki was passed out, leaning against him.

“Did you give her alcohol?” Garcia asked.

“Just a little,” Kletsova admitted.

“How dare you?!” he snapped, but in a whisper. “You don’t have that kind authority. Not to mention how stupid that is in the light that we’re being monitored by child protective services.”

Kletsova’s eyes almost seemed to glow, but she was not goaded into the fight. Trini tried to change the subject. They arrived home, Trini led Niki to her bedroom, and Lenar became scarce.

“What has gotten into you?” Kletsova demanded.

“You know, I’ve had about enough of your crap,” Garcia said, stepping in closer to her, as if he might hit her.

Kletsova pushed him. “So, what are you going to do about it?” she said, effectively demonstrating that she was not going to be intimidated, even by him.

“Why don’t you just admit that you’re jealous,” Garcia said.

“Of you? Or of all the little tramps you parade around with at every reception?” Kletsova demanded, shoving him again.

“It’s pure research,” Garcia said, shoving her back.

“Yeah, right,” Kletsova said, turning to walk away. “Research my ass.”

Garcia caught her, pulled her in close and kissed her hard. She struggled to get loose, but he pinned her against the wall. Her resistance faded and soon she was returning the kiss with equal passion.

“Tell me you love me,” Garcia demanded, as he came up for air.

“Of course I love you,” she said, crying, pushing him away using her elbows. “That’s never been a secret.”

“Kiss me,” he said, pulling her back to him.

“No!” she yelled, and then, as if changing her mind. “At least, not here. It’s too public.”

“Where?” he asked her.

“There’s only one place in the whole house where we have absolute privacy,” she said.

They moved their love scene to the bathroom, not ending the display of affection until the door was closed and locked. As soon as it was, Garcia let her go and turned on the shower.

“Continue to make noises from time to time,” Garcia said.

“Oh, Tam!” she said, loudly, then softer she said, “The crew?”

“Yes,” Garcia said, contacting Scully via his implant via the cell phone in his pocket.

“But why now?” Kletsova asked. “At this point, we might as well just wait till help arrives.”

“They killed another cadet,” Garcia said.

Kletsova nodded, and began helping him out of his tux and into the bullet proof jacket. “You want me to go with you?”

“No,” Garcia said. “If I don’t come back, your priority is to keep Niki safe until help arrives. If the show gets canceled, you’re to go live with Gene.”

“I don’t like you doing this alone,” Kletsova said.

“Once I free the first group, I won’t be alone,” Garcia said. “Don’t worry. Now step back. I don’t trust their transporter system.”

Kletsova stepped back towards the door, leaned against it, hitting it with the palm of her hands a few times for show, and saying his name. Garcia signaled Scully and her Lone Gunmen to proceed. Being ripped apart by the Iotian transporter was the most painful thing Garcia had ever experienced in his life, a pain that seemed to start in every bone at once, radiating outwards. It was like he was on fire, spontaneously combusting. Though he wasn’t aware of elapsed time from the dematerialization site to the rematerialization site, which in real time was the time it took for the energy to travel from his place through a satellite and back down, due to the intensity of the pain it seemed to take forever for the process to be over.

Garcia came out the other side alive, hugging himself as if trying to put out a fire. Scully came up and kissed him. “Are you okay?”

“God, how can you guys stand that?!” Garcia said.

“Only the military uses transporters at this time, except in extreme emergency situations, and even then, only in rare circumstances will medical facilities transport a person from an accident site to the hospital,” Melvin said.

Garcia took a moment to catch his breath and then stepped off the transporter pad. He didn’t want to do it again, but he had to. He accepted the phaser that John offered him.

Yves handed Garcia another, more lethal weapon. “I know you’re going in, phasers on stun, and all, but you might need this. It’s a projectile weapon, armor piercing bullets. It’s the only thing that will get through the suits, if you know what I mean. Here’s several extra clips and an ammo belt.”

“I would prefer not killing anyone,” Garcia said.

“You may have, to,” Melvin said. “It’s part of the game. They will kill you if given the chance.”

“He’s right,” Skully said. “As it is, I don’t think you’re being realistic, going in one man and all and expecting the outcome you want.”

“Still, we’ve seen the blue prints for the prison you provided, and evaluated your plan,” Ringo said. “It’s has a sixty eight percent chance of success.”

“I think you’re not factoring in all the variables,” Garcia said.

“Such as?” John asked.

“I never loose,” Garcia said.

“That kind of thinking will get you killed,” Yves said.

“And I want you to come back alive,” Scully said.

Electronic sounds erupted from the computer John was working on. “Alright, the transporter pattern coils have recharged. We’re ready to transport you.”

“I’ve programmed the coordinates that you gave us into the computer. It appears to be about half a kilometer away from the base,” Melvin said. “It’s far enough outside their transporter detection grid that you shouldn’t light up any monitors.”

"I'd really like to go and see how you're going to break in," Yves said. "I might learn something useful from you."

Garcia smiled at her as he strapped on the last item he had requested, a knife, and returned to the transporter pad. He was now fully armed and ready for war. He nodded to John to proceed with the transport and then met Scully's gaze. If something went wrong, her eyes would be the last thing he saw in this world. The second transport was even more painful than the first, perhaps due to the short interval between transports. He doubled over and would have gone to the ground had Brittney not been there to catch him. It took a much longer moment to recover after the second transport, but he pushed through his pain and followed Brittney back to the base, traversing the same path she did so as to avoid tripping sensors. With her in front, he had use of her eyes for surveillance. He could see the guards using her night vision. They were bored, as usual, lollygagging around and telling jokes. They were no threat.

The first obstacle was the main fence. Ideally Brittany should have been able to float him over, but the antigravity unit he had installed would not support his weight. Instead, he had her boost him over. She literally threw him over the fence, cheer leader fashion as he stepped into her locked palms and she tossed him up as he jumped. He dropped and rolled on the other side. She just floated up and over. He sent Scully a message informing her that he was technically on the base. Now all he had to do was get into the main hanger and descend to the prison. Having Brittany there had made it almost too easy. He hid in the shadow and made Brittney invisible and sent her into the hanger ahead. When the coast was clear, Garcia entered. He crossed an expansive floor, ducking once under the wing of an unusual looking aircraft. Had he more time, he would have liked to have examined it in more detail, for he admired the rakish, half moon like wings and the tiny bubble canopy, and the apparent anti-radar surface features on the body of the vehicle.

He caught up with Brittany in a changing room. The room had a supply of pressurized flight suits, the same kind the Lotians used in boarding the Philadelphia Freedom. Garcia found one that didn't contain explosives and donned the suit, but took the explosives out of two other suits to use later. The suit came with its own weapon. He gave the weapons he had collected from the Lone Gunmen to Brittney. They became invisible as soon as she stowed them. The suit had its own communication system with tactical and other information on a heads up display on the inside of his visor.

He sent Trini an email. "Alright. I'm logged into the suit. Brittney will send you telemetry. Trini, I want you to access the suit and figure out all it does, and also, find a way to disarm any suit remotely."

Her email was quick and to the point. "Downloading the suit's operating system and programs. Working on it."

When Brittany appeared again, she was wearing the Uniform that designated her as secretary staff. He accompanied her down in a lift to the medical floor where he intended to rescue the Captain. She was not in the bed she was supposed to be.

"She's not here," Brittney said, with obvious concern in her voice.

A guard approached them. "'May I help you?'"

"What happened to the prisoner?" Brittney asked, glancing at the name on Garcia's uniform. "The general asked that Gordo, here, interview her."

"She was transferred," the guard said.

"Obviously," Brittney agreed. "Where, too?"

"I'm not saying nothin'," the guard said.

Garcia pulled a phaser from his holster and shot Brittany point blank. She fell to the floor screaming bloody murder and then faded out. Garcia pointed the weapon at the guard. "Will you talk now?" he asked.

The guard immediately revealed where the Captain had been moved to. Garcia then stunned the man, using the same weapon he had just used on Brittney. Brittney reappeared.

"You're right," Brittney said. "That is an effective tactic."

"Let's hurry," Garcia insisted.

They went down two flights of stairs and came out on the prison floor. The prison layout was basically a cross. The center was the guard post that had direct vision down the four corridors. Garcia and Brittney approached the guard station.

“Tam, its Scully. John says a silent alarm has gone off. He believes they may have found the man you stunned in medical,” Scully called.

“Alright,” Garcia said. “Contact the red and gold shirts, have them begin their assault on the base.”

“Done,” Scully said. “They’re moving in now.”

That conversation was over before Garcia reached the station. The guard had observed them coming, waved, and returned his attention back to his TV. He was watching Star Conquerors, The New Generation. Garcia came around the station as if to see the program.

“Boy, that Duana chick is one fine looking lady?” the guard said.

“Indeed,” Garcia agreed, not bothering to disguise his voice. The guard didn’t even have time for a double take. He slumped in his chair due to the correctly applied pressure from the Vulcan Nerve pinch. At the far end of the hall, a guard stood and began walking towards them. He said something, which roused the other three guards. Simultaneously, alarms began to blare. Garcia raised his weapon and fired at one of the guards, dropping him with the first hit. Brittney raised two phasers simultaneously, firing both weapons in different directions simultaneously, hitting both of her targets. Garcia knocked out the final guard before he even got his weapon drawn.

“Unlock the cells,” Garcia instructed as he ran down the hall. He sent a message to Scully. “Have John disabled the lifts now.”

“Lifts? You mean elevators! The base is at full alert,” Scully announced, over the back drop noise of cell doors opening. “The reds are attacking their assigned targets. Gold team is moving in for their attack on the opposite side of the base.”

“Great,” Garcia emailed her back.

As Garcia approached the end of the hall, Osaka stopped him.

“What’s going on?” he asked, thinking the suit was an Iotian.

“I’m breaking you out,” Garcia said. “Go to the center, round everyone up. I’ll explain in a moment.”

“Garcia?” Osaka asked.

“Yes, go, quick, while I still have time to rescue the Captain,” Garcia said.

“She’s alive?” Osaka asked.

“Yes, go, quick,” Garcia said.

“Who authorized this rescue?” Osaka demanded. “You’re going to get us killed.”

“No, your delaying is going to get us killed. Now, to the center, quick,” Garcia said. “I’ll be right behind you.”

Osaka complied and rallied the crew at the main guard post of the detention center, trying to explain that Garcia was in the process of rescuing them, to hang tight. Garcia joined the group and told everyone to duck and cover.

“Why?” Osaka asked.

Garcia didn’t explain with words, he simply fired at the explosives he had placed, blowing a hole in the floor at the end of the corridor. Everyone ducked, some covering their ears, but only after the fact.

“Are you crazy!” Osaka yelled.

“Just using the same tactics they used on us, and yes, I’m crazy,” Garcia admitted. “But not as crazy as you apparently. Do you not want to be rescued?”

“How can you, one man, rescue us? Where are we going to go that they aren’t going to pursue us? Have you been contacted by Star Fleet?” Osaka demanded. “Who authorized you to rescue us? You are going to get people killed.”

“Oh bloody hell,” Garcia snapped. “Are you really mad that I am rescuing you, or just feeling bad because you couldn’t escape on your own initiative? Now listen up, the Captain wants me to get you all to safety, and by god, I am going to do that. Now, you can either cooperate, or I’ll render you unconscious and carry you out. I would much rather you cooperate so that I can still have time to rescue the Captain. Now. Which option do you want?”

It didn’t go beyond anyone’s notice that Garcia was armed. And so was Brittney, who was taking position behind and to the right so that her weapon could be in play if need be.

“What do you want us to do?” Osaka said, obviously biting back on what he really wanted to say.



“The only way out is via transporter,” Garcia said, and quite a few began to protest. “I know it’s not pleasant. Trust me, I know, but it’s the only way. Follow Brittney, she’ll take you to it, and then start getting everyone out. I’m going to get the Captain, I should be with you before the last of you beams out. Go. Time is of the essence.”

With that, the crew followed Brittney. Except Osaka, who grabbed Garcia’s arm. “You’re going alone?”

“I’m wearing the Uniform. I think I’ll blend in. The Captain wants you rescued before she will even think of leaving. So, the sooner we get the crew to safety, the sooner we’re all out of here,” Garcia said.

“Fine,” Osaka said. “Just remember, this isn’t a movie. These are real lives you’re playing with.”

“I won’t,” Garcia said. “And if its any consolation, Brittney is recording everything that’s happening here and downloading the data back to my base. You can use any of that material you want to court marital me if that’s what you think is necessary. Until then, your job is to keep your crew safe.”

“I know my job!” Osaka snapped. “It’s you who doesn’t seem to know his job or his place.”

“We’ll talk later,” Garcia said. “I’ve closed down the lifts to this floor. The only other way in is through the emergency fire exit. Don’t go there. I’m about to take it out with explosives to ensure you have enough time to get everyone out before the guards come hunting you.”

Osaka nodded. “Go, and good luck.”

Garcia headed for the stair well. He used the last of the explosive he had removed from the suit lockers, set them, and ran up the stairs. He made it three floors up before leaving the stairwell, and closed the door just in time to hear the explosives go off, collapsing the stair way. Now, the only way to get to the detention center, and the floor below, was the lift, and hopefully, it would take the base security some time to figure out why the lifts were off line. Using the map in his implant and the tactical information on the heads up display of his suit, he navigated around the enemy on his way to get the Captain.



Tolro, Riko, and Brock were lounging around, each of them being personally pampered by a secretary, when the first explosion rocked the base. Brock screamed, clinging to his favorite secretary for support. “What’s going on?”

“Sounds like we’re under attack,” Jill said. “Aren’t you supposed to be protecting me?”

“I’m a brain, sweetheart, not a hired gun,” Brock said.

“I thought this was a secret base? How could anyone attack a secret base?” Tolro asked.

Disgusted by the Ferengi’s sudden display of fear, Jill shrugged Brock off and signaled to her companions that they were leaving. They didn’t need much convincing. The manic fear part of the fight or flight response had the Ferengi huddling together like wild meerkats, their eyes wide and their ears focused in hyper alert mode searching for a threat. Their knowledge of the base was limited and so they were confused to which was the best way to flee.

“You can’t leave, Jill,” Brock protested. “You’re assigned to take care of me. I mean us. You’ve got to get us out of here.”

Jill smiled. “Tell you what, if you’re still alive when this little coup is over, and the money’s keeps coming in, we’ll be back. If not, see ya.”

“Wait!” Brock screamed. Another explosion literally echoed through the building, rumbling up through the floor, shaking the walls, and dislodging a ceiling tile. “Please, take me with you,” he begged, clinging to her skirt and falling to his knees so that she was literally dragging him towards the door.

“Get off me, you coward!” Jill said, trying to hold her skirt in place. “Even if you could leave the base, you’re not paying me enough to be seen with the likes of you in public. I do have a reputation to maintain.”

Jill departed, her girls in tow, the blond turning to give one last wink to Riko, who she actually liked. This left the three Ferengi running around the office in panic. Brock went under his desk. Tolro tried to join him and a ‘girlie’ fight ensued, hands slapping hands, arms waving, and shouts, “No room, go find your own place...” “We can both fit under here...”

Jay, and five of his best guards, entered. They only saw Riko. Some of the guards may have been unconsciously pointing their weapons at the lone Ferengi, because he immediately started screaming and fell to the floor to beg for his life.

"Where are the others?" Jay demanded.

Riko covered his head and fell to the floor, bowing and whining.

Brock scurried out from under the desk. "Oh, thank god it's you," Brock said. The guards took him by the arm. "Hey, easy. Easy! Ouch!"

"Take them to the shelter," Jay said.

"I thought you had forgotten us," Brock said.

"Rest assured, no one is going to get you," Jay said. "Alive."

"Why would anyone want to get us?" Brock asked.

"Say that last part again?" Tolro asked.

"An army of Red Shirts is attacking the base in an effort to take you hostage," Jay said.

"Red shirts?" Tolro asked. "How do you know it's us they want? Why us?"

"Because they told us, give you up or die," Jay said. "And then they started their attack. Stand by," he said, as he took a private call inside his suit. The Admiral informed him that a contingent of gold shirts were now attacking the opposite side of the base. "I understand. I'm on it. Carlito! Get these Ferengi to the shelter and lock it down. And keep them there until you hear from me or the Admiral."

"If you'll return my life pod, we could leave and be out of your hair," Tolro said.

Jay turned to the Ferengi, and the only thing that they lacked was seeing the humor on his face. "The only way you will leave this base is in a coffin. Get use to your new lives. And don't even think about escaping. My guards have orders to kill you to prevent the enemy from getting access to your knowledge. Now, let's go. Before I decide it's too risky to keep you alive any further."



The solitary confinement ward had only one guard. The guard barely acknowledged Garcia as he approached, for he was too preoccupied with watching an episode of *Star Conquerors: the Lost Episode* on his portable viewer, his ear plug inserts playing so loudly that Garcia could hear it down the hall over the alarms.

"Get lost, mutant," the guard said, when Garcia stopped at his post. He had to take his headset off to hear Garcia's response, but even then he hadn't really listened, or he would have heard the blaring alarms. "No one's on the schedule to be experimented on tonight, so, why don't you just go and play some more with your transporter, see if they can't mutate you back to something more human."

Garcia was so taken aback by this guard's lack of respect, he momentarily forgot his mission. He grabbed the guard up out of his chair and pulled him across the desk. "I don't think I heard you quite right?"

"Easy, easy," the guard said.

"You see the rank on my uniform?" Garcia asked. "I outrank you and you will respect my authority. Regardless of what your opinion is about people who have had their physiology changed due to transporter re-sequencing errors. I am still a human being. Now, do you want me to kick your ass, or are you going to open cell 214?"

"I'm going to open cell 214," the guard said, enthusiastically.

Garcia released the guard. The guard collected himself and went through the security protocols for opening the door. As soon as Garcia heard the door click open, he pulled a phaser out and stunned the man. In entertainment media, the guard would have been thrown back, but in real life, he simply melted out of his chair to become a useless pile on the floor.

"Dumb ass," Garcia remarked, as he past the guard's station.

Garcia got a quick peak down the corridor and saw the fourteen soldiers that had been ordered to guard the Captain. Not wanting to waste any more energy, he reached into a pocket and pulled out the electric metronome that he had taken back from Niki. He turned it on, setting the device to ninety two beats per minute, and watched the light flashing as he sang a little dirge to the beat. He then stepped out, purposely drawing attention to himself, and then slid the metronome down the hallway towards the soldiers, singing out loud, "Let the bodies hit the floor."

The soldiers saw the blinking red light, assumed the device was a bomb, and immediately fled the area through the back emergency door. Garcia simply walked up, retrieved the “bomb” of a metronome, turned it off, pocketed it, and then opened the cell door. The Captain was still alive, but weak. He tried to wake her, but she didn’t respond to his voice. He gave her a quick examination and she started to come around as he was removing the IV.

“What’s going on?” she asked.

“I’m getting you out of here,” Garcia said.

“Tam?” Munoz asked, wanting to sit up.

“Easy,” Garcia said, helping. “Can you walk?”

“Not so well,” Munoz said. “And if I stand up, I feel nauseas.”

“We might make better time if I could carry you,” Garcia said. “Would you be offended?”

“The others?” Munoz asked.

“The last of the crew, including Osaka, was just successfully transported off the base,” Garcia announced. “Brittney is waiting for us at the transporter.”

Munoz put an arm around Garcia’s neck and locked her hands, facilitating herself into Garcia’s arms. He stood, watching her for signs of stress as he lifted her from the bed. She appeared to have experienced a moment of vertigo, but it passed and she opened her eyes and smiled faintly at the reflection of her own image in the visor of the suit.

“How am I supposed to kiss you when you’re wearing a mask?” Munoz asked.

“Excuse me?” Garcia asked, taken aback.

Munoz chuckled. “Isn’t this the stereotypical scene from a Garcia Escape novel?”

Munoz was unable to see that he was smiling, but it didn’t matter. Her attempt at humor was short lived as she resisted being sick. She closed her eyes and rested her head on his shoulders. Garcia quickened his pace, wishing he could do something for her. Fortunately, they made it to the end of the hall and to the lift doors without any hassles. Garcia communicated via his implant with John to open the lift doors. The doors opened and they went in. And then the power went dead, fortunately with the doors still open.

“What’s wrong?” Munoz asked.

“Apparently, they’re on to us,” Garcia said. “And when they discovered that they were locked out of the base computers, they cut the power to the base.”

“Back up generators?” Munoz asked.

“Stand by,” Garcia said, carrying Munoz towards the emergency stairwell. He requested a report from Scully as he started up the stairs. “No, they blew them up. I’ve instructed Brittney to destroy the transporter so that they can’t get the coordinates to our secret base when they reboot the system.”

“Good,” Munoz said. “I wasn’t looking forward to using their transporter anyway. So, what’s plan B?”

“I’m working on it,” Garcia said, climbing the stairs. He did have a plan B, but Scully was just telling him that plan B, locking onto him with the implant that he was wearing in order to beam him out was no longer an option. The Iotian transporter system relied heavily on the use of military satellites to direct and redirect energy beams and they had all been shut down in an effort to prevent anyone from transporting on or off the base in this emergency.

“That’s a bit cliché,” Munoz complained, unaware of the conversations going on in his head. “Surely you have a contingency plan.”

Garcia kicked the handle on a door with sufficient force to start the door swinging outwards, and then pushed it with his back to enter the corridor. One of the guards waiting in ambush fired his weapon prematurely, hitting the door and drawing a line across it as he adjusted during firing. Garcia dove into the recess across the hall. He didn’t have time to apologize to Munoz as he hurriedly sat her down, slid her further into the recess, drew his weapons, and returned fire. The contingent of guards had flipped desks over to use as shields. The door to the stairwell opened and Garcia fired point blank into the first soldier coming through. When the door closed, he adjusted the setting on his phaser and spot welded the door shut.

“Brittney! I need you,” Garcia shouted through his implant. She was, of course, already on her way.

“Situation?” Munoz asked, scooting towards Garcia.

“We’re momentarily pinned down,” Garcia answered, drawing a second phaser. “Stay put.”

“Not going anywhere,” Munoz said, leaning against the wall, completely drained of energy and resigned to let come what may.

Garcia stepped boldly into the corridor firing both weapons. He hit two of the guards and three soldiers. During this, he noticed the soldiers were getting back-up from a couple of suits that were just arriving. He scored a phaser shot against one, but it was a wasted shot since the suit was designed to make them impervious to the stun setting. This also alerted his enemy to the fact that he was also wearing a suit. The rules were most likely going to change for a deadlier kind of game.

Garcia returned to the protective covering of the recess, kneeling.

“Intruder?!” one of the suits called. Garcia was sure it was the suit because of the amplification of the voice through the suit’s external speaker system. “Surrender now and we’ll let you live.”

“Let me and my friend leave and I will let you live,” Garcia said, offering his terms in the negotiation. (Trini? What’s the word on the suit? Can I access their suits remotely?)

“You know, we can sit here forever. Eventually you’re going to get tired and hungry and you will be forced to give up,” the suit negotiator said.

(Tam, I have not found a way to do it yet. The suits are actually designed to prevent what you’re wanting to attempt.) was the response from Trini.

“The thing is,” the suit went on. “The longer you make me wait, the angrier I’m going to get. And when I get angry, I need to de-stress.”

“A mineral oil bath with sauna jets?” Garcia asked.

“This is your last chance to surrender,” the suit said. “And then I am coming after you.”

“Back off, or I will be forced to kill you,” Garcia said. (Trini, I need the remote frequencies and computer protocol for the suits. Brittney, what’s your status?)

Brittney was too far away to be of service and the longer he delayed, the more time his enemy had to get reinforcements. Garcia committed to what appeared to be his only alternative. He pocketed one of the phasers and pulled out the projectile weapon Yves had given him. He wanted to signal the suit to prevent it from exploding should the occupant died, but apparently that wasn’t going to be an option. He was going to just risk it.

“Tam, I got it!” Trini said, sending him the codes to transmit to disarm the suit.

Her message came just as he stepped around the corner and fired the projectile weapon. He sent the signal a fraction of a second after the pulling of the trigger. In his mind he saw the signal reaching the enemy’s suit before the bullet, seeing how it was transmitted at the speed of light. In reality he saw the crisp hole appear in the visor of the suit, saw the blood began to ooze out, and then came the explosion as the suit self destructed.

“What the hell?” Munoz asked.

“I’ll be right back,” Garcia said.

Garcia rushed to the end of the hallway. The suit he had shot was not only dead, but in a thousand pieces. His suit going off also triggered the other two suits to self destruct, so all the suits were dead. So were the six combat soldiers that had pinned him down. Out of the four officers that had also been on the floor, one was alive, but would die if he wasn’t attended to. Garcia took the man’s belt and made a tourniquet for the man’s right leg. His leg was gone and could not be repaired, at least by Iotian standards. An emergency med kit on the wall gave him enough bandages for the wound on the man’s face. He would no doubt be blind for life. Having given the man the minimum work necessary to keep him alive, Garcia returned to collect Munoz, and proceeded towards plan C.

On the ground level, the fact that the base was under attack was unmistakable. The red and gold shirts were supposed to have come in with phasers set on stun. Though they came armed with their “fancy heaters,” they also came armed with heavy hitters. A full fledge war was taking place outside the hanger, with grenades, machine guns, anti aircraft weapons, and anti tank weapons. Garcia would learn later that, the two latter were appropriated from the base itself. The red and gold shirts were enjoying a modest success, due impart to their surprise, simultaneous attack. However, the training and skills of the soldiers would eventually see them triumph, and because the red and gold shirts had penetrated into the base much further than they

were supposed to, Garcia knew that none of them were likely to escape with their lives. Their deaths would be Garcia's fault. His fault for underestimating their abilities in temporarily taking over a portion of the base and trusting they would follow orders and fall back. It was his fault for not clearly defining their roles as a "diversionary" tactic only, not a suicide run on the base itself. He had less sympathy for the soldiers, mostly because they were trained, and, by wearing the uniform they understood the rules of the game. True, the rules of the game were played by almost every Iotian, but Garcia could still draw a line between civilians and soldiers, even if those civilians carried weapons and wore paramilitary uniforms. He would not have been surprised to find that the soldiers and the civilians were actually enjoying "the game."

Garcia came around the corner to find himself confronted by an officer.

"Hey?" the officer demanded. "Why haven't you gotten her to the shelter yet?"

"On my way, sir," Garcia said.

"Wait a minute," the officer said. "Your voice sounds familiar..."

Garcia thrust Munoz into the officer's hand, and instinctively the man held her firm as opposed to letting her drop to the floor. With his hands free, Garcia punched the man in the face, causing him to stagger back towards the wall. Surprisingly, the officer still didn't let the captive fall. Garcia hit the man a second time. The officer's head hit the back of the wall. He slid to the floor, dazed. As the officer slid to the floor Garcia executed a Vulcan nerve pinch and recovered Munoz.

Just beyond the door was the hanger. Opposite side of the hanger was Brittney. Soldiers and their dogs had the hanger secured. Brittney, stealth mode active, walked across the hanger to join Garcia. The dogs whined as she went by.

"Britney," Garcia said. "Stop. Create a diversion by emitting a frequency that will enrage the dogs. Also, free them of their leashes."

In a matter of moments, attack dogs were running around crazy, snapping at their trainers and the soldiers. It was a small bit of chaos which would have been fun to watch in other circumstances, but Garcia didn't have the time. He entered the hanger and walked calmly and boldly right up to one of the aircrafts he had admired earlier. Even amidst the chaos, Garcia was observed, but he had walked with such determination and purpose, that no one even questioned the fact that he belonged on the base.

One of the soldiers nearer to Garcia drew a weapon aimed at Garcia and fired. The dog that had been about to attack Garcia dropped to the floor. Garcia nodded. The soldier saluted.

"Hey, you just shot my dog!" one of the trainers said. "Don't shoot the dogs!"

"But..." the soldier began.

"Just help get them back in their cages, dumb ass," the trainer said.

Garcia secured Munoz into the rear seat of the aircraft and then secured himself into the cockpit.

"Hey, what about me?" Brittney asked.

"Take the one across the hanger. Hurry," Garcia said, having no intentions of leaving his HROV behind.

Activating systems on the aircraft drew attention to him and a few of the soldiers began to ask the right questions. One of them pointed towards Garcia, and was no doubt about to say "stop him!" but before the words got out one of the dogs leaped up and bit the guy's finger off. He staggered back in pain, cursing. A fellow soldier found the whole thing rather humorous and started to laugh. The soldier with the missing finger turned and slugged the mirthful soldier.

Garcia fired up the engine. In a closed hanger, it was deafening, making coherent communications impossible. It merely added to the chaos. Someone opened fire with a projectile weapon and a soldier next to him hit him, tried explaining something about shooting at suits, but the comment was all lost in the cacophony erupting. Besides, the shooter also failed to realize that some other soldiers were already advancing on the aircraft and by shooting towards the aircraft he could have killed one of their own.

Across the hanger, another aircraft fired up its engines. The thrust hit the hangar doors and started a whirl wind of dust and debris. Both aircraft rose vertically from the floor and met at the far end of the hanger. They both turned towards the opposite end of the hanger, and launched torpedoes towards the hangar doors. When the smoke and debris cleared, the aircrafts departed the hanger.

"Scully, order the red and gold shirts to retreat. The mission is over," Garcia said.

“But what about you?” Scully asked.

“I’m safe,” he answered. “Order the retreat and I’ll provide cover.”

A red shirt aimed a shoulder launched missile at one of the hovering aircraft. Brittney apprised Garcia of the situation, and Garcia was forced to shoot the man before he could fire. “And Scully, tell them not to fire any more anti aircraft missiles. They were only supposed to use stun weapons. Full retreat.”

“They’re not responding to the retreat,” Scully said.

“Incoming aircraft,” Brittney announced.

“Oh, bloody hell,” Garcia snapped. “Brittney, follow me. Right wing.”

“Tam, what’s going on?” Munoz asked.

“I’m trying to get my help to retreat,” Garcia said. “They failed to follow orders, penetrated the base further than they were supposed to, and they’re using lethal force for their own agendas. Damn it! You idiots are going to get yourselves killed.”

Seven aircraft descended on the base, executing a strafing run.

“Can you handle a little flight stress?” Garcia asked Munoz.

“Probably not,” Munoz said. “And there are no barf bags. Just get us out of here.”

Garcia wanted to look her in the face, but the seat straps prevented him from turning around. “I will if you make that an order, but you should know I got these people into this. I owe it to them to at least try and even the odds.”

Munoz moaned, reclining her head a little. She understood, and in her weakened state, she was a bit hesitant to make a decision. “And this is another reason why we don’t violate the prime directive, Tam. We shouldn’t be in this position,” she said. “Alright, even the playing field. Take out their aircraft and any ground batteries. Then get us out of here.”

And on that, Garcia banked and descended on the base, coming straight at the seven aircraft as they prepared to do another strafing run. Brittney maintained her wingman position as if she were an ace fighter pilot, but in truth, Garcia was controlling both planes, via his implant and his aircraft radio to maintain contact with Brittney. He spoke to her so as to keep her calm and distracted from asking too many questions or going off on regular Brittany tangents.

Garcia launched a missile and scored a direct hit on the lead enemy target. The remaining enemy crafts broke their run, each parting in new directions as Garcia and Brittney blew through their formation.

“They’re trying to contact us,” Brittney observed, via tricorder.

Garcia tuned a second radio to the appropriate frequency, catching the tail end of a query. “Just who in hell’s side are you on?!”

“Break off your attack,” Garcia said, wincing as he heard the tell tale signs of someone being sick at their stomach. He would not be able to smell it, thanks to the suit he was wearing, but he had sympathetic memories of the smell. “You’re firing on civilians.”

“Civilians with guns trying to capture a base, hello!” the response came back.

“Break off your attack and leave this area, or I will be forced to take you out,” Garcia said.

“Tam,” Brittney said. “Four and five o’clock. They have tone.”

“Got them,” Garcia said. “Go right.”

She went right and Garcia went straight up. One of the three veered off, going for Brittney, while the other two followed Garcia straight up. Garcia killed his thrust, giving a moment of weightlessness as he spun his craft so that it faced the ground, and then went back to full thrust, raining bullets as he accelerated past the two. The two were forced to veer off without firing for fear of being taken out by the potential debris if they scored.

“Hot damn,” someone shouted. “This guy is F’n crazy!”

Munoz wanted to agree, but she wasn’t feeling well enough to speak. She felt the restraints digging into her as Garcia pulled them out of the dive, forcing it over so that the left wing pointed at the ground to give him clearance between a hanger and a flight control tower. As he shot between the hangers he hit the over drive and purposely broke the sound barrier, shattering every piece of glass in the tower. As he climbed, he pulled up behind the aircraft that was firing on Brittney’s ship and fired a missile. The enemy banked,

launching chafe. The missile missed, but the pilot banked his aircraft right into Garcia's flight path, allowing Garcia to take him out with bullets.

"Oh, god," Munoz managed. "I don't think I can take much more of this."

Brittney locked on to several tanks rolling into position and took them out as Garcia followed the remaining aircraft on radar.

"Tam, our teams are retreating," Scully said.

"Oh, really," Garcia said, unable to resist sarcasm. "What got them to change their minds?"

"Probably that sonic boom as you buzzed the tower," Scully said. "We'll meet you at the rendezvous point."

"Copy," Garcia said. "Brittney, on me. We're out of here."

"Copy," Brittney said. "I can't wait to see this on the big screen. I think we'll blow top gun out of the sky."

"Does she think this is a movie?" Munoz asked.

"The upgrades I made to her personality matrix can't assimilate actually doing harm to another living person," Garcia said. "In order to achieve compliance without a complete systems failure, it was necessary to alter her perception of reality, to a minor degree."

"You lied to her," Munoz said.

"It's a machine," Garcia said.

"Don't tell me you never read Arthur C Clarke's 2001 and 2010 Space Odysseys," Munoz said. "Do you remember what came out of lying to a computer?"

Garcia was impressed by her Earth trivia, but before he could respond, his HROV hailed him.

"Um, Tam?" Brittney said. "We're being pursued."

"I see them," Garcia said. "Maintain your current heading and speed. Slowly start losing altitude. I'm going to pull ahead far enough to get beyond their radar, and then come up behind them."

"Understood," Brittney said.

Garcia punched it, accelerating his craft to its max thrust, and when he was sure he was out of their radar field, he descended to ground level, banked, and shot full throttle back in the direction he had come. A moment after the enemy passed over head, he climbed suddenly, like a great white attacking a seal. He established tone, fired a missile and then moved to the next target in line, firing bullets.

The missile struck, just as they were about to break formation. Sheer luck caused the target to veer into a second target as the target's flight controls failed. Both went spiraling to their end. One of the pilots managed to eject the canopy. Garcia's doggedly pursued his second choice, firing constantly until it finally burst into flames and fell out of the sky. Meanwhile, Brittney had circled back to join the fight and managed to score another hit. The remaining enemy fighter had managed to get behind Garcia and was pursuing with a fierceness that suggested revenge was at hand. Garcia's evasive maneuvers were doing a number on Munoz. She was in pain, coughing severely, probably from trying not to vomit more, which only caused her coughs to erupt into gags. He had tremendous sympathy for her condition, but there was little he could do.

Brittney pulled in behind the enemy only to discover she was out of ammo.

Garcia cursed. He was simply unable to break away from the pilot pursuing him. The tone associated with a weapons lock kept cycling on and off as Garcia tried to stay out of the enemy's line. He was in spiraling descent, which was the only thing keeping the enemy from firing. If the enemy fired now, centrifugal force from the g's they were pulling in the spiral would cause his missile to go astray. Two missiles had already been fired and had been wasted. Unfortunately, the ground was coming up fast and Garcia was running out of options.

"Garcia." It was Brittney and she was sounding very serious. "Do you know I love you?"

"Oh, god," Munoz said, and threw up.

"Yes," Garcia said. "I know."

"Do you think Ho Remotely Operated Vehicles go to heaven?" Brittney asked.

"I don't have time to engage you in philosophical banter," Garcia snapped.

"I know," Brittney said. "Over riding safety protocols. Good bye, Garcia. And good luck."

Garcia was surprised that she could over ride his over ride, and was further surprised to discover that he was suddenly unable to get control back. Brittney accelerated her ship into the fighter in front of her. The two collided, wedged together somehow, and spun into the ground where they both disintegrated into a huge fireball.

“Bloody hell,” Garcia cursed, circling the crash site.

“Tam?” Munoz asked, softly.

“The cell phone keeps losing a signal, and I can’t get anything with the aircraft communications system,” Garcia said.

“Tam,” Munoz said more than asked, even more softly, and partly because she just didn’t have the strength to give much more.

“I think I can land in that clearing...” Garcia began.

“Tam, she’s gone,” Munoz said. “Let her go.”

Garcia’s increased the grip on the joystick, circling several more times. It was just a machine, he reminded himself. He brought the aircraft out of the turn. Below them the moon broke through a partly cloudy sky, casting a bluish silvery look over the ocean. Garcia followed the shoreline, looking for his reference point, and then turned out to sea.

“Are you doing okay?” Munoz asked.

“Yeah,” Garcia answered, his voice not very convincing.

Six more aircraft appeared on his radar, converging on him. He struggled with his urge to simply give up. Unfortunately, too many people, and one machine, had already died to simply just quit. That and it was his job to save the Captain. He steeled himself for another attack, knowing full well that he didn’t have sufficient fuel for another drawn out air battle.

“Unidentified aircraft.” The voice was feminine, but no less intimidating as she assessed the situation. “This is Lt. Col. Mackenzie of the USS Enterprise. Are you receiving me on this frequency?”

“Sara?” Garcia asked. “The one who wanted to shoot down my 737 Sara?”

“The one and only. Would you happen to be Tammas Garcia?” Lt. Bell asked.

“Yes, I would be,” Garcia said.

“In that case, Captain Eggers sends his compliments and wants to know if you would like a military escort to your destination?” Captain Mackenzie asked.

“I’m going to need some more fuel,” Garcia said, relaxing a bit.

“That can be arranged. If you will follow us, we’ll take you in the rest of the way,” Mackenzie said.

“Thank you, Captain,” Garcia said.

Munoz reclines back. “Do you have a girlfriend in every port?” she asked.

“No,” Tammas said. “More like two or three.”

Munoz laughed herself into another round of being sick.



## CHAPTER TWENTYONE

Garcia's secret base was an abandoned oil rig, far enough out at sea that land was not visible, even on the clearest of days at its upper most point. Garcia landed his aircraft on the helicopter pad. As soon as the canopy opened, Osaka was there, along with the doctor and several officers to help carry the stretcher they had brought to take the Captain away.

Garcia removed his helmet and counseled with the Doctor. "According to her charts, her electrolytes are way off, and her blood sugar levels are elevated. I suspect that the Iotian transporter may have altered some of her genes, but without a medical tricorder, I can't confirm it."

"Well, if that's so, there are obviously enough healthy cells remaining to keep her alive," the doctor said.

"Many of the symptoms suggest it might just be an inner ear issue, because she seems to get worse when she stands," Garcia offered.

"I'll monitor it from here," The Doctor said. "Thank you, Ensign."

The doctor and his assistance took the Captain away. Osaka, and the remaining officers, turned to Garcia.

"I'm placing you under arrest," Osaka said. "Come with me."

"I really need to get back to my commune," Garcia said. "Any further delay in keeping me off camera brings my group under suspicion, and they would be subject to retaliation."

"You should have thought about that before violating the prime directive and then rescuing us," Osaka said. "You are a complete menace to society, theirs and ours, and I'm not letting you go back. Just how many people died in this little mad operation of yours?"

"I haven't got a total number of deaths indirectly linked to the rescue," Garcia said. "However, I am fairly confident that I am directly responsible for the deaths of twenty two people and a minimum of 120 casualties. I will need to analyze Brittney's data down loaded to the super computer to give you a more accurate count."

"You say it like you're just garbling out statistics!" Osaka said. "Don't you have any feeling for the people you killed and injured?"

"Your question called for a citation of known facts, not for an emotional appeal or philosophical rationalization for what I've done," Garcia said, simply.

"You're a complete monster," Osaka said. "You should have left well enough alone and waited for Star Fleet to come and beam us out, or negotiate our release. Twenty three dead and a hundred plus injured?!"

"Again, that's just me directly, without taking into account the death toll that the red and gold shirts inflicted on the soldiers, or the number of red and gold shirts killed while attacking the base," Garcia reminded him. "I am responsible for that as well, seeing how I ordered the attack as a diversion."

Osaka fumed, unable to comment right away. "We don't have a brig, so I expect you to comply with our imposed confinement out of respect for my authority. Come with us."

"I can not comply at this time," Garcia said.

"There are two ways we can do this, my way, or the hard way. You know this routine, don't you?" Osaka said.

Garcia fumed, his fists clenching. "I believe, if you talk to the Captain, you will find that she supports my mission."

"The Captain appears to be incapacitated," Osaka said. "That means I'm in charge and I'm losing patience with you."

"I have to go back, at least to get Niki and make sure she's safe," Garcia said.

"You shouldn't have brought her down here in the first place, you moron!" Osaka snapped. "And how dare you put her on local television!!! Not only have you further jeopardize her safety, but you've made her out to be your little whore and for what, rating and profits?"

"You just crossed the line," Garcia said.

"You're going to be lucky if you don't do jail time after this court martial," Osaka said.

"You don't understand," Garcia said.

Osaka's chosen officers spread out. "I understand completely. You want to do this the hard way. It will be my pleasure to kick your ass, you pompous, piece of shit. Or, should I just call you Admiral?!"

"Commander, you're a reasonable person," Garcia said, his hands going up into the "I surrender" gesture, which is also the best defense posture to ward off a punch. "Let's negotiate this. Surely you can see the logic in me returning to the post I set up, in order to maintain the appearance of normalcy until which time Star Fleet is able to rescue us."

"Garcia, this is your last chance to stand down and surrender peacefully," Osaka said.

"Good, cause I'm tiring of your idle threats. Bring it on," Garcia said, his open hands curving into fists.

Osaka nodded and the fight commenced and all four engaged at once. The fight stopped at the sound of Captain Munoz's voice. The men, all injured except Garcia, wearily backed away from what could have appeared to have been just a simple sparring match amongst friends; Klingon friends in a fight to the death.

"I called you all to attention!" Munoz snapped, leaning on Doctor Simmons. "And I expect your compliance or you'll all be on report."

They all lined up according to rank, eyes forward.

"We have enough problems without fighting within the ranks. And I'm too damn tired to put up with this crap," Munoz said. "Garcia, you will be returning to your Star Fleet Singers. I don't know enough to know if what you are doing is helpful or not, but I am certain the message you are giving them is a good one."

"Captain!" Osaka said. "He's clearly violated the prime directive, and no doubt violated sixteen rules of conduct and protocol, from blowing up our ship to this unsanctioned rescue operation, and just now assaulting three officers, myself included."

"They were torturing and killing our people, one by one, in hopes of gleaning information about our technologies," Munoz said. "I sanctioned the rescue so that there would still be someone to rescue. As for the rest, we'll worry about cleaning up this mess once we're rescued. For now, he needs to keep up the illusion and we need to stay hidden. Is that clear?"

"Aye," Osaka said.

"And Garcia," Captain Munoz turned to him. "You were out of line not complying with Osaka's request. This whole matter could have easily been resolved by discussing it with me. That behavior is inexcusable and treasonous, and tantamount to mutiny. This will go on your file. You will follow orders or I'll have you drummed out of Fleet so fast you will set a new warp speed record. Do you hear me?"

"Aye, Captain," Garcia said, lightly.

"What?!" Munoz said.

"I said, Aye, Captain," Garcia repeated, louder.

Captain Munoz shrugged off the doctor's assistance and stepped forward to Garcia. "Make sure you understand this. There has been enough death on this planet and I expect you to go out of your way to make sure no more deaths can be pointed at Star Fleet. Are we clear?"

"Crystal, blue," Garcia said.



Garcia landed his aircraft on the Enterprise, changed clothes, met for a moment with Captain Eggers and Lt. Bell to thank them, and then was beamed via Iotian military back to his place in New Newyork. Kletsova, roused by the noise of the Iotian transporter beam, stood and greeted Garcia affectionately. More affectionately than he was use to from her, but it did help ease the pain of the Iotian transport

"I was beginning to get worried," Kletsova said, kissing him again. When he didn't return the affection, or even resist it, she examined him for injuries. "What's wrong?"

"I'm just tired," Garcia said, stepping directly into the shower and drenching himself. He wondered if he even needed the ruse of coming out of the bathroom wet. Did the President and military know it was he that rescued the hostages? No, he convinced himself, or they would already have him in custody. But then again, they had Brock somewhere, and knowing him, Brock would have sold out his own mother to save his neck. "Just tired. Wet your hair. We've been in the shower, remember."

Kletsova stuck her head in the shower and wet her hair. She shook it out and looked back to Tam, who was leaning against the cabinet, eyes closed.

“Well, come on. Let’s get you out of this and into something more appropriate,” Kletsova said.

Garcia complied by stripping out of the clothes Captain Eggers had given him in exchange for the ‘suit’ he had commandeered. There were very few soldiers that were promoted to suit status, Eggers had explained. That was partly due to the fact that the suits were the best of the best, but also because they had reached a threshold of transporter use, meaning there was irreparable damage done to their physiology, damage that forced them to live out their days in the suit. This was how Eggers had explained the bravery of the suits, even the flat out suicidal tendencies. These men were already dead, they just wanted one more piece of the action before they were taken completely out of the game.

Thanks to the suit, and the bullet proof vest, Garcia had avoided several fatal injuries. But he didn’t get away without bruises. He had several bruises over his chest, back, and one on the back of his thigh.

“Oh, Tam,” Kletsova began.

“It’s alright,” Garcia said. “I’m coping. The crew is safe. Couldn’t locate Brock, though.”

He slipped a towel around him, intending to return to his room to put on fresh clothes. Then he decided to wash his hands, and tied the towel into place.

“Oh, I’m sure Brock is fine. Living it up on some franchise he just opened,” Tatiana said.

Garcia washed his hands and his face, turned off the water, and accepted the towel Kletsova offered him to dry his hands and face. He set the towel down, turned on the water and started to repeat the process.

“Tam?” Kletsova asked.

Garcia forced himself to stop. He opened the door and went to his room, started to go to the dresser, but instead took the ten paces to his bed and fell into it, face down. Kletsova sat next to him on the bed, massaging his shoulders.

Garcia heard the knock on the door and couldn’t even remember if he had left it open or not. “Come,” Garcia said.

Trini and Lenar entered. “I’ve made breakfast. Do you feel like eating? The two of you must be starving after last night,” Trini said, a mischievous smile on her face.

“I think I should probably get some rest now,” Garcia told them.

“Are you kicking us out?” Lenar asked.

“Um, no, I suppose if you want, you could stand there while I sleep,” Garcia said.

With the aid of Kletsova’s massage, Garcia was instantly out. When she was certain that he was asleep, she got up and went to her room to get some sleep as well. Garcia slept a good fourteen hours before they saw him up and about again.



Garcia stumbled into the kitchen and was greeted by Trini with a hug. “Do you want some breakfast?”

“Yes, please,” Garcia said, sitting down at the table. “Where is everyone?”

“Lenar and Tatiana are in the study, and Niki is still in her bed,” Trini said. “She’s not feeling well this morning.”

Garcia was up in an instant and went to Niki’s room. He knocked and entered when he heard her call. Niki looked up from her pillow and offered a faint smile, a book lay open face down beside her. Garcia sat beside her on the bed, touching her forehead. Kletsova and Lenar heard the knocking from the study and joined Trini by Niki’s door.

“What’s going on?” Garcia asked.

“I just don’t feel well,” Niki said. “I’m sure it’s nothing. My stomach has kind of been unsettled for a couple days now. Figured it’s stress.”

“I need more information,” Garcia said, taking hold of her wrist with his thumb and middle finger to feel and count her pulse. “Trini, do we have a thermometer?”

“I think I saw one in the medicine cabinet,” Trini said, departing to go check.

“My stomach hurts,” Niki said.

“How does it hurt? Is this normal monthly cycle hurt, or something new?” Garcia asked.

“It’s not that time of the month,” Niki said, blushing, looking away.

“I’m a Doctor, Niki,” Garcia said. “Don’t be embarrassed to tell me anything. When did you first notice discomfort?”

Trini returned with a thermometer, opening the package for the first time. She removed it from the box and aimed it at Niki and pulled the trigger. "I don't think it's working," Trini said.

Garcia took the device and examined it. "Does it come with instructions?"

"Oh!" Trini said, laughing. She found the instruction insert from the box and read it. "Put plastic cover over the tip, insert into ear canal, and then pulled the trigger..."

"The ear canal?" Lenar asked. "Why would you check the temperature of the ear canal?"

"It will give us a sufficient reading to discern if she has a fever. Where are the plastic tips?" Garcia asked.

"I don't know," Trini said, shaking the box to confirm it was empty.

"Maybe they're sold separately?" Kletsova asked.

"Damn merchandizing crazy people," Garcia complained. He placed the thermometer in Niki's ear and pulled the trigger. "101 Fahrenheit."

"How do we know that's accurate," Kletsova said. "If the plastic tips are compulsory, you could be getting an erroneous reading."

Garcia stuck the thermometer in his own ear, pulled the trigger, and read the thermometer. He compared the reading with the temperature reading his neural implant offered him. "It's accurate," Garcia said.

"So, you have a fever, too?" Lenar asked, reading the number on the thermometer.

"No, that's my normal temp," Garcia said.

"So, what are the plastic tips for?" Kletsova asked.

"Perhaps to keep from passing germs from ear to ear," Garcia said.

"So, if she had an ear infection, you now have it," Trini said. "That was smart."

"None the less, we confirmed that her temperature is above normal," Garcia said. "Trini, bring her some water, or any clear liquids, with ice, and a straw. Lenar, bring me a bowl of cool water and a wash cloth."

"Do you think its something I ate?" Niki asked.

"If it was just an upset stomach, maybe," Garcia said. "Your body is obviously fighting something off."

The doorbell rang. "I got it," Kletsova said and departed to get the door.

"Sit up for a moment," Garcia said. He put his ear to her chest and asked her to breathe. He repeated this, placing his ear in various places on her chest and then on her back, and then had her lay down. He then asked permission to touch her stomach. He lowered the blanket and did a cursory exam, but she made no complaints. He covered her back up. "Have you eaten anything today?"

"No," Niki said. And then her face lit up as a guest entered her room. "Susana!"

Garcia turned to see Susana Hoffs behind them. She went right to Niki and hugged her. "So, feeling a bit under the weather, are you?"

"Oh my god, Susana. Look at your hair. You look so Eighties!" Niki said, her voice going up an octave. She no longer seemed ill.

"Why thank you!" Susana said, touching the ends of her hair coyly.

"I am so happy to see you!" Niki said. "I keep needling Tam to call you, but..."

"But, you guys are busy busy busy," Susana said. "How are you, Tam? You look exhausted."

"Really? Perhaps I need a new make up artist," Garcia jested.

"Unless that's the look you're going for," Susana said.

Trini entered with a tray. Water, lemonade, white grape juice. Lenar had a bowl of water with a wash cloth. Garcia took the latter, dipped the cloth, wrung it out over the bowl, and proceeded to wipe Niki's forehead.

"So, what brings you by?" Trini asked.

"I wanted to see you all," Susana said. "Alright, no lies, I mostly wanted to see Tam. I was hoping maybe you would like to spend the day with me. You can be on the set and watch as we shoot a music video and we could do lunch and..."

"I'm sorry," Garcia said. "I'm really too tired..."

“Actually, maybe you need to get out,” Trini said. “Have some fun to wipe out some of your stress.”

“And who’s going to take care of Niki?” Tam asked.

“Oh, my, Trini, he right,” Kletsova said, not a little trace of sarcasm in her tone. “Because lord knows none of us have ever been around sick people, or been minimally trained in first aid. Why, we’re so lucky to have you here, Tam. Or, should I call you Atlas, because you’re holding the whole world up all by yourself.”

Garcia nearly unleashed on Kletsova, but Niki touched his arm. “Tam, I’ll be okay. Really, I want you to go spend the day with Susana. I want you to have a good adventure so you can tell me about it and I can live vicariously through you. And when you get back, maybe you will read that story to me again.”

“The Princess Bride, again?” Kletsova moaned.

“But it’s the best story ever told!” Niki declared. “At least it is when Garcia reads it.”

“I put it on video for you,” Garcia said. “It’s archived, and you can access it with your portable. I think you’ll like this remake. You and I are the leads.”

Niki sat up and hugged Garcia. “I love you,” Niki said.

“I love you, too. Now, stay in bed, rest up. Trini, bring her some toast, lightly buttered, and if she holds that down, later on, bring her a bowl of tomato soup, and a grilled cheese sandwich,” Garcia instructed. He kissed Niki’s forehead and stood.

“Wow,” Susana said. “If I ever get sick, I know who I want as my doctor. So, Tam, are you with me?”

“Yes,” Garcia said, taking her hand. He wasn’t sleepy tired, just restless tired, and he knew the best thing for him would be to get out and walk and just be. “Should I change?”

“You’re fine,” Susana said. “I was hoping you might take me on a tour of your starship, but we’re a bit pressed for time. We need to get to the studio.”

“Alright, let’s go,” Garcia said. To Kletsova he said, “Call me if any of you need anything or her condition changes.”

“Go,” the commune said, practically pushing him out the door.



The chauffeur’s face fills most of the screen. He is wearing dark shades, perhaps going for the Men in Black look, or maybe a farce of the Blues Brothers. The shades cover his eyes and eyebrows, but there is something about the face that can’t be disguised. Familiar frown lines draw the attention of any who gaze upon the face, giving each person pause as if the face echoed something deep within their psyche, as if the face had touched us with telepathy, a sharing of peace, logic, and love. The camera cuts to the chauffeur’s hands. We see him engage the radio. Music immediate begins to play. We see the rearview mirror. Garcia is distracted by Susana, a coy smile aimed at him. Is it for him, he wondered, or would anyone in the audience be instantly drawn to her. Close up on the chauffer again. He dramatically removes the shades, removing all doubt from Garcia’s mind.

“Spock!” Garcia shouts.

“Cut!” the director yells. “Would someone get him off the set? This is a closed set, isn’t it?”

“He’s with me,” Susana says. “Can you give me a moment?”

“Everyone take ten,” the director says, and storms off.



The set exploded with activity as the director departed the set in a huff. Camera men took time to adjust their lighting, make up artist moved in on the Bangles, and the boom operator raised the mic. Susana side stepped around her assigned make up artist heading for Garcia. Garcia was trying to get around security to get to Spock before he left the set. Garcia grabbed his arm.

“Wait! Spock, please,” Garcia said.

The man playing the Bangle’s chauffer turned and looked Garcia right in the face. “I am not Spock,” he snapped. “I just played him on TV. Can you not separate the two concepts in your head?”

Garcia withdrew his hand and reigned in on his emotions. “I am so sorry,” Garcia said. “I was out of line.”

Susana was suddenly beside him, taking Garcia by the arm. “Tam, this is Leonard Nemoy. Mr. Nemoy, this is Tammis Garcia.”

“Ms. Hoffs,” Nemoy said. “I appreciate the fact that you want to bring your boyfriend to work with you, but our agreement was that I would do this video only if this was a closed set. No Star Conquerors fanatics allowed.”

“Again, I am sorry about the outburst,” Garcia said. “I just. I saw you. I was reminded of home. I’m sorry.”

Garcia pulled free of Susana and walked away.

“That was rather rude,” Susana snapped at Nimoy. “He’s probably one of your greatest fans, and he has single handedly revitalized everything about you and that clumsy old show of yours, putting a humanitarian spin on it that Gene so long ago tried to show the world but was denied by the corporations, who I might add, are still reaping a profit off your show that you will never see a penny of because they didn’t write you in on the syndication rights. For you to go and just stomp on him like that is horrible. In fact, if it wasn’t for his admiration of your work, I wouldn’t have specifically asked for you to be in this video. Don’t you get the message we’re trying to send? You’re a part of that. He’s a part of that! You two are a lot alike and if you would just take a moment and listen to him, you would see that you two have so much in common. Reading poetry about whales to classical music. That’s you. That’s him. Only, he really swims with the whales, doesn’t just read poems to them.”

And with that, Susana stormed off in search of Garcia. Debbi knew who Susana was looking for, and reached out to touch her arm as she passed by. Debbi pointed to the dressing room. Susana nodded. The dressing room door was slightly ajar, so she pushed her way in without knocking. She watched Garcia wash his hands with a bar of soap. He dried his hands, opened up another fresh bar of soap, and began washing his hands again. After she had watched him unwrapping a third bar of soap, Susana approached him.

“Are you okay?” Susana asked.

“Yes,” Garcia said. “Just tired. Maybe it wasn’t a good idea that I came with you today.”

“Nonsense,” Susana said, touching his arm. “I did this for you. I knew you have been looking for him and I really thought the two of you would hit off. I’m sorry. I should have told you.”

Garcia dried his hands and reached for another bar of soap. Susana interrupted him by taking his hands into hers. “Tam, what are you doing?”

“I,” Garcia began, and actually broke down into tears. “I’m out of control. I don’t know what to do. He doesn’t know it, but it is him. I’m not crazy. I know it’s him. And at the same time it’s not him. None of this makes any sense. But I’m not crazy.”

“Shhh,” Susana said, pulling him to her. “Of course you’re not crazy. Hey, it’s okay. I’m okay, you’re okay, and everything is going to be okay. We’ll figure this out together. You and I are going to be okay. Now, do you think you can suffer hearing my song one more time while we try to get a few of these takes in?”

Garcia nodded, and she beamed happily up at him, kissing him lightly. “Good. As soon as the director’s satisfied, we’ll sneak away from your cameraman, and go get some food. Just you and me. The rest of the world will just have to spend one night without Tammis Garcia. Okay?”

“Okay,” Garcia said, wanting to let go and allow someone else be in charge for awhile. “I’m sorry.”

“For what, honey?” Susana asked.

“For being weak,” Garcia said. “In front of your friends and associates. On TV.”

“That’s what being human is all about,” Susana assured him. “Come on.”

They returned to the set. Vicki handed Garcia a drink and patted him on the shoulder. They took their places and the music was started once again. “Going Down to Liver Pool,” by the Bangles, video guest star, Leonard Nemoy:

Hey now...  
Where you going with that load of nothing in your hand  
I said: Hey now...  
All through this green and pleasant land.

I'm going down to Liverpool to do nothing  
I'm going down to Liverpool to do nothing

I'm going down to Liverpool to do nothing  
All the days of my life  
All the days of my life.

Hey there...  
Where you going with that UB40 in your hand  
I said: Hey there...  
All through this green and pleasant land.

I'm going down to Liverpool to do nothing  
I'm going down to Liverpool to do nothing  
I'm going down to Liverpool to do nothing  
All the days of my life  
All the days of my life.

Hey now  
Where you going with that UB40 in your hand  
I said: Hey now  
All through this green and pleasant land.

I'm going down to Liverpool to do nothing  
I'm going down to Liverpool to do nothing  
All the days of my life  
All the days of my life.

After the final shot for the day, Susana and Garcia quietly slipped out a back door, down a side lot, out through security, and jumped on a public bus that was just about to leave. The two of them quickly made their way to the back of the bus, falling into a chair, laughing, and looking around to make sure no camera had caught them. Susana hugged him.

“Oh, god, Tam,” Susana said. “You make me feel so young. It’s like I’m back in high school.”

“It is kind of fun escaping the camera,” Garcia said.

They exited the bus downtown, New Manhattan, walked the streets hand in hand. They visited a toy store, danced on the giant keyboard that lit up with their weight, shot at each other with nerf dart guns, and tried on a few of the masks. They ate dinner at a Chinese Restaurant, they went ice skating at the outdoor rink, they bought a loaf of bread and a carton of ice cream and two spoons, and went to the park where they fed the bread to the ducks and the pigeons while eating the ice cream. They stayed there until the bread and ice cream was gone, watching the sun set. After that, Garcia and Susana walked leisurely, arms linked, her head on his shoulder. When they arrived at her apartment building, she got in front of him, looking up into his eyes expectantly, holding his hands.

“Would you like to come up?” Susana asked him.

“I would like to,” Garcia said, but he resisted as she took his arm to lead him up.

She turned back to him, her eyes questing to see if he was just being mischievous or perhaps something else was going on. “You have the most amazing eyes I’ve ever seen. Hazel, but every now and then, there’s like a hint of glitter, sparkles... But what’s going on behind those eyes is a mystery. I see you looking at me, sometimes through me, and I think if you declared your intentions towards me I might just be overwhelmed and disappear into you. I am afraid of it and wanting it at the same time.”

“I do all of that to you, eh?” Garcia asked, pushing his palm against hers, mirroring her fingers with his.

“And more,” Susana said, letting her fingers fall between his, gripping his hand, pulling on him playfully to tease him off balance. “Tam, why haven’t you called me?”

“It’s complicated,” Garcia said. “But I assure you, it isn’t from a lack of feelings for you.”

“Okay, that’s good to know. So I am not misreading you,” Susana said. “But, then, why are you hesitating now?”

“You need to know some things about me if we’re to take this to the next level,” Garcia said.

She smiled. "Close your eyes," she said, and waited for him to comply. "Give me your hand, darling."

"You don't have to call me darling, darling," Garcia said.

"You're being silly," Susana said, taking his other hand and directing it to her heart. "Don't you feel my heart beating? Don't you feel the same? You say my name and the sun shines through the rain..."

"You better write this down," Garcia said. "It'll make a hit song one day."

"Be serious," she said.

"I'm always serious," Garcia said.

Susana laughed and fell into him. "You are, aren't you," she said, hugging him. "What do you want to tell me about you that I don't already know?"

"I really am from outer space," Garcia said.

"I'm okay with that," Susana said.

"No, really," Garcia said, moving her back just enough that he could look into her eyes. "You need to go into this knowing that this isn't my home world and I won't be here forever."

"Then you'll take me with you?" Susana asked. "Whereever you go, I'll go."

"Is that what you want?" Garcia asked.

"No, not really. This is my home," Susana said. "I love New NewYork. Give me a chance to make you happy. I'll help you see that what we have right here and right now is better than any fantasy you might have about being out there or being in the future. Right now, Tam, this moment, this is us and all we have. Nothing else exists."

"Though I have many fantasies, my being an alien is not one of them. I'm not delusional. I have other obligations," Garcia said.

Susana stepped backed. "You're married?" she asked.

"Technically, I think so, but," Garcia began, and then grabbed Susana's arm as she started to storm off. "I made no secret that my life is complicated."

"If you're not interested in me, just say so. Stop playing this game," Susana demanded.

Garcia pulled her closer to him. "I am more than interested. My interest in you is so high it's transcendental and at this moment I want nothing more than to be with you," Garcia said.

"Then kiss me," Susana said. "Kiss me like you did that Scully girl."

"That's another thing we need to discuss," Garcia started.

"Please, I'm not jealous of your TV encounters," Susana said. "That's just for ratings."

"What I meant is, there's always a risk that intimacy will induce a psychic bond," Garcia said. "And that brings a whole other level of complications, and obligations, and you need be aware that I have these bonds with several other people. They can't be undone, at least, not easily, and not without consequences."

"You're in love with Niki's mother, aren't you," Susana said.

"No," Garcia said.

"I don't understand what you're telling me," Susana said. "What? You can't be monogamous? You have a thing for green aliens? What?"

"Let's just stay with the easy ones first," Garcia said. "Do you believe me when I say I'm from Earth?"

"According to you, so am I," Susana said.

"You are," Garcia said.

"Damn it, Tam. I was born here. I know my mother and father, and I know my grand parents, and there is no way you can convince me that I am an alien," Susana said. "I am willing to buy into the fact that you may be psychic, because you know some things about me that no one else seems to know, and you have this power over me, but I am not an alien."

"I have no power over you," Garcia said. "You're free to make choices."

"Alright, then I choose to be with you," Susana said. "Come up stairs with me."

"I can't," Garcia said. "Not tonight. And not until I'm convinced you're making this decision with both eyes opened."



"Fine," Susana said. "Prove to me what you're saying."

"Good night, Susanna," Garcia said.

"What, you can prove it to that Scully chick and not to me?" Susana said. "You knew her all of two minutes and you jumped her mind, but you want give me the same opportunity? Prove that what you're saying to me is true!"

"Good night," Garcia said, and turned and walked away.

"I can't believe you're walking away from me!" Susana said, pursuing him. "This doesn't make any sense. You're crazy!"

"We'll talk again later," Garcia said, struggling to stay calm.

"No, there is no later. You either come with me now, or say goodbye forever," Susana said.

"Good bye," Garcia said and walked away.

Susana screamed, fist clenched, and then she ran up the flight of stairs, ran back down as if she were going to pursue Garcia, changed her mind, ran back up the stairs, struggled with her keys, tried to force the door, and then rang all the door bells until someone buzzed her in. She went immediately to her apartment.

After several blocks, Garcia's anger dissolved and he slowed his pace. He started a walking meditation to help sort through his frustration, and tried to reconcile himself that Susanna's unreasonableness came from a lack of understanding. His life was indeed complicated. He recognized he had feelings for her. He also recognized that he didn't have to act on those feelings. Had it just been a playful fling, Garcia wouldn't have had a problem with it, but like Trini, he recognized that Susana had greater expectations than just a mere fling, and he had no intentions of staying, and he wasn't Captain Kirk, he reminded himself. A car pulled closer to the curb and a window rolled down. It was Susana.

"Get in," Susana said.

"I need to walk," Garcia said.

"Tam, get in the car, now," Susana said.

Garcia just kept walking.

"Tam," Susana said, softer. "Your friends have been trying to get a hold of us. Vicki left a message on my recorder saying I need to take you immediately to Memorial Hospital. They've taken Niki there and they need you to sign the medical release forms or something."

Garcia reached for his cell phone, but it was gone. He checked all his pockets, but it was really gone. He cursed himself for being so careless, hopped into the car and Susana accelerated away. On the radio was Star Fleet's version of an old Earth song, "Dream Weaver." He turned it off.

"Hey, I like that song," Susana said.

"Can you go any faster?" Garcia asked.

"I'm going the speed limit," Susana said.

"Aren't there exceptions? Medical emergency clauses or something?" Garcia asked.

"I'll have you there in ten minutes," Susana said.

Garcia hit the dashboard. "I should have stayed with her," he griped.

"Are you saying you regretted spending the day with me?" Susana demanded.

"I didn't say that," Garcia snapped.

"Don't take that tone with me," Susana snapped back.

"You don't understand the pressure I am under. If anything happens to Niki, I will never forgive myself," Garcia said.

"I'm sure she'll be fine," Susana said, again trying to comfort him. She was wavering from being mad at him to loving him, and it was much easier to love him than be mad at him. So, he was a little messed up in the head. Most the people on this planet, she thought, were messed up in the head. Tam, at least, has a good heart, she told herself. You can't fake a good heart. "Memorial has some good doctors."

Hearing that didn't seem to comfort Garcia any, as he started mumbling about butchers and the damned inquisition. It took Susana every bit of ten minutes to arrive at the hospital, and several more minutes for Garcia to be reunited with his friends. Trini was waiting in the Emergency Room's lobby, along with the rest of the Bangles. Mark brought the camera to bear on him.

"Where is she?" Garcia demanded.

“This way,” Trini said, taking his hand and leading him straight way to Niki’s room. “Where have you been? We’ve been trying to call you for hours.”

“I lost my cell,” Garcia admitted. The Bangles were following them around a corner, while Mark was trying to stay ahead.

Kletsova was outside the door and she was wearing a phaser. “Was she worth it?” Kletsova asked, with a slight sneer.

Garcia nearly hit her, but a nurse stepped in between them. “Wait a minute,” Nurse Hudson said. “I can’t let you all go in there. This is a hospital, not a concert hall.”

“What have you done to Niki?” Garcia asked the nurse.

“Nothing,” Kletsova said. “I told them no one touches her until you arrive.”

“Then why did you bring her here?” Garcia snapped.

“I didn’t think it would take you four hours to get here,” Kletsova returned with equal intensity. “Maybe next time you won’t turn off your cell phone.”

“I didn’t turn off my cell phone,” Garcia said.

“Hey!” Trini snapped at both of them. “You’re forgetting we’re here for Niki.”

Doctor Lanciano stepped up. “I’m glad you’re here, Mr. Garcia,” he said. “If you’ll sign these forms, we can get to work on your girl. I’d like to start with some blood work.”

“I’ll be taking over from here, Doctor,” Garcia said.

“Mr. Garcia, I think she may have acute appendicitis,” Doctor Lanciano said.

“You think that, uh?” Garcia asked. “Based on what?”

“She’s maintained a high temp,” Kletsova said. “Blood pressure and heart rate are slightly increased. I have her currently resting in the semi-Fowler position, so if it is appendicitis, it should be able to drain.”

“Good thinking,” Garcia applauded Kletsova.

“So, you both want to play Doctor now?” Doctor Lanciano asked.

“I am a Doctor,” Garcia said.

“Right, and, let me guess, you went to medical school on Earth,” Doctor Lanciano said, sarcastically.

“No, actually, I attended school at the Vulcan Academy of Science,” Garcia said.

“Look, she has pain in the epigastric and periumbilical area, which is symptomatic of appendicitis,” Doctor Lanciano said.

“It could also just be stomach cramps due to a virus or poorly cooked food,” Garcia countered.

“Hey!” Trini said, extremely sensitive to critiques of her cooking.

“Allowing me to do a white blood cell count will rule out viral infections and...” Doctor Lanciano began.

“An elevated WBC count alone is not indicative of appendicitis,” Garcia argued.

“True, but with elevated WBC’s, I can justify performing a laproscopy, where I go in with an endoscope,” Lanciano said.

Garcia steamed. “My god, man! Poking holes in her is not the answer. Her infection has to be treated, the edema reduced, obstructions removed, and the tissue repaired or regenerated.”

“And how do you expect to do that with out surgery? If her appendix is bad, it has to come out,” Doctor Lanciano said.

“It isn’t necessary to butcher people to cure them!” Garcia argued.

“Appendix have no known functions in humans, so removing it does less harm than not removing it,” Doctor Lanciano said.

“Tam,” Kletsova interrupted. “We don’t have access to our 24<sup>th</sup> century medicines. You may have to consider the technology we have available in the here and now.”

“Would you stop encouraging him?!” Susana finally snapped. “Tam, this delusion you have of being from outer space is going to get Niki killed. You need to let this doctor do his job.”

Tam rubbed his forehead. “Alright, Doctor,” Garcia said, ignoring the look of relief on Susana’s face as she believed she was finally reaching him. “I’ll perform the surgery.”

Susana’s jaw dropped.

“No you won’t,” Doctor Lanciano said.

“Doctor, I am a surgeon,” Garcia began.

“Not in my hospital you’re not,” Lanciano said.

“I am a surgeon and Niki’s guardian, and I am responsible for this person’s immediate and long term health care,” Garcia said.

“This is my hospital and I am telling you...” Lanciano began.

“And this is my patient,” Garcia interrupted. “My friends and I are not from this planet, and there are anatomical variations which you are not equipped to handle. Let me save her.”

“You’re not from outer space, Tam,” Susana said.

“You want proof? Do you all want proof?! Here’s proof,” Garcia said, and reached out to the nurse with his right hand. The end of her stethoscope, which had been hanging loosely around her neck, began to levitate. It extended itself towards him. As it slipped off her neck, she reached for it, thinking it would fall, but it pulled free from her hand. It traveled across empty space to Garcia’s hands.

The nurse and the Bangles gasped. “How did you do that?” the nurse asked

“Yeah, Tam,” Kletsova asked. “How did you do that?”

“I have some psionic abilities, one of which is limited telekinesis,” Garcia said.

“Please, any magician can do that,” Lanciano said.

Garcia lifted his pants leg and removed a knife he had concealed in his boot. Before anyone knew what he was going to do with it, he cut a line in his arm. “Tam!” Susana cried out, at first moving towards him and then quickly backing up. She bumped into her friends, watching in confusion as green blood started to flow.

“I’m one quarter Vulcan,” Garcia said. “And the gene for green blood is dominant. Do you want to inspect this wound to determine if I’m telling the truth?”

Doctor Lanciano examined the wound... “Oh my god, you’re really an alien.”

“I am the son of the alien you know as Doctor Leonard H McCoy,” Garcia said, and fell into an impromptu speech, using many of the mannerism Captain James T Kirk might have used. “And I am here to evaluate how to best help your society get to the next stage of development. McCoy left his communicator here and you developed technology that your society wasn’t ready to handle. In truth, you weren’t prepared to handle the technology that the Horizon left you. My people have been trying to help prepare you for the things to come, marvelous, wonderful things, but you keep getting it wrong, and because you have free will, and our society respects freedom more than any other individual quality, the way we’re allowed to interact with you is limited. Right now, though, you are in a position to help me save my friend and that sort of thing does not go unnoticed or even unrewarded. Help me save her.”

Doctor Lanciano nodded. “May I at least assist?”

Garcia nodded his head. “Yes, I would actually appreciate that. Now, I’ll want to speak to the surgical tech, the anesthesiologist, and any other people who will be in the surgery room. Nurse, I am going to want to start an IV, lactic ringer, and I am going to want to see a list of the best antibiotics, including a map of their molecular structure, stat. Doctor, why don’t you go ahead and bandage this,” Garcia said, pointing to the cut on his arm. “And, Mark, get that damn camera out of my face.”

“Are you kidding?” Mark asked. “This is the best stuff ever. Better than the landing of the airplane”

“Just back off a little,” Garcia said.

“Come on,” Kletsova said, herding the Bangles towards the waiting room.

“Wait, Debbi,” Garcia turned to Ms. Peterson. “Is that a PMD?”

“Is what a what?” Debbi asked.

“Is that a portable music device?” Garcia asked

“My ipod?” Debbi asked. “Yes.”

“May I see it?” Garcia asked. He took it, examined it, and scrolled through the song list. “Good selections. May I have this?”

“Sure,” Debbi said.

“Tam, you don’t have time to listen to music,” Kletsova said.

“It’s not for me,” Garcia said. “It’s for Niki. It is a medical fact that patients who listen to music during surgery require fifty percent less anesthesia and heal twice as fast as patients who don’t. The selections need to have a beat of sixty to eighty beats per minute, mimicking the normal heart range,”

“Who are you?” Susanna asked.

“I told you. I am Doctor Tammas Parkin Arblaster-Garcia, a representative of the Federation of Planets, and an Ensign in Star Fleet,” Garcia said.

“Doctor,” the nurse interrupted. “Here is a list of those antibiotics you asked for. Would you like me to start the IV?”

“No, I’ll do it,” Garcia said, looking over the list. He took the nurse’s pen and marked three antibiotics. “Bring me those two, IV push, and the other will be PO starting tomorrow.” PO was medical slang for “by mouth.”

Garcia entered the room and approached Niki. He showed her the IPOD. “Debby loaned this to us,” Garcia said.

“Can I see her?” Niki asked.

“Later, right now, you and I need to talk,” Garcia said.

“No,” she started to cry.

“Niki, I know you’re frightened, and you’re a long way from home, but I am going to take care of you,” Garcia said, caressing her hair. “You believe me, right?”

Niki squeezed Trini’s hand.

“Niki, there’s a good chance you have appendicitis, and what I’m going to do is make a small incision and go inside with a camera and just take a look. If it’s good, no harm done, but if it’s bad, it’s going to have to come out,” Tam said.

“I don’t want surgery,” Niki began.

“I know,” Garcia said. He got up and washed his hands, and then set out the material he needed to start the IV. The Nurse stood by in case he needed anything. He put on some gloves and sat back down on the bed, inspecting her arm for a good vein. “I’m going to start an IV, to help keep you hydrated. Now, I’m going to have to stick you, but I am very good at this, and you won’t feel a thing. Okay?”

Niki nodded, watching everything Garcia did as he explained what he was doing. He advised her to look away, but she refused. She made a noise, not quite a scream, when he stuck her and then sighed heavily. Garcia noted that she seemed much more relaxed than before.

“I feel better already,” Niki said. “Was there a pain killer in that?”

“Doctor!” Garcia said, standing up alarmed. “Lanciano, you need to prep me for surgery now.”

“But I feel better,” Niki protested.

“You’re appendix just ruptured,” Garcia said. “Nurse, secure this IV. Doctor?”

“She’s not in pain anymore?” Lanciano asked, and came to the same conclusion as Garcia. “Nurse Mendez, get Garcia prepped, I’ll be there shortly. Have Doctor Meyers and Fennel report to the OR on the double.”

“Come with me, Doctor Garcia,” Mendez said.

“Tam, I’m scared,” Niki said, reaching towards him.

“Trini, go with her as far as you can,” Tam said. “Niki, start listening to the music. Practice your breathing techniques that I taught you. I promise I will talk to you before you go under. Let’s move, people.”

The doctor began issuing orders, and two new nurses came in to help move her to a gurney. Mendez aided Garcia in getting dressed and scrubbed up, and then led him to the OR room. Niki was there, naked and shivering, even though a warm blanket lay over her. He checked her IV placement and the drip rate.

“How are you holding up,” Garcia asked her.

Niki took the earphones off. “Tam, is this necessary?”

“It is, honey,” Garcia said. “We’re putting something into your IV that will help you relax.”

“It feels cold,” Niki commented.

“In a moment, you’re going to go to sleep, and when you wake up, everything will be okay. I’ll be there when you wake up. One mind, one heart, one thought. We will get through this together. Now, I want you to put the headset back on, and sing along for me,” Garcia said.

Niki nodded, complying with Garcia’s instructions. She began singing the chorus of one of Garcia’s songs. She saw him smile at her, saw him nod to the anesthesiologist, and then she was out. Doctor Lanciano listened and observed as Doctor Garcia performed the surgery. Garcia made an incision seven point five

centimeters long in the right lower quadrant, otherwise known as the McBurney's point. He was relieved to find the appendix so readily available, because an atypical position might have meant making a larger incision. He was also happy to find no peritonitis, for that would have complicated matters even worse, to the point of requiring a nasogastric tube to decompress the stomach and prevent abdominal distention. Niki's appendix was perforated and oozing with infectious materials, that meant it was just a matter of removing the infection and the damaged tissue. The Tammam commune watched the surgery from the observation room above, and Mark captured it all on film.

## CHAPTER TWENTYTWO

Garcia cleaned up after the surgery and then went straight to recovery, where he waited for Niki to come around, assessing her progress every step of the way. She was notably groggy, but she answered questions, and using the stethoscope, he monitored for signs of peristalsis resuming, and checked the drain left in the incision. Satisfied that she was recovering along the normal curve, he moved her to a private room, where he pulled up a chair and continued to monitor her progress.

His commune came in shortly after. "Are you hungry?" Kletsova asked.

"No," Garcia said. "Why don't you all go home and get some rest. I'm not leaving."

Trini put her hands on his shoulders, massaging him lightly. She could see that no one was going to talk him out of leaving. "Tam, you've had a really long day. Long couple of days. At least let us bring you something to eat," Trini said. "My spinach roti perhaps?"

"No, thank you," Garcia said.

"Coffee?" Lenar tried.

Garcia consented. "Black," Garcia said.

"Everything is okay?" Kletsova asked. "It sounded like there were no complications."

"Yes, she should be good. Maybe out of here in two or three days," Garcia said. "Susana?"

"The Bangles went home," Kletsova said.

Garcia nodded, accepting the coffee Lenar brought him. "Now, all of you go home and get some sleep. You can relieve me tomorrow morning about ten."

Trini kissed him good night. Everyone left but Mark, who was setting up a tripod. "Is that really necessary?" Garcia asked.

"Are you kidding? Your show just broke all records in ratings," Mark said. "We're not going to miss a thing."

"Fine, but do me a favor, keep the camera on me, and give my patient some privacy," Garcia said.

"Fair enough," Mark said.

Garcia engaged Mark in a light conversation, a mini interview if you will, that evolved into an esoteric talk on the meaning of life and what sort of things were out there in the Universe. He checked on the patient now and then, but didn't wake her. When the shift nurse came in to take vitals, Garcia chased her out, ranting, "You're not going to wake my patient up from a health generating sleep just to see if she's asleep."

"I got to take vitals," the nurse said, retreating. "Doctor's orders."

"I am her Doctor," Garcia said. A moment after she left, he shook his head, remorseful. He stepped out in the hall and waved her down. "I'm sorry I snapped at you. I was wrong. You were doing your job and you were following the correct procedures, to satisfy hospital policy and insurance guidelines."

"Thank you," the nurse said. "Can I bring you something to eat?"

"No, I'm alright. I just wanted you to know I was sorry," Garcia said. "I noted on her chart that you came in at the appropriate time. Thanks."

Garcia hovered over his patient, paced a little, washed his hands quite a number of times, and then sat on the window ledge, observing the city street below. It looked like it might rain and the street lights were star points in the morning haze. He looked up at the sky wanting to see the stars, couldn't, and then returned to his chair after washing his hands again. The hospital sounded eerily quiet, except for the beeps from the IV machine, and an occasional cough from another room. Though many people might associate the smell of hospitals with cleanliness, Garcia thought it smelt like death. It was the smell of chemical cleaners and sterile plastic that accosted his nose. It was nothing like a modern, Star Fleet regulation sick bay. He did eventually drift off to sleep about seven thirty in the morning, as sounds of traffic began to increase outside the window. It was a monotonous, dull roar of moving vehicles that would have been better for the nerves if it had been ocean waves, but it still lulled Garcia into sleep. He didn't hear Susanna enter. She approached him, memorized the features of his face, wanting to touch him, so peaceful compared to the day before. She whispered, "I watch you while you're sleeping. Do you feel the same?"

"You really love him don't you?"

Susana turned to Niki and smiled. She went to her and brushed her hair with her hand. "How are you feeling?"

“Like crap,” Niki confided. She smiled faintly. “But I know I will be okay.”

“I know so, too,” Susana agreed. “You have someone to watch over you. Tell me, what’s it like out there?”

“In space? It’s not too much different than here,” Niki said. “People live and die, love and hate, there’s general politics and drama, but there’s always hope, and I think, for the most part, people genuinely care about each other and want the best for their friends and families.”

“Is it a Utopia? Paradise?” Susan said.

“Hardly,” Niki said. “I mean, we don’t lack for material comfort, and consequently we’re not forced to spend as much of our days working, or just trying to make ends meet, like people here do. And you know, I think that makes a big difference. It’s just like Tam has told you. Your world is going to change. You’re going to be able to tap into virtually limitless energies, feed and clothe the poor, and money is going to become obsolete. When those types of stressors are gone, those burdens lifted, you’re really going to start shining as a people. The question you have to ask yourself is ‘what are you going to fill all of that free time with?’ Do you want to fill it with music and love and literature, and the betterment of society, or, do you want to continue to divide the wealth up and make it this game where only some people have access, and there’s a class division, which ultimately leads towards resentment and rebellion and retaliation. Treating all people and creatures with respect is a better way to go, but then, it’s your choice.”

“It sounds too hard. Too idealistic,” Susana said. “I hope we can get there.” She looked at Garcia. “I’m going to miss him.”

“He’s still here,” Niki said. “You still have time with him now.”

Garcia stirred and came instantly awake. He went right to Niki. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m hungry,” Niki said.

Garcia laughed and kissed her on the forehead. “Let’s start a bit light. How about some jello?”

“Okay,” Niki said.

Garcia turned to go, but Susana touched his arm. “I’m sorry I didn’t believe you.”

“It’s okay,” Garcia said, returning her touch lightly. “You had no reason to.”

“Kiss him,” Niki said.

They both laughed. “You, young lady, watch way too much television,” Susana said.

“I’ll be right back with your jello,” Garcia said, stepping out into the hall. There were two guards posted at Niki’s door. “Who are you?”

“Compliments of the hospital,” the guard said. “There’s a lot of press and people outside. It’s for your protection.”

Doctor Lanciano approached, followed by two more armed guards.

“Good morning, Garcia,” Lanciano said. “Would you come with me, please?”

“I was going to get Niki something to eat,” Garcia said.

“The nurse will take care of that,” Doctor Lanciano said. “We’re having a staff meeting and I would really like you to attend.”

Garcia nodded. He could guess what this was all about. “Let me just tell Niki,” Garcia said.

The two guards escorting Doctor Lanciano unfastened the straps holding their weapons in their holsters. “Now, Doctor,” Lanciano insisted.

“Is this really necessary?” Garcia asked.

“What did you think would happen the moment you announced on television you were an alien and McCoy’s son to boot?” Lanciano said. “Everyone who ever imagined he was once sick is showing up wanting to be your patient. My entire staff wants to discuss medical procedures with you, so, I want you to come with me, peacefully. I promise, nothing will happen to Niki. I’ve instructed them to allow your friends in, and no one else.”

Garcia evaluated whether or not he could take them, and was confident he could, but then, getting Niki out of here was a bit more problematic, especially if there were people gathering at all the exits for a chance to speak with them. “I guess I have no choice,” Garcia said. “Lead on.”



The conference room was filled to overflowing with medical staff and their own camera crew. Garcia was led to the front of the room and motioned to take the seat at the head of the conference table. The Head Doctor, a neural surgeon by the name of Canon, sitting to the right of Garcia's seat, stood to shake Garcia's hand. Garcia declined the invitation.

Doctor Canon frowned. "Just trying to make this friendly, Doctor Garcia."

"By bringing me here at gun point?" Garcia asked.

"You have to understand our position," Canon said. "We have a hospital to run and patients that need our services. As a physician, surely you can appreciate that?"

"I appreciate it," Garcia said. "And just what do you hope to gain by all this?"

"Answers," Canon said. "Surely Star Fleet's medical technology has improved since the Horizon's visit."

"It has, but I can't share that information with you," Garcia said. "I am honor bound by the Prime Directive..."

Grumbling commenced around the room and someone shouted over the din. "At least tell us how to cure Alzheimer's disease," someone managed to get out over the noise. Then the ruckus really ensued. "Alzheimer's?! We have more important issues than worrying about geriatrics. AIDs is the fastest spreading disease on our planet, and you want to waste time..." "Please, AID's can be controlled through conservative views on procreating, and anyone who gets AIDS deserves what they get for being deviant. Cancer is the most important..."

"Gentleman," Canon pounded the desk. "We will have order in here, or I'll dismiss everyone and have a private counsel with Garcia. Is that understood?"

The grumbling began to die down, until a patient blurted out, "Please, you already have a cure for AID's, you just won't give it up because of the research money you get..." Canon nodded to the guards to escort the patient out. The patient continued to yell as he was dragged away, "Don't give into them, Garcia. AID's was created by them to control the population..."

"Sorry about that, Doctor Garcia," Canon said, a bit flustered. "He's from the psyche ward and you know how they can be. Conspiracy theories abound."

"He may have a point, though, Doctor. Have you ever considered how much money is poured into medical research for AID's and cancer, and how much the pharmaceutical companies rake in every year?" Garcia began.

"Please, if it weren't for that money coming in, there would be no new drugs," someone across the table argued with Garcia. "You're not buying into that socialist pig slop that medicines should be free. It takes money and time for research and development."

But apparently, there were quite a few that liked the idea of free healthcare, and based on the dissenter's question, the opposition took off with it as if Garcia actually did condone free medicine, and again a ruckus ensued. Insurance scams, too many law suits, not enough doctors or nurses, inflation, and a number of other competing ideas were bantered about.

Garcia wasn't about to yell over the rabble going on, so he used a technique that many kindergarten teachers still employ to this day. He raised his hand and he left it up until everyone was quiet and looking at him. "That's better," Garcia said, having now attained their full attention. "There is nothing more that I would rather do than help you cure your patients, but you have so many other issues going on that anything I could offer you would ultimately prove worthless."

"What do you mean by that?" an older Doctor in the back asked.

"Yeah, what kind of issues?" another demanded. "You think you're better than us because you're Fleet."

"No, I don't," Garcia said. "And I'm sure, if my fellow Fleet people could see me now, they would be extremely disappointed with my performance thus far. What I am trying to say is that your social issues far outweigh your medical issues."

"What kind of Doctor are you?" another got an edge in. "One of those quacks that believes in holistic practices?"

"Yes, actually, I do practice holistically," Garcia said.



“You have to treat the body before you can treat the person or the social structure,” another argued.

“No, you treat the whole person,” Garcia argued. “Notice I didn’t say patient. I said person. Wait, listen to me. Damn it, you pull in me in here at gun point to demand knowledge, and you can’t even manage to open your minds and receive what little direction I can give you! Go ahead and shoot me now, then, because if none of you are going to give up your agendas to actually learn a thing or two, then you might as well go back to lighting candles and chanting.”

The room grew appreciatively silent. “Thank you,” Garcia said. “Yes, Star Fleet has medical technology that could cure everything your planet is currently dealing with, but we would only be treating the symptoms. For example, what good does it do me to cure you of lung cancer if you’re going to continue smoking, the very practice that induces lung cancer in 96 percent of the people who smoke?”

“You mean smoking doesn’t cause cancer a hundred percent of the time?” someone asked.

“Of course not,” Garcia said. “George Burns wouldn’t have outlived so many doctors if smoking was an absolute killer. Every person brings with them their own set of variables. That’s why no one particular medicine works exactly the same way on every patient. That’s why one person can eat as many eggs and bacon as he wants and not have high cholesterol, while another person only has to look at bacon and their cholesterol goes through the roof. Once you figure out how to read everyone’s genetic makeup, you can personalize medicines and dietary regimes to optimize health, but even that’s not enough. You also have to exercise. You have to clean up the environment. Quite a few of the diseases you see today are in part due to pollution, poor hygiene, lack of exercise, and a lack of self responsibility. But hell, cleaning up the environment alone would make a great start towards better health and longevity.”

“We can do that,” someone said.

“Can you?” Garcia asked. “Because if you had spent half the time teaching people to be proactive in securing their own health instead of recreating Earth on Iotia, you’d be half way there already. Every one of the problems you’re facing today we went through on Earth already. You’re simply duplicating the results out of some misguided sense that what the Horizon brought you was superior to what you had. Just look at what’s changed since then. You’ve lost your sense of who you are. You no longer live in harmony with your neighbors much less your environment.”

“Hey, now,” Canon said. “You can’t diss the book. It taught us how to organize and to be more productive.”

“And it taught us about penicillin. That has been the biggest boon to society than any one other thing,” another pointed out.

“Really?” Garcia asked. “Because I bet, if you look a little closer, you would find that epidemics were already on the decline due to improved hygiene, better systems for eliminating waste from the cities, and securing cleaner sources of water and food. This also coincides with the introduction of refrigeration, which again increased the amount of food. But, because you thought penicillin was the cure all, now you have made super bugs through the over use of penicillin and other antibiotics, and now you’re just struggling to stay ahead of the evolution of diseases. What’s the worst one you’re facing now? Staff?”

“You’re blaming us for increasing the virility of staff?” Canon said.

“Technology won’t be your savior!” Garcia said. “Have you not watched an episode of Star Fleet Singers? It’s not about technology. It’s about your relationship with it. Have you ever gone in a room and turned off the television and timed how long you can stand the silence? I dare you to turn it off and see how long it takes before someone comes right behind you and turns it on. You are constantly bombarded by artificial noise, radio, TV, constant text messages, and IM’s and blackberries, and PDA’s. You’ve sold your souls cheap to portable music devices because you can’t stand being alone with your own thoughts. And then you get pissed off because someone has the audacity to cut you off on the road. You’re so in a hurry to get nowhere that you’ll literally kill someone in a road rage incident just to get home to make sure your email is empty, and you fill every waking moment of your kids lives with band practice and sports practice that they don’t even have time to breathe, much less find out who they are. And you go home to empty lives, divided up by rank, by what you own, where you live, what you drive, by what you eat, by what listen to, by the clothes you wear. How healthy is that? This is just insanity, and you’re doing it to yourselves!”

“How did your society survive all of this?” someone asked. “Did Earth get help from any advance alien species?”

Garcia frowned, because he could see where that line of questioning could take him. But he also couldn't lie. “Yes, Earth seems to have been visited by aliens, and there is good evidence suggesting that we were helped along our way and may still be getting help.”

“Then is it unreasonable for you to help us?” Canon asked.

Garcia sighed. He knew that was coming, too, and didn't really have an answer for it. “Are you deaf and blind?” Garcia asked. “The Horizon helped you. Are you really better off as a people? You're more territorial. You've increased telecommunications, which should have brought you closer together as a people, and yet, the greater the technology, the greater the sense of isolation. Most of you go home and spend your free time in front of a television or a computer instead of getting out in the real world and socializing with real people. And when you are out in the real world, you're plugged into your cell phones and these stupid wireless headsets, walking around like Borg zombies, talking to someone far away and ignoring the people right next to you. You're so afraid of intimacy and kindness that you have made a social game of hiding behind your phone. Making real connections with people, living and breathing in natural settings, and being around animals, is a healthier life style. All you have to do is a little research to demonstrate that what I am saying is true. Hook people up to stress detectors and face them towards a pastoral setting and you will immediately see a drop in blood pressure, a release of endorphins, an increase in awareness, and a decrease in tension. Take the same subject and block their vision with advertisements, bill boards, traffic, smog, and inundate them with noise pollution, and you will see completely opposite results. People become moody, intolerant of others, increased tension, and display an increase in discomfort requiring medicines and or alcohol to ‘calm the nerves’ as the colloquialism goes, and health issues quadruple.

“People were never meant to be shut up in small rooms for hours on end, or performing the mindless task that often come with assembly lines. So, answer me honestly, did the Horizon's answers really improve things for you, or do you just say that because you've been taught not to question the book all your lives?”

“But we've come so far,” someone said. “Are you just going to give up on us?”

“I believe, if you are going to make it, you are going to make it standing on your own two feet,” Garcia said. “Not with someone propping you up on crutches and wheelchairs.”

“And you're just waiting at the finish line to see if we make it?” another asked.

“No,” Garcia said. “I'm actually here, walking the path with you. We are on this journey together, but I can't tell you which way to go. If Star Fleet starts telling you how to do things, you lose autonomy. Right now, you have the power and ability to feed everyone on this planet and distribute wealth more equitably. You know exactly what you have to do. It's just that so few of you have taken the risk because you are too afraid of losing the game. Sometimes, you just have to let go.”

“Are you saying wealth is bad?” Canon asked.

“No,” Garcia said, rubbing his forehead. “You're missing the point.”

“What is the point? People have to work to make a living. They won't work if you take away the incentive,” someone said.

“Are you Doctors because you like the rewards and benefits that society gives you, or are you Doctors because you want to heal people?” Garcia asked. “Would you still be Doctors even if there were no benefit in it for you, that you were just as rich or poor as the guy down the street? Cause, quite frankly, I would rather go to the Doctor who is passionate about health than someone who is just punching a clock to collect a salary.”

The door opened at the far end of the room and a number of suits pushed their way through the mob of Doctors. Garcia pushed his chair back in an effort to flee, but there were just too many people in the room and he could see that the soldier had already managed to block off all avenues of escape. The lead suit lifted a weapon and pointed it directly at Garcia's head.

“No funny stuff this time,” Jay said. “Or your friends are dead.”

Garcia heard the weapons coming off safety and humming up in anticipation of a brawl. Doctors were encouraged to leave the area to make room for the soldiers. Garcia didn't move.

“Good,” Jay said. “We have an understanding. Pop him.”

One of the soldiers hit Garcia with a taser, dropping him to the floor. Canon and Lanciano moved as if to go to Garcia's aid, but some of the soldiers raised their weapons, and pushed them back against the wall.

"You're killing him!" Lanciano said.

"Hardly," Jay said. "You'll find that this one here is a lot like a cock roach. No matter how often you step on him, he just keeps coming back for more. Alright, that's enough. Cuff him and bring him along."



Lt. Harvey Stogner woke when the force field to the prison cell went off. He had no idea why the force field had come down, maybe a power failure somewhere, but he wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth. He rolled off the table that made for his bed and quickly crossed the threshold of his cell. Most brigs didn't have weapons locker in them, mostly because if a prisoner escaped, you wouldn't want them having easy access to weapons. The Ferengi, on this vessel at least, did not have that philosophy in mind when it came to installing lockers. Further, he had opened it in a matter of seconds, using some of the bits of tools that he found laying around. He put a Ferengi side arm to his belt and lifted the Ferengi phaser rifle. He ignored the whip. He also opened his luggage which had been thoroughly searched through, but nothing taken, and removed his Tricorder. He set the rifle for stun, powered it up, and went in search of his captors.

Outside the brig, in the corridor, the lights were dimmed to the lowest possible setting without them being off. Stogner noted the strangeness of the fact, but pushed on, carefully, listening for any signs of Ferengi. He came to a crossway and paused. There came the sound of heavy boots, rhythmically falling against the deck. He turned and spied around the corner. Borg! At least ten of them, and they were rerouting power systems.

Stogner eased back, slowly, not wanting to draw attention to himself. He counted the odds of him taking out ten Borg and decided it wasn't good. Though he couldn't take out the Borg, he could sabotage the ship. He went the long way round to Engineering, with plans on blowing the ship up. His plans were dashed when he realized Engineering was already compromised and completely over run with Borg. Borg he had never seen before. The small grey ones gave him the creeps, causing his hair to stand on end.

Stogner fled back the way he had come. He made his way to the hangar deck where there was one shuttle. He had no idea whether or not he could fly it, with the controls in Ferenginar, but, he had to try. He sat down at the helm, set the rifle in the seat next to him, and pulled out his tricorder. Using the tricorder as both interface and translations, he managed to get the shuttle's computer to do an automatic launch cycle. The floor opened up beneath the shuttle and the shuttle was shoved out like a soda from a machine. Momentum set it drifting.

From outside the Ferengi ship, Stonger watched through the shuttles forward window as the shuttle bay doors cycled shut. He then set to work on flying the shuttle. It took him ten minutes to power up the shuttle's engines. Something moved in his peripheral vision, and he looked up to see one of the life pods detaching from the ship. It powered away. He managed to scan it for Borg life signs, and when he saw that it was only Ferengi, he let it go. Not that he had much choice in the matter. He had no idea how to fire the phasers, if the shuttle even had any.

Stogner spent another few moments reading his tricorder's interpretations of the control panel. Every time he activated a system or started a data entry, the configuration on the helm changed. It took him a while to figure out how to cycle back through the menus, but before he did, he accidentally activated his forward thrusters. The shuttle accelerated away, backwards, from the Ferengi ship. He hoped there was nothing behind him to collide with.



When DaiMon Tolro had made it to the shuttlebay, he had arrived just in time to see his one and only shuttle leaving. With no other option available to him, he was forced to abandon his ship in a life pod and by doing so he had set off an automated distress signal. A Ferengi vessel, only several hundred light years away, decided to respond. Even though it would take him several hours to arrive, he figured there might be something left to salvage. The ship's name was the Topa, or Opportunity, in English, and the DaiMon was Holn. Arriving at Iotia, he dropped out of warp and began to assess the situation. There was a crippled Federation ship, which was so old he had no use for it. There was a Ferengi shuttle, pushing the crippled Federation ship. The shuttle was literally rammed up against the Federation ship, intersecting where the dish

array would normally be in a modern Federation ship, and using its thrusters to push it away from a crippled Ferengi vessel. The crippled Ferengi vessel was pursuing the Federation ship.

None of this made any sense to DaiMon Holn, but he knew instinctively that whatever was on the Federation ship must have been priceless for DaiMon Tolro to pursue it so persistently, even with his impulse barely functioning.

“Take us along side Tolro’s ship,” he ordered. “And put a tractor beam on the Federation ship. And use command over rides on that shuttle. I want it brought into our shuttle bay. Has Tolro attempted to hail us yet?”

“Negative, communications on both ships are down,” his ops officer said. “Still unable to scan the ships due to the higher than normal ionization of their ship’s hulls. Someone must have detonated an extremely powerful weapon in this area, and very recently, judging by the comet debris.”

“A very powerful weapon, eh?” Holn repeated, his greed getting the better of them.

“Sir, we’ve detected transporter use. I believe someone from Tolro’s ship has beamed aboard,” Holn’s security officer said.

“Good,” Holn said, assuming it was Tolro. “Go talk to him and find out what’s going on.”



Some time later, Garcia woke to find himself in near darkness. Kletsova and Lenar helped Garcia to his feet. “Where’s Trini and Niki?” he asked.

“Don’t know,” Lenar said. “They separated us. They’ve not told us anything since they brought us here.”

Lights flickered on above their heads and it appeared as if they were on a stage. Jay walked out to greet them.

“So, you came thousands of light years just to be television stars, eh?” Jay asked. “Well, here we are now, entertain us.”

“Where are my friends?” Garcia asked.

“We’re having a bit of a dilemma,” Jay continued, ignoring Garcia’s questions. “See, on the one hand, the population is partial to the Garcia’s commune and philosophy. But on the other hand, the Book warned us about you commie pigs. Now, over here, in this arena,” Jay said, waving his hands so that another light came on to reveal three Ferengi huddling together in fear. “We clearly have some opportunistic capitalists. And though we understand their greed, we are not so happy with their cowardliness. Still, if we go with tradition, the Ferengi are most in line with the Book, back stabbing and conniving though they may be.”

“You can’t compare the Ferengi and the Federation,” Kletsova said. “It’s two fundamentally different systems. Even the words communism and capitalism fail to capture the essence of what we are today.”

“Perhaps,” Jay said. “But, since both of you are so willing to take advantage of our public airways to wage your war, we have decided to invite you here to play a game.”

“We’re not going play any games with you, Jay,” Garcia said. “Let my people go and we’ll be on our way.”

“No,” Jay said. “And you’re going to play, or you little friend Niki and Trini will suffer the consequences. What we have here is the ultimate in reality TV shows. Your two groups, the Fers and the Feds will compete for the title of world championship. The winners keep their lives and get to decide who the Iotians will side with. If the Feds win, we’ll join the Federation. If the Fers win, we’ll go with the Ferengi. Very simple test, but it will show us which of the two systems are better.”

“That’s not a fair test,” Brock argued. “You can’t compare economic systems with physical prowess. Any two ton ape can physically force open a coconut, but it take brain power to develop a system to mass produce coconut juice, and tanning lotion, and...”

“For the first test,” Jay said, talking over Brock as if anything he had to say was unimportant. “The leaders will direct their teams to the top of pole A. From there you will cross the intervening space to pole B, where you will collect the flag. The team that does this in the least amount of time wins the round. We will toss to see who goes first. Heads or tails?”

Garcia surveyed the space between the two poles. There were three swings, in line like a circus trapeze show with appropriate spacing between the swings, for humans, anyway. There was also a net, providing a bit of a comfort factor.

"You're crazy!" Tolro said, pointing at the task's playing field. "We're not doing that."

"Heads," Garcia said.

"Tam!" Lenar said, shaking his head. "No..."

"We can do this," Garcia assured him.

"You may have been born in a circus, but I wasn't," Lenar said.

"I can fly," Kletsova said.

"Good, then we're in," Garcia said. "Heads."

"Sorry, tails has it," Jay said. "Brock, your team can go first."

"Hey, I'm the DaiMon," Tolro said.

"But I'm in charge here," Brock countered. "And I say we let the Feds go first."

"Are you kidding?" Tolro demanded.

"No. Trust me on this one," Brock said. "It's all yours, Garcia."

"Thank you, Brock," Garcia said.

"He's up to something," Kletsova said as they walked towards the poll.

"Don't worry," Garcia said. "Let's get this over with."

"I can't believe we're actually going to do this," Lenar said.

"What? Afraid of heights?" Garcia ribbed him as they came to the bottom of pole A.

"Yes, actually," Lenar said.

Kletsova and Garcia looked dubiously at Lenar.

"I am afraid of heights," Lenar affirmed unashamedly.

"And you want to be in Star Fleet why?" Kletsova asked.

"Hello? A starship is an enclosed space. And I don't have to look out the window," Lenar said. "And a shuttle is one thing, but flinging myself across an open space with nothing but swings to catch hold of is another thing completely. I'm not a monkey."

Garcia took Lenar by the arm. "Lenar, I admire you for admitting to this fear, but the only way to beat it is to tackle it face on. You're better off even if you fall and hit the net then not to climb up at all. Tatiana and I will do the work, all you have to do is trust me. I will get us across."

"You're burning daylight," Jay said.

"Come on," Garcia said. "Up the pole. I'm right behind you."

At the top of the pole, Lenar held tightly to one of the safety ropes as Garcia explained his plan. "I'll take the first swing. Tatiana, you'll come on next and I'll pass you to the second swing. Hang by your knees and prepare yourself to catch Lenar. When you're ready, I'll catch him and pass him to you. Lenar, the hardest part for you will be catching the third swing. That's pretty much all you have to do is catch that swing. Once you're there, you hang by your knees, wrapping your legs in the lines, and Tatiana will come to you and you will hand her off to the platform on the far side. Once she's there, you can return to a sitting position, then hang by your hands and swing up to the platform and she will catch you up. Sound like a plan?"

"Why don't I just go all the way across?" Kletsova asked.

"Because Lenar can't do all three by himself," Garcia said. "I'm going to catch his hands or wrists. You're going to catch his ankles and hold on to him until he catches the third swing. Once he has that, you can let him go and he can pull himself up."

"I can't do this," Lenar said.

"Lenar, you can do this," Garcia said. "We're going to be with you the entire way."

"You'll be okay," Kletsova assured him.

"Okay? Here we go," Garcia said, taking up the swing that was tied into position at the top of the pole.

Garcia swung out, pumped up momentum, and then switched to a hanging position, his legs intertwined with the lines of the swing. As he came up he signaled Kletsova to catch on. She waited one more cycle, and then caught his wrists and swung out with him. Since the middle swing was standing still, Garcia instructed her to change position. She climbed up to the swing, using Garcia as a ladder, oriented herself head

down, and then climbed back down, noting Garcia's hands as he ran them along her side as she got into position. When she felt he had her by the ankles, she let go and he eased her down, his arms fully extended. Suspended straight down, and facing back towards Lenar, she could almost touch the middle swing at the height of their swing. Of course, she was going to actually have to fly, but it was nice knowing she was very close to her goal. Together they increased the energy in their swing until she was satisfied with the potential hang time on the upward cycle towards the middle trapeze.

"Next time," Kletsova said.

On the next up Garcia let her go. Kletsova didn't show off by doing any tumbles. She merely grabbed the swing and set it in motion with her momentum. She then pulled herself up to a sitting position and began swinging, making certain to synchronize herself with Garcia. She then moved to the hanging position and announced that she was ready.

"Okay, Lenar, take my hands," Garcia instructed, calling out to him.

Lenar didn't readily step forwards. Garcia repeated himself. Lenar let go of the rope he was holding and came a little closer. As a tall, almost gangly fellow, it would have been an awkward task to take Garcia's hands and swing out, even if he were a trained flyer. Garcia recognized this only now.

"Sit down on the edge, Lenar," Garcia called out. "Sit down on the edge and dangle your feet."

Lenar followed Garcia's instructions, but he looked like a child battling fears as a parent gave directions. He trembled, and he grabbed onto pole as he worked himself to a sitting position and then scooted to the edge until his legs dangled.

"Good," Garcia yelled. "Now, just hold out your hands."

Lenar closed his eyes and held out his hands. On the next pass, Garcia grabbed Lenar by the wrists and pulled him out of the crow's nest. Lenar screamed as he swung out. He noted the pause as he came up and Kletsova grabbed his ankles and his screaming reached new heights as Garcia let go and Lenar continued to swing. His height with his arms extended allowed him to reach the third swing, but it was only because he was flailing his arms and hands that he actually caught it and instinctively grabbed hold of it, grasping it for dear life. Kletsova made a decision to slide out of her swing and so she went with Lenar onto the third. The third swing swung with their momentum and at the height of the swing Kletsova let go and stepped off onto the nest atop the B pole. When Lenar returned she brought him in, grabbing his arm and guiding him as his feet desperately sought purchase. He went immediately to the pole and clutched it like a koala bear to a tree, his eyes closed as he repeated one of his mantras for relaxation.

"You did it," Kletsova said, rubbing his shoulders. "It's all over."

Garcia flew from swing to swing, showing off with somersaults. Kletsova aided his arrival at the nest where he took up the flag and waved it proudly. Down below, Jay stopped the timer and for the benefit of Brock's team and the TV audience, announced. "Seven minutes, twenty two seconds."

Back down on the floor, Lenar began to regain his composure. "I was so scared," he admitted.

"You did great," Garcia said.

The three Ferengi's were climbing Pole A.

"Where did you learn to fly, Garcia?" Kletsova asked.

"The holodeck," Garcia said. "And you?"

"I ran away from home and joined a circus," Kletsova said.

"For real?" Lenar asked.

"Would I make that up?" she asked.

The Ferengi were now at the top of the pole. As one they dived off, landed into the net, worked their way across the net, climbed Pole B, and took the flag. They did a Ferengi dance of success, which was more about mocking the opponent than about marveling at their triumph. Jay announced the time. "One minutes, five seconds."

"They cheated!" Tatiana screamed.

Garcia broke out into a laugh so deep and so uncontrollable his chest began to hurt. He had to sit down to recover.

"Tam! It's not funny!" Kletsova snapped. "They cheated."

“No,” Garcia gasped. “They didn’t. They accomplished the goal, which was to cross the space and take the flag. No one said anything about flying.”

“You mean, I didn’t have to fly?” Lenar asked, dumbfounded.

“I made a mistake. I assumed flying was compulsory. I didn’t think outside the box. It’s my fault,” Garcia said.

Brock and his team approached them, still doing a little Ferengi dance of victory. “We beat you!”

Garcia got up and took Brock’s hands. “Congratulations, Brock,” Garcia said.

“You Star Fleet people are too rule bound,” Brock said. “If you weren’t too proud, you could learn a thing or two from us.”

“You taught me,” Garcia said. “I’ve learned. Don’t expect to win another round.”

Jay approached them. “You will now to be escorted to your cells to await the next challenge.”

## CHAPTER TWENTYTHREE

“DaiMon!” the ops officer shouted. “A federation ship is dropping out of warp.”

“What? Where was my heads up?” Holn demanded.

“I’m sorry, sir. But the ionization of the particles in this area is interfering with sensors,” the ops officer said.

“Shields up,” Holn ordered. “Bring us about, 141 mark 023.”

“Helm is not responding,” the helm officer said.

“What’s going on?!” Holn demanded.



The Enterprise dropped out of warp and Captain Picard tried to piece together the puzzle before him. There was a tractor beam on a Federation ship, an outdated Federation ship which Data quickly identified as the Horizon. There was a Ferengi shuttle being driven remotely, one life sign inside, but due to the ionization of the region, it was hard to say what sort of life sign. There were also two Ferengi vessels, one appearing to be heavily damaged.

“Sir,” Data said. “I believe the Ferengi shuttle is trying to hail us. It’s a comm. Badge signal, very faint. I believe it has the signature of the Philadelphia Freedom.”

“Try to boost the gain on that,” Picard ordered.

“Yes, Sir, attempting to do so now,” Data said, even though he was trying to do so even before the Captain had made it a specific order. “Enterprise to Shuttlecraft, do you read.”

“This is Lt. Stonger,” the voice repeated. “Raise your shields, sir. Go to red alert. Raise your shields now!”

“What’s the nature of the emergency?” Captain Picard asked.

“I lost the signal,” Data said.

“Maybe we should raise the shields,” Riker said.

“Not yet, but take us to yellow alert,” Picard said.

“Sir, incoming message from the Topa,” Worf announced.

“On screen, Lt,” Picard said.

Locutus of Borg appeared on the screen. “Your lives as you have known them have come to an end. From this moment forward, you will live to service the Borg,” Locutus said.

Picard came out of his seat; his jaw clamped tight, the muscles in his neck fierce with stress. “Raise shields,” he said, his voice soft but determined. “Red alert, battle stations.”

“This is not a drill,” Riker yelled, retrieving for his personnel tactical display from its hidden recess at his command chair.

“Sir,” Worf said. “There was an active transporter beam from the damaged Ferengi vessel simultaneously with the message.”

“Security alert,” Riker yelled. “We may have Borg intruders on board. Security to all decks.”

“The Topa is raising its shields,” Data said. “Weapons systems are coming on line.”

“Ready photon torpedoes,” Picard said. “Evasive maneuvers. Helm, aft thrusters ahead full to 132 mark 427. Fire.”

“Firing, sir,” Worf said.

“No damage,” Data said. “They anticipated the response and used phaser to detonate the torpedoes before shield impact.”

“Captain,” Riker said. “We’re fighting against you. They have an advantage.”

“That is not me, Number One,” Picard said. “And I’ll hold my own advantages, thank you. Full spread of torpedoes towards the engineering section of the damaged Ferengi vessel. See if you can’t rupture their warp core.”

“Aye,” Worf said.

“Captain?” Riker said, thinking they were way too close.

“I know, number one,” Picard said. “Helm, take us towards the far side of that large chunk of ice comet debris. All hands brace for impact. Stand by, Worf. Wait, wait, fire!”



The direct hit to the engineering section of Tolro's ship produced instantaneous results. The ship vaporized as a wave of energy spread from a point that use to be the matter anti matter mix chamber to an ever expanding, but diminishing in intensity, spheroid of energy, momentarily as bright as any star. The energy front quickly enveloped the Topa, overwhelming its shields until they collapsed. The overloaded shields caused power surges and internal damage, in addition to tremendous amounts of energy coursing through the ship after the shields failed. The energy continued to dissipate as the spheroid field continued to expand, but that dissipation was not sufficiently quick enough to spare the shuttle containing Lt. Stogner. The shuttle tumbled forward, just barely avoiding a collision with the Horizon. The Horizon was spared most of the internal damage due to the fact all of its systems were already disabled from earlier power surges. Several viewing ports buckled under the stress as the energy wave caused compression fatigue along the hull of the ship. This exposed a number of rooms and one entire deck to the vacuum of space.

The Enterprise D's shields held longer as the comet's ice blocked a good portion of the energy, but it still failed. In addition to energy surges throughout the ship, the comet came apart and a hail storm rained down on the Enterprise. The damage from this was negligible, but the ensuing snow storm from the comet further disrupted sensors, which forced the Bridge crew to wait anxiously for the answers they needed.

"LaForge, what's the status of the shields?" Picard asked.

"The field coils are completely burned out. It will take three solar days to replace them," LaForge said.

"Do we have impulse power?" Picard asked.

"Barley, sir," LaForge. "I can give you one quarter impulse."

"Helm, push us out of this snow," Picard said. "Ahead slow, give your self time to steer around any potential debris."

"Captain," Worf said. "Security has completed their sweeps. There were four Borg intruders. They have been dealt with."

"Where the hell did these Borg come from?" Riker asked. "There is no sign of a Borg ship. And, even with all this radiation interference, there would be no way we could miss something like that."

"And it's not like them to hide," Worf agreed.

"And that still doesn't explain the presence of Locutus," Deanna said.

"Captain," Data said. "I have found something... interesting."

Picard came up along side of Data to examine the information. "I don't understand what we're looking at, Data. Is it debris from another ship?"

"It is debris," Data agreed. "But whether it was from a ship or a space station I am unable to determine. The point of interest, though, is that the nature of the material is trans-dimensional, very much like the Guardian of Edo, at Rubicun Three."

"Are you saying the Edo Guardian had a base of operation here?" Picard asked.

"I would be unable to answer that," Data said. "However, that would offer an explanation to the how and why there is a human presence on Iotia and add further insight to the nature of the Preservers, assuming there is a relationship here to be explored, which, I might add, is one of the theories Garcia published which caused quite a stir in academic circles."

Worf scoffed loudly.

"I read that paper, Captain," Riker said. "It was purely speculative in its composition, an attempt to connect the dots, so to speak, without any hard data. Garcia's been looking for a Preserver explanation most of his academic career and has offered nothing new to the debate."

"We're clear of the debris field, sir," helm announced.

"Sensor's are still being adversely affected by the radiation in the area," Data said.

"Can you make anything out on the Borg infested Ferengi ship?" Riker asked.

"Stand by," Data said. "They have life support. Weapons are off line. Propulsion systems are off line."

"Shall we finish them off, Sir?" Worf said.

"Captain, there could be some Ferengi survivors on board," Deanna said.

Picard sighed. "Will, take an away team over and de-infest the ship of Borg," Picard said.

“Do you want me to capture Locutus?” Riker asked.  
Picard looked to Riker. “One of me is quite sufficient, and I am of the opinion it isn’t me,” Picard said.

“There is only one way to find out,” Deanna said.

“Sir, incoming vessel,” Worf announced.

“Arm photon torpedoes,” Riker said.

“I unable to scan the interior of the vessel,” Data said. “But I have a visual.”

“On screen,” Picard said.

A classic, saucer shaped UFO appeared on the screen. A portion of the outer rim of the saucer rotated around the main hull of the ship and it was lit by flashing beacons. There were steady beacons at the top most and bottom most surface of the ship.

“Is that a pink UFO, or is there some problem with the sensors?” Riker asked.

“We’re being hailed,” Worf said.

“On screen,” Picard said, tugging on his uniform.

An image of a female appeared. “My name is Xuxa. Do you require assistance?”



Garcia paced the inner contours of his cell as his friends watched from their respective cells. The cell was three brick walls and one wall of iron bars. He ran his hand along the wall, his fingers floating above it.

“What are you doing?” Kletsova asked from across the way.

“Looking for a weak spot,” Garcia said.

“You’re not contemplating escaping are you?” she asked.

Garcia didn’t answer. He paused in his pacing, his hands hovering just beyond the wall, his fingers just barely touching as if he were performing a séance. When he moved, he moved towards the bars, slowly. A guard rounded the corner, seemingly in a trance. The guard revealed a key card and was about to swipe it to open Garcia’s cage when suddenly there were more guards. One fired a phaser into the guard that had been hypnotized by Garcia’s light mind meld. Another stepped up to Garcia’s cell and fired a round directly into Garcia. Garcia fell to the floor.

When Garcia came around again, he was still in his cell. He had a headache and he was groggy, but the leg cramp forced him to stand up and work out the tension.

“You okay?” Lenar asked.

“You deserve that,” Kletsova said. “Did you forget they have us on camera?”

“We can’t just sit here,” Garcia said.

“Did you also forget that they’re holding Trini and Niki hostage and if we escape that they might kill them?” Kletsova asked.

“We just can’t sit here!” Garcia said, and began to pace again.

It wasn’t long before an escort of guards came to collect them. They were forced to wear metal cuffs, with their hands in the front, as opposed to locked behind their back. They were then taken to the roof where they were whisked away by a helicopter. All weapons pointed at Garcia during the trip as if they expected him to try and escape. The copter landed on a beach and they were escorted to a table. The Ferengi and Jay were already waiting.

“Trust you had a pleasant nap,” Jay said.

Garcia didn’t respond.

“Very well,” Jay said, waving his hand above the table to point out a topographical map. “Here is the next challenge. You must maneuver over this terrain, avoiding obstacles and armed soldiers and capture the enemy’s flag at this point. You will be given laser weapons which will virtually eliminate your opponents. By the same token, if you are hit by an enemy’s laser, you will be equally eliminated. The suits you will don will record hits. Face and body hits are considered deadly. A hit to the limb will cause the suits to incapacitate that particular limb, to better simulate an actual conflict scenario. You will be given three vehicles in which to operate, a tank, an ATV, and a motorcycle. The team that captures the flag in the least amount of time wins the round. Any questions?”

“Are my friend’s okay?” Garcia asked.

“The Ferengi’s won the previous round and have chosen to go first on this challenge,” Jay said, ignoring Garcia’s question. “Brock, if you will follow Captain Romano he will assist you in donning your gear and escort you to your vehicles.”

As the Ferengi were led away, another team brought in a monitor. “We’ve decided to let you watch,” Jay said. “And I am willing to release you from the hand cuffs if you promise to behave.”

“My friends?” Garcia said.

“I find you’re persistence and your loyalty admirable,” Jay said. “Your friends are in good health. Will you behave if I release you from your cuffs?”

“I will,” Garcia said.

“I know you can’t see me laughing,” Jay said. “I require more specificity from you.”

Garcia smiled. “We will not try to escape, for now,” Garcia said, emphasizing the “we.”

“Release them, and bring them the suits for the challenge. And food and drink,” Jay said. “We can be hospitable, Captain Garcia.”

“I’m just an ensign,” Garcia said, shaking out his newly freed hands.

“Please,” Jay said. “Lying doesn’t become you. You blew up your ship, escaped from my men, rescued your crew, and made entertainment history on our planet. A mere ensign? Indeed!”

Captain Romano returned, saluting. “The Ferengi have boarded the tank and are beginning their run.”

“Excellent,” Jay said. “This should be fun.”

According to the map, there was a road that led right from the beach straight to the enemy’s camp, with the flag on the far side. The Ferengi started their run by driving the tank straight up the road. The enemy responded appropriately by pulling their teams in towards the road and focusing their laser fire on the tank itself. It wasn’t lost on Garcia’s team that Jay and Romano had a tactical advantage listening to the Ferengi chatter and watching them on the various video cams. Even with the tank firing its laser cannon at the soldiers lining the road, the tank made it three quarters of the way before it finally became inoperable from a total loss of hit points.

“That was rather disappointing,” Jay said.

“Don’t count them out just yet,” Garcia said.

And as if on cue, the back of the tank burst open and the ATV shot out. There was a Ferengi driver and a Ferengi standing in the gunner position, using a makeshift foot stool in order to use the weapon properly. It landed, skidding, coming about the tank, and headed up the road, firing all the while. A moment after it left, drawing the attention of the soldiers with it, the motorcycle departed the tank. It headed out towards open terrain before turning towards the enemy camp.

“Clever,” Jay said. “Romano, pull some of your men back towards the flag.”

Romano began issuing orders over his radio. He lost quite a few men taking out the ATV, but he had enough man power left to prevent Brock from capturing the flag, who was bullying his way in with the motorcycle. Brock’s motorcycle went down, trapping him underneath it.

“Hopefully Star Fleet’s finest will be a bit more entertaining,” Jay said, turning to Garcia and motioning him towards the waiting vehicles.

“We’ll see,” Garcia said. As his companions accompanied Garcia to the awaiting vehicles, he filled them in on his basic plan. “Tatiana, park the ATV in the tank. You and Lenar drive the tank straight up the road, and when it’s dead, use the ATV to finish your objective of catching the flag.”

“Perhaps you weren’t watching, but that tactic didn’t work,” Kletsova pointed out.

“Hand me your laser pistol,” Garcia said to Lenar.

Lenar removed the pistol from its holster and handed the pistol to Garcia.

“Belt, holster and all, please,” Garcia said, giving Lenar his best displeased look.

“Did you hear me?” Kletsova asked. “Driving straight down the road didn’t work for the Ferengi. Why don’t you let me drive the tank down the gorge and come up on the other side instead of...”

“Because I have a plan,” Garcia said. “Let’s keep the chatter to a minimum out there, but be prepared to follow my instructions.”

“You know the rules on using communications when you know the enemy is listening,” Lenar said.

“I do,” Garcia said. “And I expect you to follow them.”

“And what are you going to be doing?” Lenar asked.

“It’s been a while since I rode a bike on a beach,” Garcia said, getting on the bike and kicking it started. He put on his helmet. “Can you hear me? Good. See you at the other side.”

“He’s up to something,” Lenar said, watching Garcia accelerate away, coming up on one wheel.

“No,” Kletsova said, looking at Lenar as if he were a moron. “Of course he’s up to something. I just don’t know how to predict what he’s going to do so we can be helpful.”

“So, I guess we’ll just follow instructions and hope his plan works,” Lenar said. “He did get us through the Kobayashi Maru.”

“Yeah, on his second attempt!” Kletsova said, climbing into the ATV. She backed it into the tank and Lenar closed the tank door behind her. “So, do you want to drive or do you want the gunner position?”

“Gunner,” Lenar said.

“Good. Ever since I was a kid I’ve wanted to drive a tank,” Kletsova said.

“Funny how life works out,” Lenar said.

“Less chatter more driving,” came Garcia’s voice over the intercom.

Kletsova saluted the speaker. “Aye, aye, Captain.”



“We rescued everyone from the Horizon,” Doctor Crusher said, approaching Picard as he walked with Xuxa from the transporter room. She was carrying a cat.

“Isis!” Xuxa said, reaching out to the cat. It scrambled to her arms. “What are you doing here? He is? Where? Captain, I must go to Sickbay.”

Picard exchanged looks with the Doctor and nodded approval. He gestured towards the lift. They arrived at sickbay and Xuxa went immediately towards Gary Seven.

“Seven, are you all right?” Xuxa asked.

“Agent 99,” Seven said. “You must rescue the other Garcia.”

“The other Garcia?” Xuxa said.

“It is essential for the continued existence of this time line that he survives,” Seven said. “I didn’t realize just how critical until he and Apollo had a confrontation.”

“I don’t understand what you’re telling me. When did you get back? You were just here last year and you didn’t mention anything about this Garcia or that Star Fleet would be paying a return visit,” Xuxa said. “And what does Apollo have to do with this? When did you get back?”

“I’m not me. Well, I am me, but I am not who visited you a year ago. I must have been captured when I came to visit you, because I don’t remember completing that mission, and obviously you remember me doing so, and that means Garcia was right,” Seven rambled. “Xuxa, I am a copy of the original Gary Seven.”

“A copy? So the Omegans are here!” Xuxa said. “I know there have been rumors of abductions taking place, but I haven’t found any evidence.”

“The copy of Garcia destroyed the hive. There should be no more issues here on Iotia, but Isis and I must return to the Benefactors and report what we have seen,” Gary Seven said.

“You can use my temporal transporter, of course” Xuxa said.

“He’s not going anywhere,” Doctor Crusher interrupted. “He has radiation burns, a recent concussion...”

“Of course, heal him first, Doctor,” Xuxa said, setting Isis on the bed next to Seven. “Isis is here. She’ll look after you.”

“Captain Xuxa,” Picard joined the conversation. “Would you mind explaining what’s going on here?”

“Is there somewhere we can talk in private?” Xuxa asked. “I’ll explain what I know.”

“Come with me,” Picard said.



The tank cruised down the street taking random fire from hidden snipers. Lenar spun the tank’s large laser turret and fired in any direction he saw lasers directed at him. He hadn’t seen signs of Garcia ever since Kletsova and he had proceeded towards the goal of capturing the flag. He could see a bridge ahead of them, and lining either side of the bridge was a group of soldiers. This was where the Ferengi had lost the tank from enemy fire. Kletsova accelerated.

“As you approach the bridge, slow to quarter speed,” Garcia instructed.

“Are you crazy?” Kletsova yelled. “We’ll be a sitting duck!”

“Just do it,” Garcia said. “Concentrate your fire power on the soldiers to the left of the bridge. That’s your left, Lenar.”

Kletsova pulled back on the throttle, cursing. They were now in firing range of the soldiers on the far bank and the hit point indicator of the tank was beginning to fall at a faster pace. “He’s trying to hog the game again,” Kletsova said. “He’s probably using us as a distraction while he goes for the flag himself.”

“Well, if it works,” Lenar said.

Lenar opened fire on the soldier to the left side. His laser canon was a quad shooter, with the energy cycling through each laser cannon tip, producing bigger beams of energy than the weapons the soldiers were carrying. As the tank slowed before the bridge, Garcia came out of seemingly nowhere. Like a banshee out of hell playing in the x-games, Garcia accelerated up a dirt ramp, the bike climbed eagerly and took to the air as if it were a rocket. Lenar gulped air as he thought Garcia was falling off the bike, but it all proved to be by design. Garcia let go of the control grips, came out his seat, and flew behind the bike, one hand holding the seat, while his free hand drew his laser pistol. He fired at the soldiers on the right of the bridge, even as he flew over them, before resuming his seat on the bike. He holstered the weapon and took the grips just in time to land. He spun his bike, stirring up a cloud of dirt, obscuring him from the laser fire. Under the protective cloak of the dust cloud, he tore a trail into the forest.

The soldiers tried to regroup, anticipating Garcia’s approach, but he had already changed directions and rounded about the soldiers from a new direction. He took out another seven soldiers coming up behind them and as he powered through the group, accelerating up onto one wheel, the soldiers shot themselves as they tried to lead the target. Without warning, Garcia was airborne again, flying over the road to finish off the soldiers who had bunkered down to weather the fire from the tank. He did this flying with no hands on the grips, instead firing laser pistols with both hands. Just as he was about to land, he holstered the pistols and regained control of the bike. The few remaining soldiers took cover trying to hit Garcia before he disappeared again into the woods. Lenar took them out with the tank’s weapons.

“Accelerate to full speed,” Garcia instructed.

Kletsova’s view was more limited than Lenar’s view. “What’s going on out there?” Kletsova asked.

“You don’t want to know. Just keep driving,” Lenar said.

Garcia left the cover of the forest and took the road, accelerating in front of the tank hoping to draw out the enemy’s fire. Apparently, it worked, because the next thing he knew was Lenar was yelling at him, giving him heads up. “Garcia! Snipers in the trees.” Lenar saw the glint of light from a sniper’s rifle scope in the tree top and swiveled his weapon towards it, magnifying the scope. “Garcia! Snipers in the trees.”

Garcia went off the road, back into the forest, leaving Lenar to shoot at the tree tops. In addition to the tree top snipers, there were soldiers along the road. Garcia harassed them while the tank continued towards its target and it was because of Garcia’s antics that the tank made it to the edge of the enemy base camp before it ran completely out of hit points and came to a halt. Enemy soldiers quickly gathered around the tank in a closing circle waiting for someone to depart. That’s when Garcia made his next appearance, again going airborne, flying high over the tank, literally somersaulting himself and the entire bike, both hands out firing his laser pistols.

The circle of soldiers fell back, several falling to Garcia’s incredible luck or drop dead accuracy. This freed up an opportunity for the ATV to flee.

“Go,” Garcia ordered. “Circle right and head into the camp. The flag is on the far side.”

The back of the tank began to lower and the ATV shot out before it was fully open, doing a bit of its own flying, with Kletsova yelling for Lenar to hold on. Kletsova was driving, and Lenar was firing the mini quad laser from the back of the ATV, standing position only.

The next time Garcia’s bike went airborne, he pushed free from it completely. He landed on a building top, abandoning his bike to careen into a tree. He hit the roof top rolling and came up drawing his pistols, firing both. He physically hit an unsuspecting guard in the face with an elbow just hard enough to stun him, and then grabbed him up to use him as a shield to take out the rest of the roof top soldiers. His bike which had gotten itself stuck in the branches came free as the branch finally broke. With all the roof top guards down,

Garcia picked up one of the sniper rifles, used the pump handle to prime the batteries for the next shot, and went to the ledge of the roof. From there Garcia began to clear a path for the ATV, dropping soldiers left and right, pumping the weapon each time he fired.

“Stay to the right of that building,” Garcia directed Kletsova.

Four soldiers exited a building and Garcia dropped three of them before the final one made it to the sand bags. The ATV came to a skidding halt, its hit points gone.

“Go for the flag, Lenar,” Garcia instructed, stepping up on to the rim of the roof. “Tatiana, cover him. I got your back.”

Garcia followed his friends in the large scope and on seeing an enemy cycled to a higher magnification. A direct hit to the soldier’s helmet caused him to fall. In order to better follow Lenar and find more targets, he cycled back to the lower magnification scope, giving him more to look at. One of the soldiers was out in the open and Garcia shot him without cycling through the magnification. Kletsova smartly picked up one of the soldier’s weapons, giving her a simulated machine gun with multiple bursts of lasers.

“An enemy behind that sand bag wall,” Garcia yelled.

“Keep heading for the flag,” Kletsova instructed Lenar, turning and running towards the wall. She jumped from the ground to the top sand bag, just as the soldier was taking aim at Lenar. Kletsova dropped him with multiple burst, tarrying a little longer than necessary. Movement in her peripheral vision caused her to turn, and just in time to see the soldier falling, hit by Garcia. She headed towards Lenar who was engaged in hand to hand combat with a soldier. Firing point blank, she dropped the soldier, freeing Lenar to conduct his flag stealing business.

“Go,” Kletsova said.

As they rushed up the hill to the flag pole, three guards rushed up the other side to meet them. Kletsova rushed past Lenar, firing at point blank range. They fell. Lenar began untying the line to lower the flag, leaving Kletsova to cover him as he did so, offering herself as a shield. As she searched for threats, she spied several soldiers moving in to take out Garcia.

“Tam! Below you,” Kletsova yelled.

Garcia ignored her in favor of taking out three soldiers pushing a shielded canon into place to fire on Lenar. One of the soldiers fell. The flag started coming down as Kletsova moved to help Garcia. Before Kletsova could get in range, though, Garcia took a hit in the arm. He was forced to use only one hand to pump the rifle for his next shot. The second soldier pushing the cannon fell, a shot to the leg, leaving the third struggling to push the weapon. Garcia dropped him, too, before taking a hit in the chest. Due to his precarious footing, he fell forwards and towards the ground.

“No!” Kletsova yelled, opening up on the two soldiers that had snuck up on Garcia. She was on them before the second one had fallen. She hit him in the gut with the rifle butt, shoving him out of the way. She threw her weapon down in order to render first aid to Garcia. She cried over him as she rolled him over.

“Tam, are you okay? Speak to me.”

Lenar’s hands reached for the flag, just as a solitary soldier stepped from behind a tree to fire on him. Lenar went down, clutching at the flag as he did so. The flag pulled free, wrapping around him as he fell, covering him as if he were a fallen hero.

“Tam?!” Kletsova said.

Garcia opened his eyes. “Did we win?”

“Are you hurt?” Kletsova demanded.

The shadow of Jay fell across Kletsova and Garcia and they both look up into Jay’s visor. Judging by his voice alone, Jay seemed to be in a good mood. “Now that was entertaining.”



The senior officers in the staff room seemed a bit amused, all except one, Captain Picard, who glared ominously at the “theatrical” version of himself on the screen.

“There are a number of other episodes currently airing around the world in various languages and time zones,” Data explained. “I have ascertained that for the most part, the episodes are peopled by computer graphics.”

“Computer graphics of that quality are beyond the capability of the Iotians given their current computer technology,” LaForge said.

“But not beyond the ability of the computer implant in Garcia’s head,” Data said. “Garcia’s brain and implant function as one unit and the images he imagines could be transferred to a media storage device in use by the Iotians. There are some real actors. I am fairly certain that this Bridge is part of an actual set.”

“What else do you have, Data,” Picard asked, wishing he hadn’t called this briefing.

“Quite a bit, actually,” Data said. “Garcia had been examining the Iotian television broadcast before arriving at Iotia and found some really interesting programs.”

“I am aware of the programs,” Picard said.

“You are?” Data asked.

“Xuxa, if you will,” Picard said.

“One of the reasons I was sent to Iotia was to determine the source of these television broadcasts,” Xuxa said, speaking for the first time since Picard had introduced her to his staff. “Our Benefactors have been concerned about the Iotians ever since the Horizon’s visited this planet. My mission has evolved to try and establish a non gangster social path for the Iotians to follow. I have been fairly successful in that, but by far, Garcia has offered more in the short time he has been on the planet than I have in my ten years on this planet.”

“Do you have anything else, Data?” Picard asked. “Something other than fiction?”

“Yes,” Data said. On the screen a number of images of crop circles began to appear. “One of Garcia’s obsessions since he has arrived on Iotia has been the appearance of crop circles.”

“Please,” Riker said. “The crop circles are the creations of pranksters.”

“I might be willing to concur, except for two things that Garcia has discovered,” Data said. “Note this image. It is a crop circle in the snow. The image was taken by a satellite mapping the southern pole. There are no known human inhabitants in this particular region, pretty much eliminating the prankster theory of crop circles.”

“That is intriguing, but it still meaningless,” LaForge said.

“Garcia has a theory about the seemingly meaninglessness of the formations,” Data said. “A theory that I find highly plausible.”

“Garcia’s theories can be a bit hard to swallow, Captain,” Riker said. “If there were a pattern our universal translators would have found them.”

“Indeed, the way that Garcia presents his theories can be a bit rough to the uninitiated, Commander, but I find this one extremely sound,” Data said. “For example, if I sent you the letteres L O L in a text message would that mean anything to you?”

“L O L?” Riker asked.

“Looking on line?” Counselor Troi asked.

“Laughing out loud, actually,” Data said. “It is a form of communication invented in twentieth century Earth, mostly by teenagers wanting to send text messages. In most cases, messages had to be short due to the cost of sending lengthy posts, and also, common messages were abbreviated to shorten response time, as well as to create code to block parents from decyphering. Universal translatorions are made possible by crunching incredible amounts of data and then comparing similarities of vocal and visual patterns of full text with visual representations and gestures. So, if all we had were strings of acronyms to go on, our computers would be hard pressed to find the appropriate translations. And that is what Garcia believe this is. A language based on characters, such as Earth Chinese language, mixed with acronyms.”

“Which doesn’t negate my earlier statement, the phenomena is interesting, but meaningless,” LaForge repeated.

Data switched the image on the screen to a specific crop circle, which had been cut directly into a rain forest. Picard was the first to comment. “That looks like the Edo Guardian.”

“I thought you would think so,” Data said. “This formation was photographed, reported to authorities, and coincides with the time of Garcia’s arrival planet side.”

“What are you saying?” Worf grumbled. “The Edo God chose Garcia?”

“I am not saying that at all,” Data said. “I am merely pointing out an odd coincidence that seems to be playing out around Garcia.”

“Given what Xuxa and Gary Seven have confided in me, I doubt that any of this can be explained by mere coincidence,” Picard said.

Data turned his head to the right. “And what did they say?” Data inquired.

“Another time, Data,” Picard said. “Riker, what do you have?”

“We have not been able to locate Garcia or his team,” Riker said, saying “his team” with a bit of contempt, as if he didn’t approve of Garcia’s actions. “However, we have located some survivors from the Philadelphia Freedom. They seem to be hiding out in an abandoned oil platform, in the Eastern Ocean of Iotia. It would take us four minutes to beam them out.”

“Four minutes without shields would give the Iotians time to get a landing party on board,” LaForge said.

“Not likely,” Worf said.

“Explain,” Picard said.

“We’re in a standard orbit above Iotia, shields up to prevent the Iotians from beaming on a boarding party,” Worf said. “As per your orders, Captain. Using sensors I’ve analyzed their transporting abilities and find them lacking in sophistication.”

“But considering they shouldn’t have transporters at all, they’re pretty sophisticated,” LaForge said.

“Yes, how did they get transporters?” Picard asked.

“According to local folk legend, Doctor McCoy left a communicator,” Xuxa answered.

“That would explain it,” LaForge said. “That probably means they have subspace communication abilities as well.”

“Then why hadn’t they contacted us?” Crusher asked.

“I don’t believe they have subspace communication abilities,” Xuxa argued.

“They would have to. The fundamentals of subspace communications precedes the invention of transporters,” LaForge said.

“They must have made short cuts,” Data said.

“Short cuts?” LaForge said. “Death cuts, more like it. Technology has to evolve along certain paths. Subspace communications, antigravity, inertial dampners, force fields, matter anti matter reactors, and finally warp drive. You can’t start with warp drive and expect to go anywhere without inertial dampners. Without them, if your ship survived the stress and didn’t implode, everyone on the inside would be splattered against the far wall like bugs on a windshield.”

“None the less, they have transporters,” Xuxa said. “And from what I have seen, they are not very safe.”

“Indeed,” Worf agreed. “They are transporting objects blind. They use their planets GPS coordinate system, which varies in accuracy from a centimeter to a meter. Since we have been in orbit the Iotians have made two transport attempts. Had we not had the shields up, two of the would-be-borders would have materialized inside of bulkheads.”

“My god,” Crusher said. “Don’t they know they can’t beam through shields?”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to explain. They are transporting blind. They don’t have sensors,” Worf said. “They have no idea that we have our shields up, nor do they have the ability to scan the inside of our ships, or they would set their people down in open areas instead of inside objects.”

“We got to contact them and tell them not to try beaming any more people up,” Crusher said.

“I imagine they have figured out that it’s not working,” Worf said. “They have not tried to transport anyone up since their second attempt to board the Enterprise. More than likely they know their people are dead and are trying to figure out what went wrong.”

“I suppose that means they aren’t just stupid suicidal then,” Troi said. “They’ll only use that tactic if they know there’s a chance of achieving a goal.”

“Either way, we have got to put an end to that,” Crusher said. “We can’t let them keep transporting people to their deaths.”

“I agree,” Riker said. “But we can’t lower our shields, either. You saw the play-back of what happened to the Philadelphia Freedom.”



“I can shut down their transporter systems,” Worf said. “All I have to do is knock out all their satellites in orbit and knock out several power stations on the ground, effectively cutting off all power to the continent that comprises the New USA.”

“You can’t do that,” Xuxa protested. “People depend on a certain amount of power to live their lives.”

“It would be an inconvenience,” Worf said. “But it wouldn’t hurt them.”

“What about the people on life support? What about the elderly that depend on heating or air-conditioning, depending on their climatic needs? What about food consumption? People require electricity to cook and store food,” Xuxa pointed out.

“I don’t see how they could be so primitive and so dependant on technology,” Worf said.

“Oh, and how long would you survive without replicators to feed you?” Xuxa asked. “Captain, I can not condone any action that would put civilians, especially children, at risk.”

“And you can be certain, we will avoid doing that,” Picard said.

“Still,” Counselor Troi said. “I am surprised they haven’t continued to try to board us. They should have launched space ships by now.”

“Their government may be preoccupied,” Data said.

“What do you mean?” Picard asked.

“According to some of the news feeds I am monitoring, a coup is in progress,” Data said.

## CHAPTER TWENTYFOUR

Garcia and Kletsova were bickering as they were led back to their cells. "We would have won that if you had maintained your position," Garcia repeated.

"It was just a game," Kletsova repeated. "You could have been badly hurt."

"So?" Garcia said. "You had orders and you failed to follow through on them."

"It was just a game!" Kletsova screamed.

Even with the bickering, Garcia's team quickly discovered the surprise waiting at their cells: Trini and Nikita were present. As soon as the cell door was open Garcia went directly to Niki and hugged her up, pulling back only to examine her face, checking first her eyes, and then brushing back her hair to feel her forehead, checking for fever.

"I'm fine, thanks," Trini said.

The guard closed the entire Star Fleet singers in the same cell.

"What's going on?" Kletsova asked.

"I don't know," Trini said. "We were watching you on television, when the station went off the air and the guards came in to retrieve us. They brought us here."

"You were amazing," Niki said.

"How do you feel?" Garcia asked her.

"I'm okay," Niki said. "The tube is still draining. Is that normal?"

"Yes," he said. "What's the color of the discharge?"

"Hey?! Easy," Brock complained.

Garcia stood, watching as the three Ferengi were locked into Kletsova's old cell. He went to the bars. "Excuse me? What's going on?"

"We've got to beef up security," the guard said. "Just make yourself comfortable. We'll bring some food for you in a bit."

"That was some fancy flying there, Garcia," Brock said.

Garcia began examining the bars to the cell, twisting them.

"Apparently Garcia isn't as bright as you told me he is," DaiMon Tolro said. "He hasn't learned that he is on video and they're likely to shoot him if he tries to escape."

From the far end of the cell, Garcia could see a group of soldiers sitting down to a game of cards.

"Hey," Garcia yelled at them. "Mind if I sit in a hand or two?"

They all laughed. The lead guard turned to Garcia. "What do you take me for? A fool?"

"Excuse me?" Garcia asked.

"I wasn't born yesterday," he said. "That trick is as old as Kirk."

"Besides," another guard said. "Knowing you, you could probably use this deck of cards as a deadly weapon, killing us with the throw of a single card."

The guards all laughed.

Garcia frowned. "Actually, a card doesn't have enough mass to penetrate deep enough into flesh to cause a mortal wound. But paper cuts can be distracting, especially if you score the eye."

The guards stopped laughing. The lead guard got up, motioning to his fellow guards to follow. They all drew their weapons and aimed it at Garcia. The lead fanned the deck and offered Garcia a chance to draw a card. "I dare you to hit that dart board over there," he said.

Garcia drew a single card and pitched it, hitting the bull's eye. It stuck just as if it had been a dart.

"Holy crap!" the lead guard said.

"I told you he could kill you with a card," the other said.

"I thought you were joking," the lead said.

"I bet he can't do it again," another guard said.

The lead handed another card to Garcia. Garcia held the card, thoughtfully.

"What do I get out of this?" Garcia said.

"I won't stun you," the guard said.

Garcia tossed the card, knocking the first free, scoring another bull eyes.

"Holy crap!" the lead said, all his guard's laughing in awe.

That's when the door blew inwards. Had the guards still been at the table, they would have died from the explosion. As it was, they died when the storm troopers rushed the room, firing. Garcia grabbed at a weapon as the guard closer to him fell, but he missed, and came up with some of the playing cards.

Garcia's team hovered at the back of the cell as the storm troopers cleared the bodies out of the way. Captain Romano took the keys and unlocked the Ferengi from the cage.

"It's about time," Brock said. "I thought you had forgotten us."

"We were waiting on a suitable distraction," Romano said. "We nearly started the coup while Garcia was flying about, but we launched our coup after the Federation ship arrived in orbit."

"What Federation ship?" Garcia asked.

"Have they tried hailing us?" Brock asked.

"No," Romano said. "Mann tried calling them."

"Fool!" Brock said. "I told him not to do that."

"Well, the Enterprise responded by saying they would only communicate with the legitimately elected government," Romano said. He laughed. "Apparently the Feds are stupid or something. There hasn't been an elected government since Kirk put the current power structure in place."

Romano turned and opened the door. "Step out, Captain Garcia."

Garcia didn't move. Romano aimed a weapon at Garcia's companions. Garcia complied with his instruction to exit the cell and Romano closed the cell door behind him.

"We don't need him," Tolro said.

"Mann wants him," Romano said. "Right after he activates the unlimited power device, and offers free power to the entire world, he intends to offer Garcia to the Feds in trade for warp technology."

"What unlimited power device?" Garcia asked.

"The device we built based on the formula that Brock gave us," Romano said. "The Ferengi have proven to be a better ally than you, communist."

"What did you give them, Brock?" Garcia asked.

"I didn't give them anything," Brock said. "You know my philosophy on giving away technology that could make someone independent!"

Garcia picked Brock up and slammed him against the wall. The storm troopers raised their guns but Romano waved them off, amused by Garcia's violence and Brock's pitiful whining.

"What did you give them?!" Garcia demanded.

"It was just a harmless bit of fluff, honest," Brock cried.

"A harmless bit of fluff? Are you completely daft? These people rebuilt cities from Earth with nothing but an outdated history book on Gangsters! Now, tell me what you gave them. Spit it out, Brock, or so help me, I'm going to go gangster on your ass," Garcia snapped.

"I gave them the Yuliarc formula. Pure fluff. Once their scientist finish going through the equations, they'll discover its all meaningless dribble, simple quantum equations to waste time," Brock said.

Garcia slowly put Brock back on his feet. "You've probably just killed us all," Garcia told him and turned to Romano. "Captain Romano, tell me you didn't build anything based on that formula."

"Of course we did," Romano said. "I gave the formula to Mann and he had his scientists engineer the device. It helped us out a great deal finding superconducting coils in the Ferengi life pod."

"You came in a life pod?" Brock asked Tolro.

"I told you, it was along story," Tolro said.

"If your ship is damaged or destroyed, I am no longer obligated to share the profits I've earned here," Brock shouted.

"You shook on it," Tolro said.

"Under false pretenses!" Brock argued.

"Gentlemen," Romano said. "No one is making any more profit. The future has come and it means free energy for all."

"If you made a deal with Mann, you're just trading one slave master for another. Only, instead of the oil companies controlling your life, it will be the Entertainment industry. Do you really want market forces determining your value as a human being?" Garcia asked.

“You’re being a bit dramatic, as always, Garcia,” Romano said. “And you’re wasting Mann’s time.”

“They couldn’t build anything, could they?” Brock rambled, timidly, trying to get an assurance from Garcia.

“Now, if you’ll all come along peacefully, Mann wants you to be at the lighting ceremony,” Romano said.

“Alright,” Garcia said. He acted like he was going to comply, but as he took several steps forwards, for positioning, he threw several playing card at the eyes of the guards. Three guards reached for their eyes and yelped, while the others stepped back, raising their weapons. Garcia attacked Romano, grabbing for his weapon. As they struggled for control of it, some of the storm troopers rushed in to aid their Captain, only to be clobbered by Garcia who freed a hand here, and launch a foot there, all the while struggling with Romano. He even forced Romano to shoot one of his own men. Garcia finally freed the weapon and knocked Romano back, shot another guard, and then came to a halt.

Tolro held a weapon to the small of Garcia’s back. “Drop it,” Tolro said. “Eh, easy. No tricks. In front of you.”

Garcia dropped the weapon in front of him. Romano stood up, brushed himself off, and then punched Garcia in the gut. Garcia dropped to one knee and Romano pulled out a knife. “You know, I was hoping you might try an escape so I could just kill you.”

Romano pulled back the knife, winding up for the kill. And then he went slack and fell to the floor. Behind him, standing in the doorway just as cool as a spring breeze, stood Xuxa. Her Paquita girls rushed in and took over the room, disarming Tolro, who realized he was out numbered.

“Xuxa?” Garcia asked.

“I was just coming to rescue you,” Xuxa said. “Why didn’t you tell me you were Star Fleet?”

“I did,” Garcia said. He turned to witness his friends being released. The Paquita girls greeted Nicki with the warmth deserved for any of their comrades.

“Well, let’s get you back where you belong,” Xuxa said.

“No one’s going anywhere.”

Everyone turned to see Jay and his men, who were blocking any hope of egress. “That’s right. Put down your weapons,” Jay said.

“This is just like in the movies,” Niki said to Trini.

“Xuxa, have your team put down your weapons,” Garcia recommended. “If you shoot them you could blow us all up.”

“Looks like we got a stand off, then,” Xuxa said. “Jay, you no more want to die than we do, but we will not be held as hostages.”

“You are alien invaders,” Jay said. “And you are subject to our laws.”

“I am here to help you,” Xuxa said. “If you watch my show, you know the work I’ve been doing.”

“Just how many aliens are on my planet distracting us with TV shows and music?” Jay asked.

Romano stirred and Jay drew his weapon on the man.

“No, don’t kill him,” Garcia said.

“It’s not your concern. He’s a traitor,” Jay said.

“Probably, but let the courts decide his fate,” Garcia said. “Right now, I need information from him.”

“What sort of information?” Jay asked.

“Brock gave you technology, and Romano gave it to Mann and Mann had someone build something. If that something is what I think it is, your planet is in imminent danger,” Garcia said.

“We built a zero point energy device that will liberate us from the oil conglomerates,” Romano said. “It’s due to be activated any time now.”

“Romano,” Garcia said. “Did you ever hear of the Trojan Horse? That’s what you built. An alien race broadcasted the original version of that formula that Brock gave you, knowing that any potential semi intelligent race that could hear that broadcast would build a device and then turn it on. Once activated, the device would blow a hole in the planet large enough to kill all life on the planet’s surface. Now tell me, what did you build and where is it?”

"I'm not telling you anything," Romano said. "You just don't want us liberated from underneath the oppressive Federation government."

"Where is it?!" Jay asked.

"You call me the traitor, but you're the traitor to our people," Romano said. "We all see your admiration for Garcia and his ilk."

"I've watched Garcia ever since he has arrived on the planet, and the one thing I can say for him is that he has been honest in everything he's done," Jay said. "Now, tell me where is this device is or I will kill you."

"Go ahead," Romano said.

"I'll tell you where it is," Brock said.

"You know?" Garcia asked. "You've been wasting our time when you know?"

"I think I know," Brock said. "And I'll tell you, for a price."

"What is it?" Garcia said.

"Get me off this planet," Brock said.

"Done. Now, tell me what you know," Garcia said.

"Mann mentioned something about a super collider in New Texas..." Brock began.

Romano threw a knife at Brock, Garcia caught it, and Jay shot Romano.

"You didn't have to do that," Garcia said.

"Tam," Xuxa said. "We got more pressing business."

Garcia nodded. "Will you let us pass so we can save your planet?"

"Take me and my men with you. My helicopters are in the court yard," Jay said.

"My spaceship is on the roof, and it's faster," Xuxa said.

"To the roof, then," Garcia said. "Jay, have your men bring the Ferengi."

"Hey, wait just a minute," Brock complained. "You said you would get us off the planet."

"And I will, as soon as I turn off the bomb you gave them," Garcia said.

The Pink UFO was waiting on the roof, ramp down. They all boarded to find that the inside of the ship seemed much more spacious than the outside dimensions could allow for. Garcia didn't comment on the anomaly. He simply followed Xuxa to her command chair. She gave instructions to her helm officer and then to Garcia. "I'll have us there in about ten minutes."

"Do you have transporters that can get us there now?" Garcia asked.

"Yes, if you prefer," Xuxa said.

"Look, I don't know what they built or how much time we have left, but I want you to do me a favor. Get Niki off this planet," Garcia said.

Xuxa nodded.

"No!" Niki said. "I'm not leaving you again."

"Hey, none of that, now," Xuxa said. "You're one of us, and you will follow orders. Garcia, I will do this, but I must evacuate the children from my orphanage."

"Agreed," Garcia said. "Trini, go with Niki and Xuxa. Lenar, Tatiana, you're with me. Bring the Ferengi, Jay."

"Wait, why don't we just stay and help Xuxa rescue the children?" Brock said.

"Because, your absence will give one more child standing room," Garcia said. "Where's the transporter room?"

"Follow Sasha," Xuxa said. "Helm, change course."

"This way," Sasha said. "Just walk through there."

"What's all the smoke about?" Kletsova asked.

"Just ignore the smoke and walk. The coordinates have been set," Sasha said.

Garcia nodded and led the way through the fog-like cloud that rotated around a vortex in the center of the room. He felt a dampness, the same that might be experienced passing through a cloud when skydiving. The light faded until he couldn't see even his hand in front of his face and then the light grew and he was standing in a room. Kletsova and Lenar stepped out on either side of him, and then so did Jay and his men and the Ferengi.

Mann stood on a podium, giving a speech. "And now, people of Iotia, I offer you free energy."

“No,” Garcia yelled. Several cameras swiveled to greet him. “Stop!”

Jay’s guards took on Mann’s guards and Jay grabbed Mann off the podium. “It’s too late!” Mann laughed “You can’t stop progress.”

“Tam!” Lenar yelled, pointing out a diagnostic light board, mapping out the important technical aspects of the plants. “These rings here are no doubt part of the super heavy collider.”

“What are you smashing?” Garcia asked.

“Gold atoms,” The scientist answered, but only after a guard pointed a weapon at him. “We’re just waiting for the superconducting cables to reach full strength.”

“Can we stop it?” Kletsova asked.

“The atoms are already accelerating around the complex,” Lenar said. “As long as they don’t smash inside the apparatus, we should be safe. Some of this is chance. The atoms are flying around their respective tracks, which meet at this point.”

“This here is the addition,” Garcia said. “Suspension platform, probably surrounded by a network of super-conducting coils?”

“Exactly,” the scientist said. “We intend to smash the atoms directly center of the decahedron, in an artificial vacuum, where the magnetic fields will suspend the micro black hole we’re trying to create. We will then introduce atoms into the chamber, allowing them to fall into the black hole and the resulting back lash of energy as the atoms fall in will supply us with unlimited powers, with a point two percent gain due to the normal random flux of energy inherent in the space time continuum.”

“Oh my god,” Brock cried. “We’re all going to die.”

“Sounds like a Romulan power source,” Lenar commented off hand.

“Who do you think built the Trojan program?” Garcia asked. “It’s one of the best kept secrets of the Klingon Romulan war.”

“Where did you get that from?” Kletsova asked.

“Never mind that now,” Garcia said. To the scientist he asked, “Isn’t there a cooling pool that the super-conducting cables pass through?”

“Yes,” the scientist said. He went to the window and pointed to the pool. “The pool is a hundred meters deep, with the first set of cables passing at twenty five meters from east to west and the second set at seventy five meters north to south. That’s magnetic north and south, mind you. That gives it a bit of a natural boost. I designed it.”

“Nice. It’ll make a great epitaph,” Garcia said. “What’s the fastest way down there?”

“The lift,” the scientist said, pointing. “What did you mean by epitaph?”

“Jay?” Garcia said, going for the lift.

Jay moved and his men followed.

Kletsova was right on Garcia’s heels. “Tam, what are you planning? You can’t just stop atoms that are already flying at relativistic speeds.”

Jay kept the cameramen out of the lift, not that there was room for them anyway.

“No, but if we kill the superconducting cables, we might just prevent the end of the world,” Garcia said. The doors to the lift closed. “Ground level.”

Jay pushed the button for the ground level. Cameramen scrambled for the stairwells.

“And just how do you plan to cut through the cables? They’re probably contained in three centimeter thick metal pipe,” Kletsova said.

“More like ten centimeters,” Lenar said.

“Three, ten, it doesn’t matter. How do you expect to cut it?” Kletsova said.

“The pool is forty meters across,” Lenar said. “We will have to sever the cables at both ends of the cooling pool to ensure that no arc occurs across the severed ends. It will take approximately twenty four minutes on each end using underwater arc welder equipment.”

“We don’t have arc welders and we don’t have twenty four minutes,” Kletsova pointed out.

The lift opened and Garcia hustled to the pool side and started kicking off his boots. A moment later cameramen swarmed out of the doors to the stair well, most of them winded from having run down the flight of stairs with their equipment, but they caught up with Garcia and his team.

“Lenar, you’re with me. Kick off your boots,” Garcia said.

“How can I help?” Jay asked.

“I need your gun belt. And you, give yours to Lenar. We need two phasers each,” Garcia said, strapping on the gun belt.

“Are you daft?!” Kletsova said. “Phasers don’t work underwater.”

Lenar nodded, finally understanding what Garcia had in mind. Each carried a phaser in a holster, and each carried one phaser in their hands. They both adjusted the phaser in their hands, putting the weapons in an over load condition.

“Oh my god, Tam, you’re going to kill yourselves,” Kletsova said.

“We’re already dead,” Tam said.

“Will it be enough?” Jay asked.

“It’ll have to be,” Lenar said, the whine of their phasers increasing in volume and pitch.”

“Just a moment then,” Jay said. He removed two pieces of plastic explosives from his suit and handed it to Garcia. One of his other suited soldiers stepped up and handed Lenar his two pieces of explosives.

“Thank you,” Garcia said. “Let’s do this, Lenar. Make sure you empty your lungs as you descend, and be completely lung empty by the time you reach the first cable set. The plastic will mold easy enough. Just stick the phaser right into it. You got east and south. Go.”

“Tam,” Kletsova interrupted. “God be with you.”

Garcia nodded and dived into the pool. He heard Lenar dive in and saw him heading towards his target. The water was ice cold, but Garcia could handle the temperature temporarily. He only hoped Lenar could as well. He could hear the increasing pitch of the phaser, even under water. Reaching his end of the pipe, he stuck the first bit of plastic explosive on the pipe and then set the phaser in it. He immediately swam down along the wall towards the north end of the cooling pool. Before he reached it, there was an explosion. The rush of water pushed him into the wall and he hit hard enough to see stars. Judging by the pain in his head, he was certain his ears had ruptured, as well. But he had to press on. The pipe that he and Lenar had just blown fell, hitting the second pipe, turning up like an unbalanced teeter tatter before sinking the rest of the way to the bottom. Garcia planted his plastic on the second pipe, retrieved his remaining phaser, set it for overload, and stuck it in the plastic. He then pulled himself along the pipe to check on Lenar. Lenar was headed downwards, which was a bit puzzling until Garcia saw the phaser floating downwards. He pursued Lenar and by the time he caught up with him, Lenar had quit swimming and was floating. Garcia knew well enough that Lenar had succumb to the cold water and lack of air, but he couldn’t help his friend. He chased the phaser all the way to the bottom of the pool. He was ascending when the explosion from the north end of the pool ripped through the tank. Garcia saw the light flashing on Lenar’s gun, a blinking light increasing in tempo. He couldn’t hear the sound as he had earlier, which he knew meant he had suffered severe ear damage. He hurried towards the south end of the pipe, placed the phaser in the plastic, and then headed back for Lenar. Garcia tagged Lenar just as the last phaser blew, setting off the plastic which ripped the pipe from the wall.

The pipe hit Garcia in the back. He turned to push it off of him, but he no longer had the strength or energy to struggle for life. He resisted breathing, but the biological necessity would soon force him to try and breathe. He was not sure if the stars he was seeing was from the concussion, the pain in his head, or desperation for air. The pipe was taking him down. Lenar floated there, lifelessly, in the tunnel of water. Sun glinted on the top of the cooling pool, lighting off the ripples, a closing diamond pattern.

Garcia took water into his lungs as he would air. At first his lungs felt as if he had breathed in fire, but then the pain went away. All his pains went away. The water itself became light, as if it were illuminated quick silver.



When the fourth explosion ripped through the pool, splashing water out of the tank like Shamu at a sea park, Kletsova prepared to dive into the pool. The only thing that prevented her was the strange noise behind her. A flash of light whited out the day sky and she turned to see a fire ball growing inside the decahedron. She was sure she was dead. The fireball collapsed in on itself and a wave of energy expanded, evaporating the decahedron. As the sphere of energy expanded, it quickly dissipated but not without setting off fires along the building sides and the grass and the trees. Every window facing the blast blew out. She and the soldiers and

cameramen were tossed to the ground by the pressure wave. The next thing she was certain of was that there was an Away Team hovering over her.

Kletsova saw the mouth of the medical personal talking over her, but heard nothing. She tried to sit up, but the woman with red hair pushed her back. The Vulcan next to her stood up, looking towards the pool. Kletsova turned her head to the pool. She saw a Klingon handing Lenar out of the pool. She was pretty sure it was Worf who was rescuing Lenar. Yes, she decided, she would recognize that Klingon anywhere. Another man, a bearded man, surfaced, and he was dragging the limp body of Garcia. Worf and the bearded man handed Garcia up to the medical personnel.

Kletsova laid back on the ground and closed her eyes. "You finally done it," she mumbled. "You finally went and killed yourself, you stupid ass." She began to cry.



Garcia tried to shake the blinding white void from his eyes, but even holding his hand before him as a shield failed to cast a sufficient shadow. It wasn't that the light was painful, but no matter how he turned or tried to block the light, a light that was raining in on him from all sides and all points as if there was no source, he was unable to avoid it. All points were light. There were no shadows. He called out and his voice had a resonance as if he were in a shower and he felt the sound move out from him as if all of space was stirred by the sound the same way a stone would send visible ripples across the surface of a pond. He walked but since there were no reference points he could not determine how much headway he was making. A point of interest, a variation in the light, almost a shadow but more similar to the twisting of light through a prism, became apparent in front of him. He stepped closer to it. The twisting of light also moved closer to him, as if he were approaching a mirror, only it wasn't a mirror. Right before a collision with the apparition, a human coalesced out of the light and reached out and grabbed his hand.

"Tammis Parkin Arblaster Garcia," the female said.

Garcia blinked. "This is not like before. Where's Sarek?"

"You're not dead, Tam," she said.

"I'm not?" he asked, glancing around before returning his gaze to the female.

She had a tight grip on his hand. She purred lightly. "You were dead, but Doctor Crusher healed you," she said.

"Really," Garcia said, still a bit skeptical. "Okay, then where am I and who are you?"

"You're in sickbay," she said. "My name is Isis."

"This isn't sickbay," Garcia pointed out.

"You're in your head. You're in my head. We're in each other's head, inside Sickbay. Think mind meld light," Isis said. "You've done this before. Remember?"

"My head isn't this quiet," Garcia said.

"I'm helping you with that part. You needed the quiet. And your girlfriends consented to us having a private chat," Isis said.

"Girlfriends?" Garcia asked.

"Have you forgotten Duana and Ilona already?" Isis asked.

"No," Garcia said. "I'm just surprised you know about them."

"I spoke to them, just as I am speaking to you now," Isis said.

"I'm not dreaming," Garcia told himself. He was sure of that. "And I don't know you. I would remember meeting you."

"Oh, we have met," Isis said. "Well, even that is a bit more than I should share with you at this time. We have something more important to discuss."

"You said your name is Isis. You're sure I'm not dead?" Garcia asked.

"Disappointed?" Isis asked.

"Who are you?" Garcia demanded.

"My name is Isis," she said again. "I work with agent Gary Seven."

"Gary Seven?" Garcia asked.

"Remember? Gary Seven and Captain Kirk saved Earth from blowing itself up," Isis said. "Kind of like you just saved the Iotians from a similar fate."



“But...” Garcia began.

“Shh,” Isis quieted him, pulling him closer to her.

Isis was uncomfortably close and he knew beyond a doubt that he wasn’t dead when her proximity raised the compulsion in his mind for him to kiss her. He resisted, with effort, but he resisted. He could feel her breath against his face and he had the strangest sensation in his body, as if dolphins were pulsing him with echolocation. It was a quiet, warm vibration as if a cat were lying on his chest, purring.

“We need you,” Isis said. “We want to recruit you.”

“Who are you?” Garcia asked.

“We do not choose agents lightly,” Isis continued. “Normally we recruit our agents when they are young, train them for specific missions, and only then send them out into the field. But, we have to make an exception in your case. Call it fate, or luck, or bad karma, but you have opened up a specific convergence of energy which could theoretically, if left unchecked, spiral out of control and bring the entire galaxy to ruins, setting the evolution of Galactic civilization back to the stone-age.”

“Please,” Garcia said. “That’s absurd. No one individual can be that important. And even I am not so egotistical to believe that the choices I make will bring chaos to the entire galaxy.”

“One man can make a difference. Look what Kirk accomplished in his lifetime,” Isis pointed out. “I’m very serious, Tam. You need us. We need you.”

“If what you say is true, and the Galaxy is at risk because of me, then it would seem logical to kill me,” Garcia asked.

“Your absence from the space time continuum would only escalate the situation,” Isis said. “Believe me, we did evaluate that option, and found the end results were not any more promising. No, the only way is for us to work together.”

“Who is we?” Garcia asked. “Oh my god. Q! You’re Q.”

“No, I am Isis,” she said.

“But Q is a part of this, isn’t he?” Garcia pressed.

“There’s going to be a war. The war of the gods,” Isis said. “The Multi-verse will be the playing field, and you, Garcia, are the queen. Q is just another piece to be manipulated in a game even he doesn’t understand. Q can come and go through this space-time continuum the same as a dolphin can leap from the water, but Q always return to this specific space time continuum, this Universe.”

“You’re not Q?” Garcia said.

“I’m Isis,” Isis repeated, patiently.

“Are you a Traveler?” Garcia asked. “Like the one that came to Wesley.”

“No,” Isis said.

“Is this some kind of a practical joke?” Garcia asked. “Wes? Come out, Wes. You got me. Computer, end program.”

Isis squeezed his hand and moved even closer to him, her face nearly touching his. Garcia felt an involuntary shiver, as if a cat whisker had tickled his nose.

“Tam, listen to me,” Isis insisted. “Wes is a game piece, just like you. We are not completely sure how his game will evolve. In one future, he’s a Captain of a Starship. In another future, he leaves Star Fleet. We know your paths will intersect again. He may save you. He may destroy you. Are you listening to me?”

“No,” Garcia said. “You’re talking nonsense.”

Isis grabbed Garcia, both her fist catching up his shirt, pulling him closer. Her mouth touched his. “You have to listen to me. We need you. You need us.”

“You’re hurting me,” Garcia said, blood spilling from his chest.

“We need you,” Isis said again.

As she spoke, her lips brushed his, and he could no longer resist kissing her. Her words were lost in the kiss.



Doctor Crusher finally pulled Isis off her patient and handed the cat to Doctor Selar. “Would you take this cat back to Gary Seven’s quarters, please?”

“Perhaps the cat’s purring would be sufficient stimulus to help revive Tam,” Doctor Selar said, trying to keep the cat from scratching her.

“I’m surprised at you, Doctor,” Crusher said. “That’s not very scientific, or even logical. I’m not saying it wouldn’t work, I’m just surprised.”

“So am I,” Doctor Selar said. “I suppose the mind meld I attempted on Garcia to help him initiate a healing trance has influenced me negatively.”

“The cat idea would have been a treatment Garcia would have tried,” Doctor Crusher agreed. “Look, I know you and he had, well, I know you don’t even want to discuss what you and he had, or have, but you shouldn’t be embarrassed that Garcia has influenced you to the point that you tend to be emotional around him.”

Doctor Selar raised an eyebrow. “I am not emotional, Doctor. If anyone has been unduly influenced by Garcia, I believe it is you. After all, you were dragged into a mind meld with him as well.”

Isis hissed, her ears going flat, vocalizing discontent with a growl descending in pitch, offering an impressive bass.

“Of course I am feeling emotions,” Doctor Crusher admitted. “I’m human, and I do have feelings for him. But you had a relationship with him and his humanity has obviously affected you much more than you’re admitting.”

“Am I interrupting something?”

Doctors Crusher and Selar turned to Counselor Troi. “No,” they said, almost simultaneously.

“I was just about to return Gary Seven’s cat to him,” Selar said and departed Sickbay.

Crusher smiled faintly at Troi. “Don’t know how that cat keeps getting into Sickbay,” she said, turning to take another reading of her patient.

“Beverly?” Troi asked.

“I don’t understand why Selar can’t simply admit that she loves him,” Doctor Crusher said. “It’s not like it’s illogical to love him. Yes, love is an emotion, but there’s also an intellectual component to love that transcends emotion and...”

“Beverly,” Counselor Troi said, even more gently.

Crusher turned to Troi and embraced her, sobbing. “I’ve done all I can for him. He will either wake up or he won’t.”

“Shh,” Counselor Troi said. “It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not,” Crusher said, pulling away from Troi. “I shouldn’t feel this way. He’s my patient.”

“He’s our friend,” Troi said. “You haven’t lost your professional objectiveness. You’ve done all you can, you’re feeling some frustration because you want to do more and you can’t. That conflict between wanting to do something and knowing you can’t, coupled with the fact that you don’t know if to mourn or be happy is the source of this energy. He’s hanging on as well as he is can.”

“He reminds me so much of Wes,” Crusher said, wiping her face. “And yet, there’s still something... Deanna, I shouldn’t feel this way.”

“Garcia has touched all of us,” Counselor Troi said, patting her on the back. She stepped forward and caressed Garcia’s shoulder. “I’ll watch over him awhile. Why don’t you go get some rest?”

“Thank you,” Doctor Crusher said.

Deanna found herself alone with Garcia. She held his hand and sang the child’s song, “Row, Row, Row your boat.” It had worked for her in the past, but this time it appeared not to be effective. “Tam, it’s safe now. You can come back to us.”



Crusher and Selar were able to stabilize Garcia and repair the damaged brain tissue fairly easy. The freezing temperature of the water had helped reduce the amount of damage done after he had drowned. As Garcia approached consciousness and lucidity, he was in and out of a semi conscious state and his questions were repetitious: “Did we save the planet? Is Lenar okay?” But mostly he slept, stirring once when Counselor Troi came and sang to him. The people that had hovered over him seemed like a dream. The first thing Garcia noticed as he began to regain consciousness was sound. He heard the whispering of voices and the quiet, familiar chirpings of bio-beds. Someone laughed. A female. The air smelled clean, with a touch of

lilac, and a hint of coffee. He forced his eyes open, squinted as he took inventory of the room. The lights were dimmed for third shift, simulating night. He asked himself if he were dreaming, but decided it was real. He touched his forehead and found a neural stimulator attached to his left temple. He had an impulse to pull it off, but he forced himself to leave it alone. Thirst motivated him to try and get up. He found his feet easy enough and managed to stagger over to the replicator.

"Tomato soup, luke warm," Garcia said.

A large coffee cup, shaped more like a bowl with a handle, of luke warm tomato soup appeared and he picked it up, sipped from it, and turned around to survey sickbay. He dropped the cup and knelt down to pick it up. When he stood, he was startled by Doctor Crusher's sudden appearance at his side.

"I don't remember telling you that you could get up," Crusher said.

"I was thirsty," Garcia said, allowing her to lead him. He sat down on the bed. "I made a mess."

"I'll take care of it," Crusher said, taking the cup from him. She set it aside and retrieved her tricorder. "We were worried when you didn't start a healing trance on your own."

"But obviously we saved the planet," Garcia said.

"Yes," Crusher said.

"And Lenar? You released him already?" Garcia said.

Crusher closed her tricorder and pocketed it. "If you promise to rest, I'll release you to quarters."

"You didn't answer my question," Garcia said.

"A fragment of the pipe penetrated Lenar's C2 vertbrae, severing the spinal cord from the brain," Crusher said. "He was already unconscious from drowning, so he didn't feel anything. He died instantly."

"The Trill?" Garcia asked.

"We are unable to determine whether or not the symbiont has survived, but we were able to maintain minimum body functions, so we are keeping Lenar's body alive on life support. A Trill medical team will be standing by to receive Lenar as soon as we get back to Earth. I am hopeful. The symbiont's neural structure seems to be intact. We're just not seeing normal neural synaptic activity, yet."

Garcia's focus shifted beyond Crusher to the ceiling. He was no longer hungry.

He heard Crusher offer to call Counselor Troi, he felt himself shake his head, but he didn't feel as if he had done so with intention. He pushed to his feet. "What quarters do you have me assigned to?"

"Doctor Selar's quarters," Crusher said. "I figured it would be alright, since..."

"It's fine," Garcia said. "I'm free to go then?"

"Yes," Crusher said. "Are you sure you don't want to speak with Counselor Troi?"

"No. Yes. I'm sure," Garcia said. "I'll be fine."

Garcia walked the corridors, turning only once to verify that he was being followed by his two familiars, Duana and Ilona. They kept strangely quiet, as if they were respecting his funeral march for Lenar. Whether the Tril survived or not, Lenar was dead. Garcia logged onto the network via his neural implant and was happy to find that it was working fine again. He scrolled through the list of survivors from the original Iotia boarding of the Philadelphia Freedom. He was relieved to see Afu had made it to a life pod. Then the secondary report came up listing Afu as MIA, believed to be dead due to the destruction of an alien space station by Garcia. He had to reread that to understand and discovered that the Preservers had made a clone of him during an alien abduction. He felt vindicated that he had indeed been abducted but he was frustrated that he had no specific recall of the event. All of his reading and thinking and walking led him around deck several times. He had to walk to comprehend it all, his mind sluggish as if he were fighting off a drug induced sleep. On the third time around the deck, he noticed Counselor Troi walking beside him. He didn't have to touch her to know it was the real Troi, not the simulation running in his head.

"Hey," Garcia said.

"Doctor Crusher released you on the premise you would retire to your quarters and rest," Troi said.

"Selar reported you missing when you failed to show."

"I'm reading," Garcia said. "That's a form of relaxation."

"I doubt the reading you're doing is relaxing," Deanna said.

"No," Garcia said, pausing at the turbolift. "Will you excuse me, please?"

"I think we should talk," Troi said.

“Give me an hour,” Garcia said. “There’s something I need to do first.”

Garcia entered the turbolift that became available and closed the door manually to shut Deana out. As soon as the door was shut, he asked the computer for the whereabouts of Captain Picard.

“Captain Picard is in Conference Room Four,” the computer responded.

Garcia was momentarily distracted by the computer’s voice, but he pushed on. It was Mrs. Roddenberry’s voice. How odd was that? Was this the Preserver’s doing? “Take me there,” Garcia said.

The turbolift whisked him away and he closed his eyes as he noticed a slight sense of vertigo as the lift moved. It set him on the appropriate deck, as close to the Conference Room as possible. He was so determined to follow through on his course of action that he hadn’t stopped to consider that Picard might be otherwise engaged. He entered the Conference room with passion, but that wind was taken out of his sails when he saw who was in conference with Picard. Captain Picard sat at the end of the table, with Captain Munoz to his left. To the left of Munoz was Commander Osaka and to his left was Commander Riker.

“Have you lost all sense of social etiquette?” Riker demanded.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Garcia fumbled for words. “I was...”

“It’s alright,” Picard said. “I think it’s only fitting that you sit in on this, since we’re discussing you. Come sit down.”

Garcia’s earlier resolve returned and he stood at attention. “Sir, I prefer to remain standing while you issue your charges against me.”

“There aren’t going to be any charges brought against you,” Picard said.

“Then I respectfully submit myself for disciplinary action, based on...” Garcia began.

“This is exactly the kind of passive aggressive, disrespect I have been talking about,” Osaka said. “He’s obstinate to the point of almost being disobedient, and it’s this kind of willful arrogance that suggests that he can never be a team player.”

“I disagree,” Munoz said. “It’s his ability to think through his orders, understanding the consequences for his actions and inactions that make him a valuable member of our team.”

“At any rate, we are not about to levy charges against you,” Picard said. “So, come sit down.”

“I don’t understand,” Garcia began.

“Sit down!” Picard said.

Garcia took the chair next to Picard. Once Garcia had taken a seat, Picard glanced over the PADD in front of him, sat it down gently, and appraised Garcia in a compassionate light. “I understand that you may be experiencing feelings of guilt about Lenar,” Picard said.

“It isn’t a feeling, Sir. Guilt isn’t a feeling at all. Guilt is either a yes or a no, and it’s a fact that I ordered him to his death,” Garcia said.

“And, given the same circumstances, would you do so again?” Captain Munoz asked.

“All things being equal, yes, I would,” Garcia said.

“Then you can put his death behind you and move on,” Munoz said. “He chose to participate in an effort to save billions of lives. You both did. You acted in accordance with Star Fleet protocols, above and beyond the call of duty. After all, you had the opportunity to abandon Iotia with Xuxa, but the thought never even occurred to you. You did what you had to do and time was of the essence.”

Picard set his PADD down on the table. “So, after reviewing the evidence, from both testimony and video records supplied to us by the Iotian government, this preliminary investigation finds you not guilty for the death of Lenar, since both of you were acting in accordance to your conscience and duty.”

“I concur,” Riker said.

“I concur,” Osaka said.

“I concur,” Captain Munoz said. “In addendum, I also recommend that Garcia be awarded the Starfleet Silver Palm, medal of valor, for his efforts on behalf of the Iotian people.”

Garcia was a bit taken by surprise on that, especially when both Osaka and Riker agreed.

“Further,” Picard said. “After careful review of the telemetry and records from the emergency buoy launched from the Philadelphia Freedom prior to its destruction, we find you not guilty of sabotage of the afore mentioned starship, but rather find your actions to be in accordance with Star Fleet protocols, which

clearly defines your rolls in the absence of senior officers faced with the potential loss of the ship to a hostile force.”

“I concur,” Munoz said.

“I concur,” Riker said.

Osaka revealed his bias in his hesitation. “I still believe it would have been possible for Garcia to contact 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt Myers on deck four.”

“We’ve already been over that,” Riker said. “Meyers was pinned down and unable to access any of the control interfaces. The data clearly shows had Garcia delayed in initiating the self destruct, there would have been insufficient computer resources remaining to destroy the ships, and the Iotians would now have access to warp drive, among other things.”

“Ninety seven people died because of his decision,” Osaka said. “They might be alive if he had not blown the ship up.”

“Garcia had no way to know how many people would die, how many people had already been captured, or murdered,” Captain Munoz said. “He did give them five minutes to find a way off the ship, with a general hail to let them know the situation, which was more than you or I would have done had we still been on board. We know that ten of the crew had the opportunity to be captured by the Iotians and chose to remain hidden, unable to get to either a transporter or a life pod. So, they did have options.”

“We will just have to agree to disagree on this one,” Osaka said.

“Very well,” Picard said. “Let the records show that in the preliminary investigation into the destruction of the Philadelphia Freedom, three out of four find Garcia not guilty of willful and malicious sabotage.”

“Garcia, do you have anything to add to these preceding?” Captain Munoz asked.

“No, Captain,” Garcia said.

“I guess, then, we’re done here,” Captain Munoz said.

“Wait,” Osaka said. “What about Garcia’s conduct on the planet? What about his rescue operation, the number of people he killed directly and indirectly, disobeying a direct order from me, and charges of assault on a superior officer.”

“I have already reprimanded him for the assault,” Captain Munoz said. “And considering that the three of you attacked him first, I think you should leave it at that. As for the rescue operation, I take full responsibility for that, since I gave him the order to rescue you. Star Fleet will have to decide whether the death and destruction in the rescue warrants further investigation, but given Garcia was just one man, and that only two of our officers died in the rescue, and that due to the poorly designed Iotian transporters, I think he will be given considerable leeway. Further I recommended Garcia for the Outstanding Airman Award, based on his flying during the rescue of my crew, and for the landing of the 737 on the deck of an aircraft carrier, saving 117 lives, if I’m not mistaken. I have also recommended Garcia being awarded the Federation Star.”

Garcia knew that the Federation Star is awarded only to persons of Starfleet that distinguish themselves conspicuously through bravery and valor, risking their lives above and beyond the call of duty while engaged in an action against an enemy of the Federation. The deed performed must be one of personal bravery or self-sacrifice so conspicuous as to clearly distinguish the individual above his comrades and must have involved risk of life. In all of the times that the Federation Star has ever been awarded, incontestable proof was presented, so Garcia could only imagine what sort of proof Captain Munoz was presenting on his behalf.

“If there is anything else?” Picard asked. No one volunteered any information. “Then I call this meeting adjourned.”

Osaka pushed away from the table and departed in a huff. Riker shared a glance with Picard communicating something only the two of them were privy to, as he got up to leave. Garcia started to get up.

“Please remain seated, Ensign Garcia,” Captain Picard said.

The door closed behind Riker and Garcia shifted his glance back and forth from Captain Munoz to Captain Picard. They stared at him.

“Starfleet is sending a ship to further investigate the Preserver presence here, as well as decide on the best way to help the Iotians further. Because of one of your Star Fleet Singer episodes, they are also sending

cetacean ambassadors to communicate with the sentient life in the oceans here on Iotia,” Picard said. “But, even with all that, it would seem that your self sacrifice on the behalf of Iotia has done more for bringing about the changes that Kirk had originally intended to bring so long ago than anything we could have anticipated or planned. The whole planet has engaged in prayer, song, and candlelight vigils on your behalf. They are actively modifying their way of life, modeling their behavior on their new conceptions of a Starfleet Officer, specifically, you. I personally don’t like them elevating a single man to the status of sainthood, but you have their attention, and before we leave for Earth, I think you should speak to them.”

“I will endeavor to say something appropriate,” Garcia said.



“Come,” Deanna Troi answered the call of her door, setting the PADD she was reading on the coffee table. She stood up to greet her visitor and seemed surprised to find Garcia.

Garcia hesitated at the threshold. “May I come in?” he asked.

“Please,” Deanna said, gesturing for him to sit on the couch.

Garcia sat on the couch, keeping arm’s length distance between him and Troi. He stared at the candle for a moment, and then shifted on the couch so he could view out the winow. He stared at the Iotian planet far below. Considering the balance of water to land, it could have been Earth. “I went to talk to Picard,” Garcia said. It looked peaceful from orbit and the song “From a Distance,” originally sung by Nancy Griffith.

“And?” she asked.

He shook the sultry voice of Nancy out of his head. “It didn’t go quite the way I expected,” Garcia said.

“It didn’t go the way you expected, or it didn’t go the way you wanted?” Troi asked.

“It didn’t go the way I wanted,” Garcia corrected.

“And what did you want?” Troi asked.

“I wanted to be punished,” Garcia said. “And I wanted to be comforted at the same time. I wanted...”

“You wanted?” Troi asked.

Garcia looked at his feet and clasped his hands. “I wanted something inappropriate.”

“What did you want?” Troi repeated.

“You know how much I admire Picard,” Garcia said. “More than that, I have created this father archetype persona based on him, and the fact that I see a bit of Sarek in him probably confuses the issues...”

“What did you want, Garcia?” Troi asked again, softly.

“I wanted him to hug me and tell me everything would be alright,” Garcia said.

Deanna shifted closer to him, putting both her hands on his hands. He was unashamed of the fact he was tearing up.

“How can I ever hope to be Kirk?” Garcia asked, searching her eyes for an answer. His vision became blurred as tears began to flow and he noted the warmth as they tracked down his face. “I have studied everything about Kirk I could ever get my hands on, from text to actual media files and old ship logs, and I think I can safely say James T Kirk never experienced any social angst over sending men to their deaths or about having a promiscuous life style.”

“I got news for you, Tam,” Deanna said. “You will never be Captain James T Kirk. And you will never be Jean Luc Picard. You can only be you.”

“I know that,” Garcia said.

“Do you?” Deanna asked.

“Do you know, even with all the death I saw, the one that affected me the most was the Brittany Bot,” Garcia said. “She was just a robot and I still grieve for her.”

“She was more than that. She was an extension of yourself. Loosing her was like loosing an arm,” Troi said. “That’s one of the dangers of getting implants, a danger that is often over looked when discussing the pros and cons thereof.”

“Maybe you’re right,” Garcia said.

“Maybe?” Deanna said, playfully.

“Thank you, Deanna,” Garcia said.

To his surprise, Deanna leaned into him and kissed him. “No, thank you. You outdid yourself this time.”



Garcia waited outside the door for someone to answer. When the door opened, it was Nancy Carter. She immediately fell on Garcia, hugging him and kissing him, and dragging him inside. “Thank you so much for saving my daughter,” Nancy said.

Niki came out of her room to see who it was and instantly went to Garcia, hugging him, too. She openly cried, still saddened by Lenar’s loss, but happy to see Garcia had survived.

“Niki, would you be willing to do one more song with me?” Garcia asked. “To say good bye to the Iotians and Lenar. With your mom’s permission, of course.”

“Do you have a song in mind?” Niki asked.

“Yes,” Garcia said. “If you can be ready in half an hour, meet me at transporter four. Lt. Carter, I would like it if you come.”

“Of course,” Nancy said.

With that, Garcia departed and went to see his other two friends. Kletsova and Trini greeted him with almost equal intensity, both glad that he was up and about and all three began commiserating the loss of their friends. “I would like you to join me for one last song. I’m going planet side and I am going to leave some flowers at the pool.”

“Of course,” Trini said.



Garcia placed the flowers into the pool and set them adrift. And then he returned to join hands with his circle of friends. Another circle, enveloping their own, consisted of Iotian dignitaries and Senior Officer’s from the Enterprise and the Philadelphia Freedom. “Lenar would not want this to be a sad occasion, but one of gratitude, a moment to reflect, learn, and maybe laugh. So, in keeping with his wishes, we will sing and celebrate his life, as well as all of those from the Philadelphia Freedom who were lost.”

Garcia let go of his friend’s hands and lifted the guitar from its cradle. Niki stepped up to the microphone. “This song is from Earth and was performed by Celine Dione, My Heart Will Go On,” she said, which she had talked Garcia into doing. Trini was unable to hide the fact that she was crying. After that song, Niki introduced the song Garcia had picked out for their farewell number. “This is Abba. Thank you for the music:” And Niki sang:

I'm nothing special, in fact I'm a bit of a bore  
If I tell a joke, you've probably heard it before  
But I have a talent, a wonderful thing  
'Cause everyone listens when I start to sing  
I'm so grateful and proud  
All I want is to sing it out loud  
So I say  
Thank you for the music, the songs I'm singing  
Thanks for all the joy they're bringing  
Who can live without it, I ask in all honesty  
What would life be?  
Without a song or a dance what are we?  
So I say thank you for the music  
For giving it to me.  
Mother says I was a dancer before I could walk  
She says I began to sing long before I could talk  
And I've often wondered, how did it all start?  
Who found out that nothing can capture a heart  
Like a melody can?  
Well, whoever it was, I'm a fan  
So I say  
Thank you for the music, the songs I'm singing  
Thanks for all the joy they're bringing  
Who can live without it, I ask in all honesty  
What would life be?  
Without a song or a dance what are we?

So I say thank you for the music  
For giving it to me  
I've been so lucky, I am the girl with golden hair  
I wanna sing it out to everybody  
What a joy, what a life, what a chance!  
So I say  
Thank you for the music, the songs I'm singing  
Thanks for all the joy they're bringing  
Who can live without it, I ask in all honesty  
What would life be?  
Without a song or a dance what are we?  
So I say thank you for the music  
For giving it to me."

The ceremony ended with that song, shaking of hands, and diplomats mingling with people of consequence. Garcia even met Jay, who was no longer resigned to wearing a suit thanks to Crusher's medical intervention. As Garcia made the rounds, he secretly pushed to the far ends of the crowd, wanting to escape the people and bustle. Like Picard, he hated ceremonies more than anything else. Pomp and circumstance just wasn't his style. Give him a leather jacket and a hat and let him crawl around a dungeon, or give him a bike and a long stretch of highway. Or a starship, hovering in the dead of night listening to the background noise of space, hoping to find that one intelligible signal from some undiscovered race of beings, seeking their own answers from the deep immensity of it all.

Garcia was about to slip away when he felt a hand touch his shoulder. He turned to see Susanna Hoff smiling up at him. Before he could manage to speak, she hugged him, going up on her toes, and whispered in his ear, "Let's get out of here and go make some noise?"

He kissed her, took her hand, and they departed, unnoticed by all, save one. Kletsova lifted a glass of wine, saluting the two as they disappeared, and then turned back to give Paula a hug good bye.



## CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Garcia and Susanna sat in the big chair of the Enterprise set in his tower studio, their feet propped up on the exercise ball Garcia had carried over from his flat. They watched scenes of stars moving across the large, projection screen television that Garcia passed off as the main viewer. Susana snuggled closer to Garcia, hugging him tight, smiling up at him.

"So, is this what it's really like?" Susanna asked.

"Pretty much," Garcia said. "We're missing the sounds of life support, miscellaneous computer functions, and the bustle of flight crews, but pretty close."

"Where do we go from here?" Susana asked.

"I have to return to Earth," Garcia said. He wanted to ask her to come. He wanted her to ask him to stay, and then again, he didn't want her to ask. His life was so complicated. What would Rivan think? Not that he owed her an explanation. If anyone would want to know what was going on, it would be Jaxa. And Simone. He sighed.

"What's going on in that head of yours?" Susana asked. "Saving more worlds?"

"Just trying to hold mine together," he answered, trying to make it sound funny. "Actually, my mind is rehearsing the song, Goodbye Girl, by Bread."

"I love that song," Susanna said. "Sing it for me?"

Garcia sang it for her.

"Will you come back and visit me?" Susana asked.

"I would like to," Garcia said.

Susana didn't press him for a commitment. "I would like you to."

Garcia contacted the Enterprise via his implant and logged into the computer to make a request. A moment later a small, black, felt box appeared on the seat next to him. He retrieved it and offered it to Susana. She looked at him, trying to contain her excitement. He opened it to reveal a gold pendant attached to a gold necklace. The pendant resembled the communication badge he was wearing.

"Oh," Susana said, a little disappointment creeping into her voice. "It's lovely."

"If you would prefer a ring, I can arrange it," Garcia said.

"No," Susana said. She allowed him to place it on her

"It's a communicator," Garcia said. "Keep it on you and if I am ever in the area, I'll call you."

Susanna kissed him. For a moment they were both lost in the kiss, but then someone coughed, interrupting them. They both stood to meet their unexpected guests.

"He's just like you, Bill," Nicole said.

"No, he's just like Kirk," Bill said.

"Is there a difference when it comes to kissing beautiful women?" Leonard asked.

"You're all here!" Garcia said. "Together again."

"Yes," Gene said, coming forward to shake Garcia's hands. "Thank you. We've decided to use one of your scripts for the new movie."

"Lots of running around, adrenalin flowing, heart stopping actions," Bill said.

"And explosions," Leonard agreed.

"It won't be the same without you here, though," Roxanne said.

"I have faith in your abilities," Garcia said.

"And we have faith in yours. Thank you for giving us new hope," Majel said.

"Hey, I like that," Bill said. "We could call our movie A New Hope."

"I think it's been used already," George Takai said.

"By whom?" Bill demanded.

"Enterprise to Garcia," Garcia's comm. badge opened up, spitting out the voice of Worf. Going right to voice without beeping him was usually indicative of an emergency, but Worf's voice suggested impatience, rather than urgency. "We're ready to depart for Earth and we're waiting on you."

"Stand by," Garcia said. He hugged everyone present in the room, thanking them for all they had done to make his life on Iotia enjoyable. He hesitated at DeForest Kelley, wanting him to be something he knew

couldn't be and then forced himself to let go. He then kissed Susana one last time, which, though it distracted him from his loss of McCoy, was its own brand of torture.

"You better not keep the Captain waiting," Susana said. "It's not good to hold up the wheels of progress."

Garcia stepped away from her, letting go of her hand only after his arm reached full extension. His badge was already activated, so he didn't need to tap it. All he had to do was call for a beam out. He hesitated.

"Come with me," Garcia requested, knowing she wouldn't which made him want her more and knowing if she did his life would only be that much more complicated.

"Stay," Susana asked.

"I'll be back," Garcia promised.

"I'll be waiting," Susana promised.

"Enterprise, one to beam up," Garcia said.

The Iotia world disappeared and was replaced by a dimly lit transporter room. Lt. Bronwyn Gail Robinson greeted Garcia as he stepped down from the transporter alcove.

"Hello," Garcia greeted Lt. Robinson, perhaps a little more flirtatiously than he should considering his most immediate longing.



The copy of Gary Seven stood in a circle of light, surrounded by cats of all sizes and descriptions. Most of the cats bordered on the periphery of the light which encompassed Gary, while some moved around in the dark beyond. Isis sat proudly next to Gary's feet, her tail coiled around her, the tip lightly flexing up and down. If it wasn't for the occasional turning of her head, she might have been mistaken for the ideal porcelain cat sculpture.

"I don't believe he will join us," Gary said. "He has taken the side of the Grays."

"Even if he did, he's too old to enter the training," said an orange tabby.

"We need him," Isis said.

"We don't need him," responded a lion. "He's reckless and unpredictable. And for time travelers, we can't tolerate people of an unpredictable nature."

"Whether he joins or not, he is the focal point for the coming crisis," Isis said. "The least we could do is protect him."

"Whoever protects him will have to surrender their time travel privileges for the duration of their assignment," the orange tabby said.

"I'll go," Gary said. "After all, I can't very well return to Earth, being a copy and all."

"We have another assignment for you," the lion said.

A white Royal Bengal tiger stood and stretched, dipping its head and extending its forepaws. It then did another stretch, arching its back high and yawning. Except for its size, the behavior would have been familiar to anyone who had lived around a common house cat. "I'll go," the tiger said.

"Do you know what you're getting into?" the orange tabby asked.

"I find the quantum fluctuations that permeate the space around Garcia interesting," the tiger said. "I like the sound of his vibrations. It's soothing. It reminds me of my mother's purr."

"Your bias towards liking the human makes you an unsuitable choice," the lion said.

"But her experience in the time period in which Garcia operates would make her a valuable asset to him," the orange tabby said.

"Is there a limit of information I can share with my assignment?" the tiger asked.

"Your discretion," the orange tabby said. "There's an agent in the field near Garcia now. We'll have her talk to him. Prepare him to expect you."

"Very well," the tiger said. "If you'll excuse me, I should go take care of a few affairs before I leave for the 24<sup>th</sup> century. It's been a while since I've been there. Looking forward to going back, actually."

"Good luck," Isis said.

"Isis," the tiger laughed. "I'm surprised at you. Luck, indeed!"

Isis walked over to the tiger and brushed up against her leg, and stood up on her hind legs to scent mark the tiger's chin.

"Be careful, at least," Isis said.

"I will," the tiger said, amused. She returned the affection.



Lt. Robinson parted company with Garcia and Guinan came and sat down next to him. He smiled at her and waited to see if she might speak first. She merely seemed to be appraising him. The expanse of windows were behind Garcia, which kept him from being distracted by the passing stars.

"Why are you looking at me like that?" Garcia asked.

"You once asked me about my temporal sense," Guinan said. "About my intuition regarding where I am, or more specifically, when I am, and how I can tell if that when is somehow wrong or off."

"Yes," Garcia said. "I remember having that conversation with you. You said it wasn't time yet. I remember trying to be cross at that, but it's just too hard to be mad around you."

"It's time," Guinan said. "Come by my quarters tomorrow, 2100 hours. We need to talk."

"You're joking, right?" Garcia said.

Guinan didn't appear to be joking.

"Why can't we talk right now?" Garcia asked. "I'm free."

"2100 hours," Guinan said.

"2101 alright?" Garcia asked, being a smart ass.

"That will be fine," Guinan said, getting up.

"You're always so mysterious and cryptic," Garcia said. "I am looking forward to finally learning some secrets from you."

"I didn't say I was going to divulge any secrets," Guinan said. "I just said we need to talk."

"Fine," Garcia said. "This isn't going to be another session of me talking and you listening, is it?"

"Depends," Guinan said.

"On?" Garcia asked.

"See you later," Guinan said.

Garcia's frustration didn't fully bubble up until after she was gone. "I hate cryptic!" he said, hoping his voice carried back to her. He smiled at the patrons that had turned to figure out why he was yelling at no one in particular.

## EPILOGUE

With nothing more to say about their situation, the Garcia clone rearranged his priority list to include finding food and securing shelter. He walked and the Seven of Nine clone walked next to him. Both were quiet, but both for their own reasons. Presently they both stopped.

“Did you hear that?” Garcia asked.

“I sense a tremor in the earth,” Seven said.

They proceeded up the incline for a better vantage point of their surroundings. As they looked down into the valley dappled with flaming trees and a meandering brook, they saw what appeared to be dinosaurs.

“Miniature Aegyptosaurus baharijensis,” Seven said and was about to add a description to that only she suddenly found herself thrown to the ground, her mouth capped by Garcia’s hand. She fumed and bit his hand, but he didn’t let up.

“Be quiet,” Garcia said, an urgency about him. He eased up on her to allow her to move, ignoring the fact that his palm was bleeding. “Look.”

Seven pushed Garcia off her and rolled over to peer down at the herd of miniature Aegyptosauruses, looking for whatever anomaly had “freaked” her companion. That’s when she saw the first of the bipedal, reptilian humanoids. Now that she knew what she was looking for, she could discern a number of them walking in the high grass, literally herding the Aegyptosauruses. She was angry at herself for having missed such an obvious threat.

“Species 622,” Seven said.

“The Gorn!” Garcia echoed. “Look at the primitive way they’re dressed, though. And they’re carrying spears.”

As the herd of Aegyptosauruses moved closer to the brook, they were able to see a number of Gorn clustered around several trees. On closer inspection, they could see what appeared to be two humans tied to one of the trees. One of the Gorn opened up a Star Fleet issue tricorder. The lights and noise startled it, causing it to drop the device and jump back. Its fellow Gorn laughed at the antics.

“We could use that tricorder,” Seven said.

“If I’m not mistaken, I think that’s Afu,” Garcia said.

“What’s an Afu?” Seven asked.

“A friend of mine,” Garcia said. “I have to rescue him.”

“We’ll have to wait till dark,” Seven said.

“No, the dark would give them an advantage,” Garcia said. “We need to do it now.”

“It’s too risky. I can’t allow you to endanger yourself,” Seven said.

“Excuse me?” Garcia asked.

“In order to increase our chances of survival on this planet, we will need each other. That means we have an unspoken social agreement not to engage in behavior that puts our group at risk,” Seven said.

“You help me rescue them and then there will be four of us, which improves our chances of survival,” Garcia said. “Plus, he has a tricorder, possibly a phaser.”

“You wouldn’t have a chance against one Gorn as an unarmed human, much less fourteen,” Seven said.

“I don’t intend to fight them,” Garcia said. “The Gorn aren’t very fast. I can out run them.”

“You can’t out run a spear,” Seven said.

“I can dodge a spear,” Garcia said. “I’ll get away.”

“They will pursue until you’re too tired to continue,” Seven said. “They do not give up the hunt easily.”

“Look, I’m going to cause a distraction, have them chase me, then you can go down there and untie my friends, get their equipment, and we’ll meet you back at the portal drop off point,” Garcia said.

One of the Gorn prodded the woman with a stick and she screamed bloody murder. The Gorn moved in a way that suggested laughter.

“Good luck,” Seven said.

Garcia nodded, moved low through the grass, trying to get as close as he could without being seen. As he made his way closer he found a decent size stone. He moved within throwing distance of one of the herder

Gorns, came up yelling, and then tossed the stone. It hit the Gorn dead center of its forehead. The victim of the stone became enraged and yelled an alert. Two of its friends moved forward, one of them throwing its spear. Garcia caught the spear, turned it around, and returned it with equal force, catching the one who threw it in the arm. Its scream of pain brought on all the hunters and the chase was on.

Seven sighed, thinking Garcia had pretty much signed his death warrant. She proceeded down through the grass, keeping low to the ground. As soon as the last of the stragglers were away from the hostages, she crept in and untied them. She didn't need to impress upon them that they needed to be quick and quiet. They gathered their things and departed back into the grass. They did all of this without verbal communication. They were no sooner into the thick of the grass when the wounded Gorn made another call, alerting its brothers to the fact that they had been tricked and the others were escaping. Seven and her rescued hostages accelerated their pace.



An old man stood gazing intently into a fountain, which he stirred occasionally with a finger, changing the view. His long, wavy white hair suggested age and health simultaneously. The wrinkles around his eyes suggested wisdom, brought on by love and pain. He was draped with cloth that seemed as if it might blow away if the intermittent breeze were to suddenly pick up. The only other significant item about him was the gold bracelet. He seemed neither concerned or alarmed by the swarm of illuminated orbs that rushed into greet him, circling in a dance. The orbs increased in brilliance and then gave sudden, intense pulses of white light. The space that had been occupied by the orbs were now occupied by a people.

Several complaints were delivered simultaneously. The old man waved a hand to silence them and then pointed to one of the men vying for his time, without ever looking up from his fountain.

"Something must be done about this Garcia character. He ruined several hundred years worth of history manipulation, skewed the results of my research, and lost vital information necessary to complete the statistical overview necessary to set up the next experiment," Hades protested.

"None of this would have happened had you not been so lackadaisical when it comes to security," Artemis said. "Your failure to secure the portal will be the ruin of my pet project."

"You can't lay the blame for the destruction of the dinosaurs at my heels," Hades said. "Garcia was helped. We have a traitor in our midst."

"Strong words coming from you, betrayer," Apollo said.

"Enough," the old man waved. "I will not tolerate bickering amongst you. All things work out to my benefit."

"That's just a cop out you throw at us every time we fail to achieve our goals," Apollo said. "We've done sufficient research on the humans. It's time to end the experiments and dispose of humanity."

"Dispose of them?" Athena asked. "Have you lost your mind?"

"We created them and we should destroy them," Apollo said.

"Apollo is right about that," Hades said. "My research proves that beyond a shadow of a doubt. If we don't destroy them, they will one day be like us, immortal and near omnipotent, and we will rue the day we made them. Look what happened in the Q experiment. And don't forget the Metrones."

"We will not be destroying the humans," the old man said. "Nor will I allow the complete eradication of any one species. Dinosaurs inclusive."

"The humans mock us at every turn," Hades said. "You saw how Kirk treated Apollo, and how Kirk's descendent, Garcia, destroyed my base. The humans must be taught a lesson."

"Everyday," the old man agreed. "They must learn and learn at their own pace. I didn't go into this project blindly. Had I wanted to build robots, I could have done so, and it would have been much easier. I wanted companions. I wanted fresh perspectives of what it means to be alive. I can't have that without a certain amount of free will, something your experiments lacked, Hades. Creating two planet Earths. Establishing two Roman periods and two Constitutions of the United States of America. And recreating the Gangsters of America's twenties and thirties on Iotia? That was just over the top."

"You have to have constants to have a baseline if you're going to make reasonable comparisons," Hades complained. "Besides, it wasn't my fault the Horizon contaminated the Iotia experiment."

“Don’t try to blame your fiasco on an accidental insertion of the Horizon. I’m not stupid, though you all try to play me as if I were. Your experiments, Hades, skew the results of the statistics because you had to eliminate a certain amount of free will to duplicate the evolution of similar historic events.”

“I prefer to look at it as variations on a theme,” Hades said.

“Your variations on a theme very nearly got you permanently removed from the game,” Apollo observed.

“Father, are you forgetting that I’m the victim of Hade’s negligence?” Artemis asked.

“I would hardly call you a victim,” the old man said. “What were you doing bringing the Gorn to that planet at that time? There is a time and place for everything and that is clearly not their time and place.”

“I wanted to see how the two reptilian speices would react to each other,” Artemis said.

“Speaking of time and place, I want to know when I will be allowed to move against Garcia,” Hades said.

“He’s mine and you know it,” Apollo said.

“I don’t think he’s your type,” Aphrodite said. “Father, may I take charge of the Garcia Experiment?”

“I doubt you’ll get what you want from him,” Hades said. “He’s a lady’s man and you’re no lady.”

“Please, everyone has slept with me,” Aphrodite said.

“Not I,” Apollo countered.

Aphrodite smiled, tracing a finger down his arm. “If I could charm all the gods, I think I could charm one man.”

“Your charms don’t work on me,” Apollo said.

“I’ve never tried particularly hard in you case,” Aphrodite said, shrugging her shoulders. “You’re not very entertaining.”

“Why, I ought to...” Apollo started.

“And you should have when you had the chance,” Aphrodite interrupted.

“Father,” Apollo said. “I made official claims on Kirk and all his offspring. Reasonable vengeance is mine.”

“Your legal claims against Garcia are invalid. Garcia’s blood line doesn’t count, as it was manipulated genetics, not voluntary reproduction,” Athena said.

“You always have sided with the humans,” Apollo said.

“That’s because most of them have more morals than the lot of you all together,” Athena said.

“Good times,” Dionysos said, raising his drink in salute.

“I like Garcia,” Thalia said. “I think it’s funny how he has stirred you all up.”

“You think everything is just some cosmic joke,” Apollo said.

“Everything is,” Thalia said.

“Hades and Apollo have legit claims against Garcia,” Ker said. “So does Artemis. Even his own species, the Kelvan, aren’t through with him. He is a focal point for some catastrophic event. It isn’t too hard to predict that the Gorn, the Borg, Q, and the Metrones are all going to try play him to their own ends. Either we assign someone to sort this mess out and bring balance back to the playing field, or nature will correct itself. And nature’s corrections aren’t as fair as ours would be.”

“Because your idea of balance is really fair,” PHEME said.

“Someone has helped Garcia,” Hades said. “I want to know who and I want appropriate penalties administered for this blatant abuse of their authority.”

“I will consider your request,” the old man said. “Now, all of you, off my mountain top. Athena, tarry with me a moment.”

“Yes, Father,” Athena said, bowing slightly.

The other gods gave her a look of jealousy, before becoming brilliant orbs of light. Each orb flew off in their own direction. Dionysos’ orb staggered, as if drunk, ran into a pillar, and floated back seemingly stunned. “Sorry,” came his voice, and then the orb shot off.

“Thalia will be sorry to have missed that,” Athena said.

The old man nodded, amused, and came down the steps to put an arm around his daughter. He led her to the side of the mountain, where they could look down into a marvelous valley, literally milk and honey.

The sun shone directly behind them, capping the mountain as it moved towards sunset. The other side of the horizon was gathering darkness, with a clear view of the emerging Constellations.

“Out of all my children, Athena, you are the only one who has not taken a mate, or produced a potential heir for this dominion,” the old man said. “It is time. I want you to seduce Garcia and produce offspring.”

“So much for free will, eh?” Athena asked.

“Don’t take that tone with me,” the old man said. “I need you to do this, and soon, before any of the others move against him. This may be the only way to prevent our own extinction.” The old man lifted her chin with a delicate hand. “I don’t command this of you lightly.”

“Did you ever consider that maybe extinction isn’t necessarily a bad thing?” Athena said. “Maybe we’re missing something by being immortal. How can we, as gods, learn to be kind, when we know no fear? When we have never suffered true pain?”

“Hence the need for humans,” the old man said. “What better way for children of god to learn boundaries as they explore their true potential. Besides, you assume no god has ever suffered, or has ever lost their immortality. I have more cards in play than you could ever imagine.”

“This is all it is to you? A game?” Athena asked.

“My goal isn’t just to save an elite few,” the old man said. “My goal is to save everyone. Elevate everyone. Everything that has ever lived, every diamond, every lump of coal, every atom, has a place in my dominion. You have free will, Athena. You can choose the time and place, the how and why, but I want the thing done, and I will have my way. Is that understood?”

“Why don’t you just send Aphrodite to seduce him?” Athena asked. “Or one of your muses. Harmonia like Garcia well enough.”

“Because I chose you,” the old man said. “No more negotiations. You have your mission.”

“Fine. I will do your bidding,” Athena said. “But I will never speak to you again.”

“Never is a long time,” the old man said.

“You’re about to find out just how long that is,” Athena said. She snapped her fingers and was replaced by an orb of light. She accelerated away from the mountain, going to mach speeds in the matter of moment, rattling Mount Olympus with thunder.

The old man sighed. “She’ll get over it,” he said, to no one apparently present. “Yes, I know. I will see to it, personally. Yes, Mother. I know. I said I will take care of it. Have you ever known me not to follow through in a matter?”

The old man walked back to his fountain and stirred a new image into the surface of the water. The sun set and the stars stood out brilliantly against the night. Shooting stars, or perhaps orbs of the gods, raced across the heavens. Athena’s orb became more and more brilliant with every kilometer of her rise and then her orb winked out as it accelerated into warp, a tail of light collapsing at a point, as if sucked into a black hole. The old man smiled in amusement at her dramatic display. “You may not be talking to me, but your message was received, loud and clear, Athena. Carry on.”

## Author's Diatribe

The idea of "Another Piece of the Action," came about while a friend and I watched "A Piece of the Action" together. It's clear from watching this episode that there should be a sequel. I mean, Captain Kirk himself, in chastising McCoy for losing his communicator, clearly states, paraphrasing, "A hundred years from now, the Iotians might be demanding a piece of our action." And a hundred years from Kirk's statement would put that in Captain Picard's court. Unfortunately, Picard is quite busy, considering the history as established in episode time. Book and movie time simply compounds the issue that much more, so when writing a Trek book or story line, a reasonable author should take that into consideration. (Something I wish the writer's of Enterprise had done when they wrote that series: like, actually talk to someone who knows Trek history, or at least find a good continuity director. (And I'm only angry at that because it's now off the air and had the writing been better and more consistent with Gene's original concept as defined by the original episodes, perhaps they could have maintained a large enough audience to still be Treking. (So, not upset with the cast, or special effects, or the theme song, just the writing, because just utilizing TOS history alone for their guide, there was so much they could have done that built on what we knew. Take TOS episode, "Balance of Terror," which suggests a larger warfront than what the series Enterprise dealt with. (And, according to TOS "A Piece of the Action," the Horizon would have been a pre-Star Fleet ship, meaning there were more Earth ships than the Enterprise. Heck, that would have made a nice episode from ST: Enterprise perspective, where the Vulcan's discover Earth had more than the "one" starship when Enterprise is ordered to go looking for the missing "Horizon" which is over due to report in.)))

But I digress. As always. "A Piece of the Action" is a fun, gangster kind of world. So, I had a choice; continue with the fun, light hearted gangsters as established in TOS APOTA, or go really dark, which would be more in line with gangsterism in general. Yes, when Kirk and his "landing party" beam down next to the fire plug just in time for a drive by shooting, that could be taken pretty serious, but the mood is still pretty light. Exciting, but light. So, I decided to go with light, keeping in step with the original episode. Unfortunately, my mind couldn't let me just stick with gangsters. There was too much going on in that episode just to leave it at gangsters. Sociologically, I wanted an explanation to why the Iotians so readily adopted the gangster lifestyle. The simple explanation that they emulated gangsters because a superior alien race left a book on gangsters just didn't satisfy me. Sure, if an alien landed on a mountain and gave someone the ten commandments, I could see that. The ten commandments are fairly reasonable rules for living by when you live in a community of humans, in addition to flushing the toilets, washing your hands, and having milk and cookies, thank you Mr. Fulgam. (Everything I need to know I learned in Kindergarten.) But gangsters? Then again, humans do tend to admire and glorify pirates and bank robbers... (Sorry, that's how my brain works. I want a reason, assuming there is a rational explanation to be had.)

Which brings me to the subplot of the story: how did humans come to be on Iotia in the first place? Now, TOS offers us a solution to this in the form of the Preservers, first mentioned in the episode "Paradise Syndrome," where Kirk takes a break from being Captain to play Indian. From what the Federation was able to gather, a race known only as the Preservers took Native Americans from Earth to establish the colony that Kirk visits. We can only speculate as to the why. If the Preserver's knew the Native American's were doomed culturally speaking, that suggests that the Preservers are either time travelers or clairvoyant, or they they just wanted more Indians. Further, knowing they were doomed, they would have to believe that the Native Americans had some inherent value sufficient to relocate them in an effort to "preserve" their culture. Could this also explain the human presence on Iotia? Or the human presence on Miri's planet, the planet which was an exact duplicate of Earth? Or the human presence on Omega IV, the planet that had an American Flag and a culture that wrote a Constitution of the United States of America, where the communist and capitalist actually went to war? Or a planet that had a human population where the Roman Empire didn't collapse and Kirk finds the Roman's using 20<sup>th</sup> century Earth technology. The latter episode, TOS "Bread and Circus," was the hardest for me to watch because some writer attempted to sneak religion in on us by saying Caesar and Christ were both on this planet. But, I assume Gene gave it a pass for a reason, even though he thought religion and politics were (are) holding humanity back, and the episode was tasteful and respectful in that sense. They mention Caesar and Christ, but it's not preachy. It also helps to explain the presence of humans on Rubicon Three, protected by the Guardian of Edo.



And it offers something else. If the Preservers are indeed moving humans to other planets in an attempt to preserve various types of cultures which they believe might otherwise die, could they also be taking important Earth people, prominent figures in human history, copying them, and reasserting them into these colonies? That would explain Caesar and Christ. That would explain how Omega IV had the Constitution of America. And it might just explain Miri's planet. Of course, then you have to wonder why the Preservers would do this. From a Darwinian point of view, a culture that dies out by definition isn't worth saving. If you're just trying to save humanity, putting humans on other planets is sufficient, but if you're trying to save a particular cultural mind set, then it isn't sufficient to simply move people, you have to move ideologies, and that requires specific situations and people and a specific order of events. This is a pretty big task the Preservers have set for themselves. Not an impossible task, but one requiring a great deal of resources. Using a human mind set, the motivation for preserving particular cultures, and humans in general, would have to transcend merely favoring those communities. You wouldn't want to just plop a certain culture down and allow it to remain static, unless you're a zoo keeper and you want to maintain the costs of fortifying social structures to guarantee society remains constant. And knowing human nature, someone will eventually rebel against the system and the whole thing will topple. So, again, one has to wonder what the point is. My solution, and really, probably the easiest solution, is to believe that the Preservers are conducting experiments on human populations to see which culture is likely to endure the test of time. And since we know there were historical icons on other planets, I figure, why not put some on Iotia, too. And since Iotia is so enamored with Earth's culture, why not just take that theme a little further, and give them twentieth century entertainment.

Of course, TOS always asked "what if" kinds of questions as they explored human issues, so I couldn't leave that out of this. One of Gene's premises for Star Trek was that humanity moved beyond simplistic ideologies, such as Capitalism. Since the Iotians as gangsters was really a surreal snapshot, a stereotype of a specific American phenomena, it seemed reasonable to explore Capitalism versus Communism, a theme that appears now and then in Star Trek. One could say that Earth of the Federation has a Communistic approach to the distribution of resources, but it really isn't that simple. The Iotian's would have had to have taken on the American Capitalistic attitudes of the twenties and thirties in order to fully emulate the gangster life style. That would put them at odds with the ideals of Earth of the 23rd century and that would offer one reason why they were unable to hear or process Kirk's message of peace. To explore that theme further, I thought it fun to throw in a 24<sup>th</sup> century Capitalist, and his name is Ferengi. TOS "the Savage Curtain" wanted to see a fight between good and evil, as we all do, and so a race like the Iotians who were convinced that Capitalism is good would naturally be inclined to fight evil communism. Then again, they might just throw the two competing ideologies into a ring and see which one comes out victorious.

And so, this is how "Another Piece of the Action" evolved into what it is. Though the above ramblings may seem as separate issues, I think they have some fairly common themes that flow well together, convoluted though they may appear from a micro analysis. I am no doubt still trying to tie some loose ends together, TOS loose ends, that don't need closure per say, but are just fun things to think about. What if...

I'll let you fill in the rest.

Enjoy.

John Erik Ege

## REFERENCES

### ST TNG

“Conundrum,” episode 114. I go here only because of Kristin, played by Liz Vassey. In this episode she discusses with Doctor Crusher a previous injury while cliff diving in a program called, Cliffs of Heaven, 47-c. Given Garcia’s predilection for holodecks, risky activities, and beautiful women, why not make him involved in the original incident? What makes the scene difficult is the holodeck safety protocols, and having two people diving from the cliffs. The best explanation for how the holodeck works is that if two people are standing close to each other then they share the same holographic vision. However, if they were to separate, at a certain distance each individual would be suddenly encapsulated in his or her own holographic illusion. So, though you may only be a meter away from your friend, having the illusion of diving while suspended in air by a tractor beam, you’re still only a meter away, and so the safety features would have supposedly still prevented Kristin from being hurt, or could have aborted the program and Garcia not been harmed, leaving him available to render first aid, which would have only been a strain. But, it’s not as fun. So, I am torn. Stay consistent with making technology realistic, which tends to be my personal bias, or go with fun. Ummm, right now, I’m sticking with fun. And remembering how Data pushed Crusher off a boat into the water.

“Schizoid Man,” episode 31. Okay, human downloads himself into an android, right? Well, what if an android downloaded himself into a human? It could happen.

“Data’s Day,” episode 85. I know there’s a reason for it being in my notes, just don’t remember why. Data listening to multiple songs simultaneously? Something about Data and his cat? Ummm. It’s the first episode with Spot.

“Unification,” episode 108. The timeline for “another piece of the action” falls within the timeline for Unification. We start on the Enterprise before it goes in search of Spock, and concludes after Picard returns to the Enterprise.

“A Matter of Honor,” 34. Plot contrivance for me. How do I get a Ferengi onto a Star Fleet ship? Easy, they throw a tantrum because Star Fleet participated in an Officer Exchange with the Klingons, but didn’t invite them to play, too.

“Justice,” episode 9. The Edo of Guardian is mentioned... And I speculate that maybe the Edo Guardian is a Preserver spacestation.

“The Last Outpost,” episode 7, by Krzemien. This is the episode that introduces the Ferengi for the first time and really the only time we see the odd, simian like behaviors of walking hunched over and dragging knuckles. Either the continuity directors were asleep, or it was just too much for the actors to keep this up, or these Ferengi had an illness, or there are several groups of Ferengi and I missed an explanation.

### ST TOS

“A Piece of the Action,” episode 49. Do I have to say it? There could be no “Another Piece of the Action” without “A Piece of the Action.” And does it really make sense that an “intelligent race” would waste resources recreating American cities in order to emulate the gangsters of the twenties and thirties? No, but it’s a fun episode, and it provided me with an opportunity to think sociologically. Why would a peaceful society go gangster? Population control and resource management? Maybe. Or, maybe they were just partial to “the Book.” (Did everyone recognize that James Doohan, Scotty, did the gun commercials for Iotia? Am I right or am I right?)

“For the World is Hollow and I Have Touched the Sky,” episode 65. I keep coming back here. Probably because I am a McCoy fan and this is where he got married. And since McCoy and Garcia have a history here, as established in “A Touch of Greatness,” I felt it only proper that McCoy is laid to rest here, along side his wife.

“Mirror Mirror,” episode 39. Fun episode. If you read “Another Piece of the Action,” you know why it’s in the reference section. And didn’t you want to know what Spock and the Evil McCoy had to talk about?

“City on the Edge of Forever,” episode 28. We know from watching this that an alternative timeline was established. There is one where Edith Keeler dies and Kirk returns to his future and there is a timeline where Edith Keeler lives and the Federation never has a chance. Wouldn’t it be interesting if the Evil Kirk in Mirror Mirror is the result of Edith Keeler living?

“The Changeling,” episode 37. This is the V’Ger episode. Of course it’s not. This is the Nomad episode. I’m just testing you. But it got me to thinking about robots, ROV’s, and HROV’s.

“Requiem For Methuselah,” episode 76. For the same reason above, I’m thinking floating robots. But wouldn’t mind one of those androids.

“Bread and Circus,” episode 43. The Roman Empire doesn’t collapse and Caesar and Christ live again? Mark this as exhibit A for Garcia’s evidence that the Preservers are up to something.

“Miri” episode 12. Mark this as exhibit B for Garcia’s evidence that the Preservers are up to something. Come on, an exact duplicate of Earth and there not be an intelligent entity at play? Bonk bonk, on the head.

“Omega Glory,” episode 54. Exhibit C...

“The Paradise Syndrome,” episode 58. Exhibit D...

“Assignment Earth,” episode 55. Gary Seven and Isis are back in time. There was hope for a spin off on this one. It didn’t happen and though there is a book or two where Gary and Isis as guest stars, they don’t ever touch on his assignment. I do, or, at least, I make the attempt. The fact that the cat is named Isis isn’t lost on me, either, and it plays into a theme that will bloom in the third book of this trilogy.

“Plato’s Stepchildren,” episode 67. The chemical kironide is responsible for telekinetic abilities, and is found to work in conjunction with pituitary growth hormone, explaining why the dwarf Alexander is unaffected. So, why aren’t there more people in the Federation that have telekinetic abilities? Could it be that kironide is a controlled substance? What, drugs are still illegal in the future? Or maybe it has to come from fresh fruits from the originating planet. Maybe it has a short life span. Maybe I don’t know, but I want to know.

“Who Mourns for Adonais,” episode 33. The fact that Gene explains the Greek gods as visiting aliens fits what I know about Gene. (I really wish I could have met him.) Interesting thing about the alien Apollo was his ability to grow in size. And when Kirk destroys his technology, he loses his ability to manipulate the world. Maybe he’s just a hologram. Maybe he’s a Preserver. And maybe, the Preservers have an agenda that’s not human friendly.

## ST CARTOON SERIES

“Beyond the Furthest Star,” episode 4 of the animated adventures of Gene Roddenberry’s Star Trek was the first to introduce the “Life Belts.” I think it was an ingenious plot device to keep the actors visible, where as bulky space suits might reduce our visual information of the people we loved. That, and they didn’t want to draw a bunch of space suits when they could just reuse the characters they already drew, and just add an aura. I don’t know. Then again, they didn’t use life belts in TOS, and it would have been easier to throw a suit over a cartoon than a real person, so why didn’t it get used in TOS? Is it that hard to scratch an aura around someone in live action film? I don’t know, but I can’t live another moment without trying to address where the technology went. If you have force fields to plug holes on ships, can’t you have one that surrounds a person? There were quite a few episodes where they (the cartoons) use the life belts, but this was the first.

Miscellaneous information? Perhaps.

Since the Iotians are recreating Earth, and I added some prominent figures in a warped sort of way, here are a few examples of the not so obvious cultural icon inserts.

Donna, flight attendant, is the character from A View from the Top, played by Gwyneth Paltrow.

Lt. Col. Sarah ‘Mac’ MacKenzie, from Jag, played by Catherine Bell.

LT Robinson, of course, is the Terri Hatcher character from TNG episode, The Outrageous Okona.

And if you don’t remember the Bangles video, yes, Leonard Nimoy is really in the video! Hence, the need to write the Bangles into Garcia’s life. As if I needed to create a reason to demonstrate my bias for the Bangles.

There might be a few more people. Somewhere.

## SOUNDTRACK

This book has a soundtrack. I felt it compulsory to provide credit to the musicians who performed the songs in the text, but here is a list in case you don't wish to go back and reread... ☺

From A Distance, by Nancy Griffith. (Referenced. (Really, it's her song, and it's the better version. (Yes, I'm biased.)))

There are Places I'll Remember, the Beatles.

Black Bird, the Beatles.

Follow Me, Uncle Kracker (Might not have actually worked this one in to the story, but it was supposed to go somewhere.)

Semi Charmed Life, Third Eye Blind (Did I leave this one out, too?)

Roam, B52's

Love Shack, by the B52's. (Tan Ru? Please, I can't be the only one that hears Star Trek in the B52s!)

You Never Even Call Me By MY Name, David Allan Coe (Referenced, not actually sung.)

Dream Weaver, Gary Wright (Referenced.)

Sail Away, Styx (Reference... Can't hear this song without thinking Star Trek.)

Goodbye Girl, Bread (Referenced.)

Afternoon Delight, Starland Vocal Band. (Referenced.)

Ouji Board, Ouji Board, Morrissey (Not even referenced, but I know I meant to work it in.)

Cool change, Little River Band (Referenced.)

My Generation, the Who (Niki sings a bit of it, putting a punk edge to it.)

Don't Let's Start, They Might be Giants (It's the song I hear when Tatiana and Tam are quarleling. Didn't even reference it. (I need to work harder. (No, I'm already at 600 plus pages, need to be more consice and condense, saying more with less, but that's why I'm practicing here.))

Why Worry, by Dire Straights

Philadelphia Freedom, Sir Elton John.

Thank You for the Music, Abba

Fernando, Abba

Turn Turn Turn, the Byrds

The Preamble, School House Rock

Elbow Room, School House Rock

Pumps Your Blood, Ansom Williams

Calypso, John Denver

Over the Rainbow, by Judy Garland. (It really is the most popular song on earth, in terms of sales, downloads, and remakes by various artists.)

If You Believe, Diana Ross.

And, yes, that song by Celine Deon is still playing in the future.

If I failed to give appropriate credits, it is an error on my part, with no ill intent towards the musicians who have enriched my life. May everyone's life be blessed with music and joy and Star Trek. Live Long and Prosper.

John Erik Ege